

## What is this book about?

Do you avoid family reunions? Do you skip coffee with friends? Us, too! Why? We're all frightened about where American Democracy is headed but we're afraid to talk about it. Many books warn us about signs of the end of our cherished system of governance, but few tell us what to do. Each chapter ends with a "what I and we can do" to help you RAISE AMERICA.

*"At a time when our democracy faces its greatest threat since the Civil War, too many Americans seem to have forgotten their most basic civics lessons. Raising America offers a timely refresher. This engaging and accessible book will help remind Americans from all political persuasions how we once made democracy work."* **Steven Levitsky, Harvard University, co-author, *How Democracies Die***

*"This book speaks to what our world desperately needs right now: the hard, yet deeply meaningful, work of bringing people together to demand of our government policies that embody justice and equity. This book excels in not simply exhorting us to do better, but in provoking us to think for ourselves. By raising the right questions as information and insights are provided, readers are compelled to think for themselves and arrive at their own conclusions."* **Rev. Dr. Brooks Berndt, Minister for Environmental Justice, United Church of Christ**

## The Authors

**Charles R. Kniker**, professor, minister, seminary president, author, learned to cherish democracy spending a year in a Latin American country when Fidel Castro was spreading communism, living in a nation under autocratic rule. **Dianne Prichard** has a penchant for seeing solutions within problems, from making Shakespeare fun (with sword fights and matchmaking) to organizing mask-making volunteers (250 volunteers delivered 11,000 masks) to saving democracy (this book).

## The Contributors

**V. V. Raman**, Emeritus Professor of Physics and Humanities, author of 25 books.

**John Pavlovitz**, speaker, blogger, author of *A Bigger Table; Worth Fighting For*.

**Miguel A. De La Torre**, Professor, Iliff Seminary, author/editor of numerous books on ethics, and especially immigration issues, including *Embracing Hopelessness*.

**Ted Kniker**, Vice President of Impact Paradigm, internationally recognized expert in organizational performance improvement; former Department of State staff guiding development of democratic civil societies in Eastern Europe. *Director of the website: RaisingAmericabook.com*.

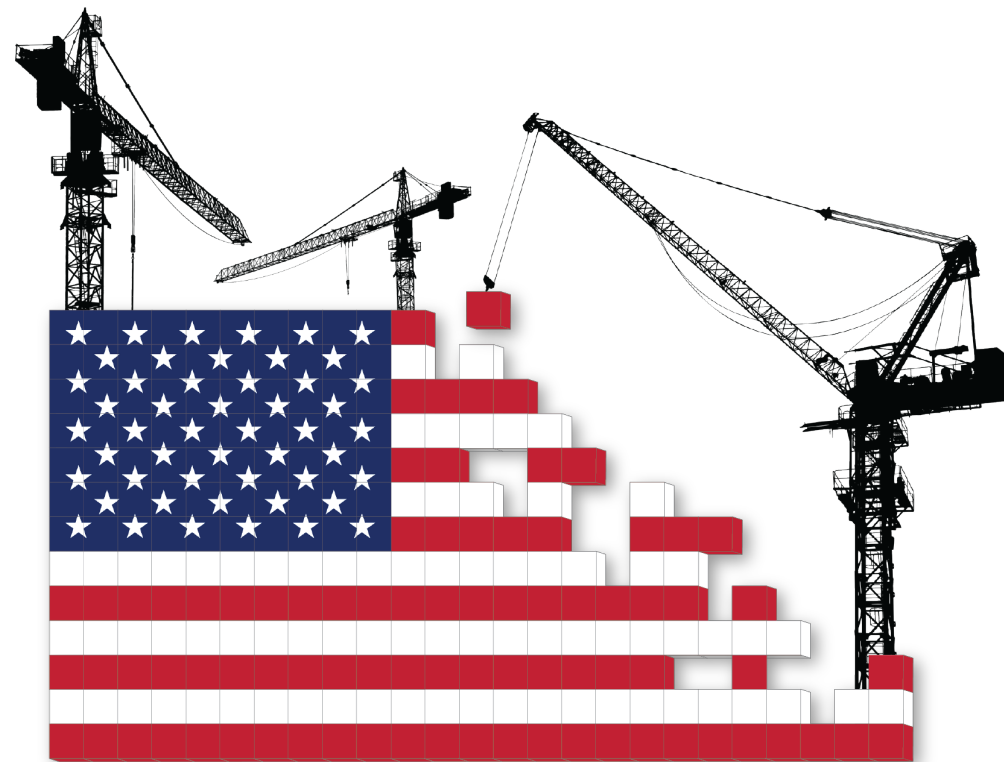
**Alexis M. Kniker**, researcher and data analyst, on media influence and perceptions.

[info@raisingamericabook.com](mailto:info@raisingamericabook.com)

[www.raisingamericabook.com](http://www.raisingamericabook.com)



RAISING AMERICA: Building a More Perfect Union



# RAISING AMERICA

## Building a More Perfect Union

Charles R. Kniker and Dianne Prichard

# RAISING AMERICA

**Building a More Perfect Union**

## What people are saying about *Raising America*

*Raising America: Building a More Perfect Union*, by Charles R. Kniker and Dianne Prichard, is a book for our time. As fascism grows across the globe, including in the United States, this book offers hope for our Democracy and a detailed outline of how to save it. This book is a primer that brings together lessons in philosophy, history, logic, psychology and civil engagement in not only a call to action, but also as a guidebook as to how to make the call successful. This book belongs in every library in the country, in every public school, and in every organizer's hand. Some will try to suppress it, which is what fascists do.

Buy this book. Give copies away. Toss it like confetti into crowds if you can afford it. Share it with all you know who are patriots who love freedom and America and who share our democratic values. I will, and my copy will soon be dog-eared, smudged, with innumerable marginal notes.

There is remarkable knowledge in this book, and with knowledge comes a source of power that will help Raise America and build a more perfect union for each and every one of us, regardless of our ZIP code, race, gender, faith, sexual orientation, or gender identity. It's a book for all of us.

—Robert Leonard

**Robert Leonard is an anthropologist who has bylines in the New York Times, TIME, USA Today, the Des Moines Register, the Iowa Capital Dispatch, and many, many more publications. He and his work has been featured on CNN, MSNBC, NBC and innumerable public radio shows and foreign broadcasts and print publications. He also writes at Deep Midwest: Politics and Culture.**

*Raising America* is a valuable primer for citizens who are concerned with the threats to U.S. democracy and want to plan what they can do in response. The book provides important background on the structure of the U.S. government, the core values we seek to preserve, the different challenges to our fundamental freedoms, and things we can do individually to sustain our society, including participating in the political process and dialoguing with others who have different views.

—Dr. Wayne Moyer

**Professor of Political Science, Grinnel College, Grinnel, Iowa**

Kniker and Prichard's book has arrived at a time when their wisdom is greatly needed by our fractured communities and has implications far beyond political discourse. Investing in these efforts has the potential to pay dividends much needed in a time when our society faces such monumental challenges, some, like global climate change, no less than existential.

—**Deb Patterson**  
**Oregon State Senator and ordained minister**

Critiques of our political divisiveness have been commonplace in recent years to the point that many have written off any prospect of resolution in a civil manner. Yet there are voices calling us to the “better angels of our nature” in Lincoln's phrase from his first inaugural address. Kniker and Prichard join those ranks with their volume calling us back to our democratic foundations and urging action to secure them for future generations.

—**Dr. Michael Waggoner**  
**Editor, Religion & Education**

The late Massachusetts Congressman and Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill, made famous the political axiom, “All politics is local.” In *Raising America: Building a More Perfect Union*, we see that reality and the foundational truths needed today in the greater body politic realized in all its fullness. Kniker and Prichard had amassed a central and critical set of essays that leads to fundamental questions that will guide our nation. Questions of the Common Good, the role of government, personal responsibility coupled with accountability, and what are the pillars of a democracy, these and more frame this timely contribution for all Americans. This small book is more than a crash course in civics, it develops fundamental directions with practical questions to guide all who are concerned with the state of the nation and the political processes that are unfolding daily. It is also a clarion ‘All Hands-on Deck’ call. Now is the time to not pull back, but to “Come, let us Rise up, and build together” rooted in the same call as the prophet Jeremiah. Now is the time to ask what kind of barn are we building, and for whom? With national elections looming, *Raising America* indeed brings us forward in the great experiment of democracy that is the American story. And it awaits yours, mine and all thoughtful contributions.

—**H. Scott Matheney**  
**Chaplain and Dean of Religious Life, Elmhurst University, Elmhurst, Illinois**

Can't wait to see it all in the final form and get it out into the hands of the people. There is a hunger for positive, creative, and impactful ways to engage during these challenging times. I am confident that *Raising America* will be an agent of positive action for all who choose to read the pages and act upon your words.

—**David Faux**  
**Vice-president of Heuss Printing, Ames, Iowa**

*Raising America. Building a More Perfect Union* by Charles Kniker and Dianne Pritchard is a courageous and timely book. As a neurologist I naturally wonder how the brain is working with the outlines of these chapters. I know that our brains are equipped with gifts to fight and run the other way but also to wonder and ask questions and seek collegiality. I see this book with its clear explanations and outline and definitions and procedures as nourishing and cultivating our prefrontal cortex (home of compassion and altruism) and thereby promoting more person-to-person understanding and bringing us all to “a more perfect union.” Thanks, Charles and Dianne.

—**Dr. Selden Spencer**  
**Neurologist, Ames, Iowa**

More than any other time, we need to find ways to dialogue across difficult issues. People need straightforward, clearly written sources that present the facts with as little bias as possible. *Raising America* fills this much needed gap. Readers will find themselves enlightened without being preached to or lectured. The more people who read this the better off we'll all be.

—**Rev. Jonathan C. Page**  
**Senior Minister, Wellesley Hills Congregational Church,  
Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts**

*Raising America* is a balm for individuals, families, and communities who are feeling overwhelmed by the realities of political polarization and the growing specter of accompanying political violence in our nation. How do we, amid these forces, empower ourselves for constructive action to preserve our democracy without ourselves potentially becoming a part of the problem? With well-formatted and resource-rich chapters, Kniker and Prichard edit this collection as a practical guide to building knowledge and understanding for how to engage in the political process with a heart for the common good. It is a book that will inform and form communities with capacities for empathy and understanding amidst sociopolitical difference. In that, it is a book that can take us beyond righteously drawn sides of partisan commitment and help us build a way forward to liberty and justice for all, or as James Baldwin put it, to achieve our country.

—**Deborah Krause**  
**President, Eden Theological Seminary, Webster Groves, Missouri**

The authors are especially grateful to Varadaraja V. Raman, PhD, Emeritus Professor of Physics and Humanities, polyglot polymath and our “Renaissance Man.” His breadth of knowledge and worldwide experiences gives us an appreciation of various expressions of democracy and deeper insights into concepts of truth and facts.

Dr. Raman taught himself French in order to earn his PhD at the Sorbonne in Paris, France. He is a Metanexus Fellow, past President of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, recipient of the Raja Rao Award for Literature from Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi, India) and a Fellow of the International Society for Science and Religion in Cambridge, United Kingdom. He is one of four executive editors of the eighteen-volume Encyclopedia of Hinduism and has written more than 25 books on such topics as the intersection of science and religion and the Bhagavad Gita.

Dr. Raman contributed Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 10.

\* \* \*

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www.raisingamericabook.com

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# Table of Contents

Preface.....	ix
Introduction.....	xi
<b>Part One: Foundations of Democracy</b>	
Chapter 1: Governments and Governance.....	1
Chapter 2: Democracy: Pros and Cons .....	11
Chapter 3: Democracy: The Common Good .....	17
Chapter 4: Balance of Power .....	25
<b>Part Two: The Four Freedoms Today</b>	
Chapter 5: Reaffirming Democracy’s Four Basic Freedoms .....	37
Chapter 6: Freedom of Speech: Dissent, Media Rights, Group Protests, Censorship .....	41
Chapter 7: Freedom of Worship: Religion, Beliefs, and Public Education.....	49
Chapter 8: Freedom from Want: Climate, Hunger, Health, and Homelessness.....	61
Chapter 9: Freedom from Fear: War and Terrorism, Violence, Immigration and Racism .....	71
<b>Part Three: Fact-Finding and Verification</b>	
Chapter 10: Fact→Truth→Opinion.....	83
Chapter 11: Identifying and Verifying Facts.....	89
Chapter 12: Conspiracy Theories .....	97
Chapter 13: Coping with Media .....	105
<b>Part Four: Special Situations</b>	
Chapter 14: Responding to Alternative Views.....	115
Chapter 15: Talking with Friends and Family .....	121
Chapter 16: Civil Conversations in Small Groups .....	129
Chapter 17: Preparing and Sharing.....	135

## Part Five: Action!

Chapter 18: Vote!.....	143
Chapter 19: Join In, Join Up!.....	149
Chapter 20: Engage!.....	155
Chapter 21: Run!.....	165
Chapter 22: Serve!.....	173

## Facing the Future

Chapter 23: What about agreeing to disagree?.....	181
Chapter 24: Coping with Hopelessness.....	185

## Gratefully

Epilogue.....	193
Acknowledgments.....	197

# Preface

## Why?

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

—John Stuart Mills, 1867

Why write this book? Based on our life experiences in various countries and states, as well as professions and careers, we believe American democracy, or its republican form, is the best model of governance.

In the last few years, though, people have asked us, “What can I do?” or “What can we do?” Their concern is not about taxes or moral standards. Neither are they concerned about military spending nor high tariffs.

They are concerned that our unique form of government, American democracy, is in danger of being replaced or even destroyed.

Why the concern? Again and again, we have been told that political differences are so severe that conversations with family members, close friends or colleagues are now impossible. From others we hear that legislative debate has lost its power. Why is this situation a threat to democracy?

A national expert on American Democracy has shared with us that democracy must depend upon citizens being able to talk with each other; organizations and associations should find agreements on mutual concerns, and elected representatives should be able to debate forcefully yet compromise for the common good.

**FACT:** In a 2017 Reuters Poll 42 percent of each political party viewed the other as “downright evil.” In the same poll, 20 percent of a group of Americans believed that the country would be better off if large numbers of the opposing party died (Sarah Ruger, *Des Moines Register*, 2/23/20).

Timothy Snyder, a longtime observer of why democracies fail, posits that “official” decisions (such as laws) and challenges to actions (like voting procedures and election outcomes) must be based on facts. Otherwise, if there are “alternate truths,” the biggest wallet or the loudest media presence will gain control. We agree with his underlying assumptions: the increasing use of inaccurate, unchecked “facts” and assertions by mass media, social media, elected political leaders, religious bodies, and influencers are harmful to any society, especially democracies. If there is no such thing as truth or facts in our conversations, democracy cannot survive, because then no one can be held accountable.

#### THE IOWA CONNECTION

It is fitting that the authors are from Iowa, the state known since 1972 as having the first Democratic presidential caucus. Four years later the Republicans of Iowa had their first caucus. While now lessening in significance, over the years the Iowa Caucus has been a bellwether for prospective candidates. Called “retail politics” because candidates have to make many personal appearances to become known, national media coverage has reduced its significance. For many Iowans, however, it has become a habit to become more informed about issues of the day.

# Introduction

## What?

For much of their political careers, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were bitter political enemies. In their last years they reconciled, writing three hundred letters between them. Fittingly, even providentially some say, they both died on July 4, 1826, fifty years after the events of 1776.

In Jefferson’s last letter to Adams, written on March 25, 1826, the passionate politician compared their stances to heroes in Greek mythology: “It was the lot of our early years to witness nothing but the dull monotony of Colonial subservience, and of our riper ones to breast the labors and perils of working out of it.” John Adams was delighted with that letter. Their friendship should symbolize for us not only their dream for American democracy, but their experience that opponents can work together, like a community overcoming their divisions to raise a barn.

As Jefferson and Adams experienced political life, there were times when “we need to talk” was imperative. And such times, then and now, are divisive and too often unhealthy. But productive actions won’t result with one party authoritarian rule which erodes, then eliminates, individual freedoms or rights.

For whom is this book intended? Citizens of the United States of America. That includes everyone from high school students to centenarians. It is for citizens who feel they already have all the answers, but who want to gain additional information for their discussions. It is for citizens who have never voted as well as for citizens who have run for office. Our point: everyone needs to save democracy!

Let’s be realistic. Research findings from psychology and other fields are clear. Humans have primal beliefs (i.e., people are good or bad) and worldviews (e.g. climate change is denied or affirmed) that are difficult to change even when objective contradictory evidence is provided. Politicians and religious

celebrities know that and often distort the truth. They can allege, “We (nation, tribe, organization) have left the Garden of Eden,” (“Things are much worse due to past leaders”) and imply that choosing them will save us from more problems. Or they can say, “We are on the way to the Garden of Eden” (“Elect me, see what good things I’ve already done and will do more”), or proclaim “There never was a Garden of Eden” (“and only I know the right way to go”). The emerging interpretations of the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the national Capitol offer the best case for the need for facts. Some observers claim it was a coup, others allege it was only a “college fraternity stunt that went bad.” Cultists will claim their alternative — and often secret — sources provide the correct facts. Everyone can express their opinions and assertions in the public arena; intelligent conversations require facts.

Our primary emphasis will be on ways to hold meaningful conversations among families, with friends and colleagues, as well as with strangers, elected officials, and organizations. That said, as difficult as it may be, at times citizens must confront those individuals, organizations, and political bodies who disregard the truth and/or promote what we consider unethical behaviors.

The most effective way to endorse unethical behaviors is to give up and never speak out. However, if we claim to be both ethical and patriotic, we must each actively and intentionally participate in raising democracy.

The title of the book, *Raising America*, reflects our foundational analogy and primary assumption — a community with dissenting views can still unite for a common good, for example, to raise a barn destroyed by lightning. My grandparents experienced such an event. Within a week of the fire, friends and strangers, regardless of race, religion, or politics, banded together and raised a new barn.

This book has as its philosophical foundation the Four Freedoms, as presented by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on January 6, 1941. The occasion for Roosevelt’s speech was the annual State of the Union address. The motivation was the rise of fascism. Tellingly, FDR cast the freedoms not solely as American freedoms, but “translated into international terms,” as freedoms that should be secured anywhere in the world.

We believe the Four Freedoms — freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear — as well as the freedoms guaran-



ted by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, should be secured now, in the United States of America. Are these freedoms — we should also identify them as “rights” — in danger of being eliminated or reduced now?

One book cannot make you an expert on civil conversations in uncivil times. Our goal is to give you the confidence to become more involved in not simply preserving but in raising a newer vision of a more perfect union, an authentic and diverse democracy. We hope you will find the facts we present, including descriptions of procedures and practices, not only helpful, but feasible and practical. Our vision is to inspire you to participate with confidence and knowledge in lively discussions, including dissension and advocacy.

What specific strategies should you get from this book? With the help of high school teachers, people with government experience, and elected officials, we offer the following list of outcomes. We put them in four categories: values/beliefs, skills, knowledge, and intentional actions.

## **Values/Beliefs**

- Define/describe your core beliefs that are based on scientific evidence, and those that reflect a religious or spiritual foundation.
- Identify the sources of your beliefs (your trusted sources).
- Do values correlate with how they are linked to experiences?
- Can you express doubts about values/beliefs?
- Ascertain your degree of passion about defending values, and openness to admitting they could change.

## **Skills**

- Feel comfortable explaining your beliefs about what democracy is or should be.
- Articulate the challenges to democracy such as gerrymandering or voter suppression.
- Listen/view media (broadcast and social), discerning what is “fair and balanced,” what is propaganda.
- Vote with appropriate knowledge of candidates and issues.
- Conduct civil conversations with individuals and groups on the importance of democracy today.
- Organize small groups to study democracy and its opponents, domestic and foreign.

## **Knowledge**

- Define/describe the hallmarks of democracy and its republican organization.
- Differentiate the Constitution, Bill of Rights, and three branches of American government.
- Identify/explain the alternative forms of government, such as oligarchy, theocracy, autocracy, fascism, authoritarianism.
- Locate non-partisan and official sources of facts/information.
- Discriminate between facts and opinions, misinformation, and disinformation.
- Identify challenges to democracy from organizations, demigods, and cults.

## **Intentional Actions**

- Willingly share your support of democracy with others
- Regularly vote.
- Be active in a political party or support organization.
- Attend and/or watch programs about matters relevant to democracy.
- Confront individuals and groups who are actively proposing non-democratic solutions to American problems.
- Discuss democratic issues regularly with family and friends at meals and events.

## So, what can you or I do?

After reading the answers to our why and what questions, you could likely be thinking, What can I or my friends and groups do to “raise America”? One of our contributors, Ted Kniker, a long-time federal government employee and now consultant to many public agencies and non-public organizations, developed the list below. Rebuilding democracy involves a range of actions that can be undertaken at individual, community, and broader societal levels. Many of these steps will be spelled out in more detail in the “to do” text boxes at the end of each chapter.

### 1. Educate Yourself and Others

- Learn about democratic principles: Understand the core principles of democracy, including the rule of law, separation of powers, human rights, and free and fair elections.
- Promote civic education: Share knowledge about democratic values and processes with others, especially young people, through formal and informal education settings.

### 2. Engage in the Political Process

- Vote: Participate in all elections, not just national ones. Local elections often have significant impacts on daily life.
- Volunteer for campaigns: Support candidates or causes that uphold democratic values by volunteering your time and skills.

### 3. Advocate for Democratic Reforms

- Support electoral reforms: Advocate for changes that make the electoral process fairer, such as ranked-choice voting, gerrymandering reform, and campaign finance reform.
- Lobby for policy changes: Contact your representatives to support legislation that strengthens democratic institutions and protects civil liberties.

### 4. Participate in Civil Society

- Engage with non-governmental organizations (NGO) that work on promoting democracy, human rights, and social justice.
- Start or join advocacy groups: Form or join groups that focus on specific issues like voter rights, freedom of the press, or anti-corruption.

### 5. Promote Free and Fair Media

- Support independent media: Subscribe to and share content from reputable news sources that provide unbiased and fact-based reporting.
- Combat misinformation: Actively debunk false information and educate others about the importance of media literacy.

### 6. Defend Human Rights

- Support civil liberties: Advocate for and protect the rights of free speech, assembly.
- Fight discrimination: Stand against discrimination in all forms and support policies that promote equality and inclusion.

### 7. Foster Inclusive Dialogue

- Encourage open conversations: Create spaces for open, respectful discussions on political and social issues.
- Listen actively: Understand diverse perspectives and build common ground with people from diverse backgrounds and viewpoints.

### 8. Strengthen Community Engagement

- Participate in local governance: Attend town hall meetings, community boards, and other local government forums to stay informed and involved in decision-making processes.
- Support community initiatives: Get involved in local projects that aim to improve community well-being and promote democratic engagement.

### 9. Promote Transparency and Accountability

- Advocate for open government: Support initiatives that increase transparency in government operations and decision-making.
- Demand accountability: Hold public officials accountable through petitions, campaigns, and public scrutiny.

### 10. Protect the Rule of Law

- Support judicial independence: Advocate for a judiciary that is free from political influence and can act as a check on other branches of government.
- Fight corruption: Support anti-corruption measures and transparency in government spending and operations.

## 11. Build International Solidarity

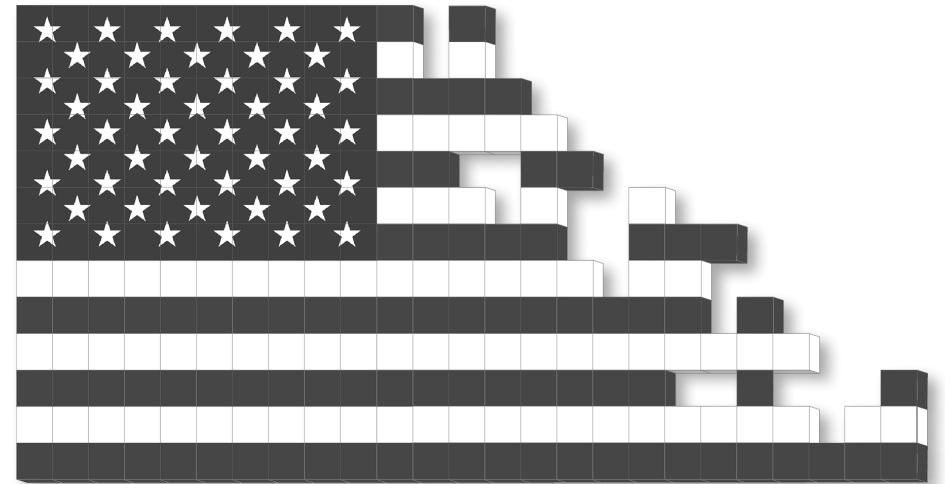
- Support global democracy movements: Stand in solidarity with pro-democracy movements worldwide through advocacy, donations, and spreading awareness.
- Learn from other democracies: Exchange ideas and best practices with democratic movements and institutions in other countries.

## 12. Use Technology Wisely

- Leverage social media: Use social media platforms to spread awareness, mobilize support, and organize actions for democratic causes.
- Protect digital rights: Advocate for internet freedom, privacy rights, and protection against digital surveillance.

## PART ONE

# Foundations of Democracy



# 1

## Governments and Governance

Why should I read  
this chapter?

To know why  
democracy is unique.

*“A thought which does not result in an action is nothing much, and an action which does not proceed from a thought is nothing at all.”*

**George Bernanos, World War I soldier (1888-1948)**

*“History proves that dictatorships do not grow out of strong and successful governments, but out of weak and helpless ones. If by democratic methods people get a government strong enough to protect them from fear and starvation, their democracy succeeds; but if they do not, they grow impatient. Therefore, the only sure bulwark of continuing liberty is a government strong enough to protect the interests of the people, and a people strong enough and well enough informed to maintain its sovereign control over its government.”*

**President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1938**

*“Autocracy: government by the few for the fewer.”*

**Charles Kniker, 2024**

Every civilization, every nation with an orderly system of government has had a body of people who formulate and control the rules and laws by which the country is run. We say that they have political power. To understand how these systems develop and how they perform is the subject of thousands of books and articles, but we are most concerned about democracy and fascism.

## Democracy

The word “democracy” is formed from two Greek words: *demos* — the people and *kratia* — power or rule. In this context we may recall a related word: *republic* which is a word of Latin derivation which more or less means affairs/matters concerning the public. Simply put, the power to govern comes from the citizens, who elect officials to represent their interests. Democracy by definition gives its citizens legal equality, political freedom, and rule of law. The appeal of democracy lies in its characteristics of individual empowerment: diversity of thought, motivation, values, and lifestyles. There are as many varieties of democracy as there are eggs in a carton.

For simplicity’s sake, the chart below describes three variants of democracy.

Type of Democracy	Characteristics	Examples
Representative democracy	Voters choose governing officials who make decisions through elections.	Senators and Representatives
Participatory democracy	Organized groups compete with each other to influence political decision-making.	Political parties and Political Action Committees
Elite democracy	A group of wealthy or highly educated individuals influences political decision-making.	Electoral College

Does it surprise you that the United States functions with three different kinds of democracy? Is one better than another?

The United States went through a period of paranoia in the mid-twentieth century as communism spread through much of the Eastern Hemisphere. The term “communist” was a pejorative label for anyone who promoted financial assistance or regulation from the government. Government aid and ownership are, in fact, components of socialism. Furthermore, the countries that claimed to embrace communism were oligarchies or autocracies. Hence, despite lessons in high school classes, many Americans don’t truly understand the elements of these various forms of governance.

To further complicate the topic, forms of governance are often confused with forms of economic systems. Essentially, economics is buying, selling, and trading, while politics determines who is heard and who makes decisions regarding the people and their day-to-day business.

Here is a simplified version of “Civics and Economics for People in a Hurry.”

Form	System	What it Is	Heard on the Street
Democracy	Government	People have a role in making decisions	Everyone gets their own way
Communism	Economic system	All assets are shared equally	No personal freedom
Socialism	Economic system	Some assets are administered by the government	Same thing as communism
Capitalism	Economic system	Private ownership of property; choice; competition	Same thing as democracy
Fascism	Government	anti-liberal, anti-socialist, violent, exclusionary, nationalistic	Bully; can’t happen here; ancient history

Chart continued on next page

Form	System	What it Is	Heard on the Street
Autocracy, Totalitarianism, Authoritarianism	Government	Prohibits opposition; controls all public and private systems including all media; ruled by a dictator	What the other political party wants; don't let them win!
Monarchy	Government	Ruling positions are inherited; usually a type of republic or democracy	Princes and Princesses
Theocracy	Government	Ruled by clergy according to the dictates of one specific faith traditio.	Christian Nationalism is ascendant in the United States; Islam is the basis for some Middle Eastern countries
Oligarchy	Government	Rule by a small group of people, often the wealthiest members of the population or members of the military	Poor people see rich people as the real rulers of the country

### Autocracy: Authoritarian or Totalitarian

Autocracy is a system of government ruled by one person with absolute power. Some Americans advocate for a “strong man” because they believe having one person in charge (of everything) is a much more efficient form of government (Ben-Ghiat).

Autocracies are almost always authoritarian or totalitarian in nature. What are the differences? Authoritarian regimes allow some freedom in private lives while totalitarian regimes seek to control every aspect of citizens’ lives.

Our current push toward authoritarian rule is best exemplified in a plan known as Project 2025, coordinated by The Heritage Foundation.

The plan would:

- reject abortion as health care and eliminate the Affordable Care Act’s coverage of emergency contraception
- infuse the government with elements of Christianity
- withhold funds appropriated by Congress if the president wished
- fire any U.S. Attorney who doesn’t carry out the president’s order to prosecute someone
- pardon every one of the 800 persons accused of attacking the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021
- slash funding for the Department of Justice (DOJ)
- dismantle the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Department of Education and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
- reduce environmental and climate change regulations to favor fossil fuel production
- eliminate the Department of Commerce
- modify the power of various federal agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC)
- reduce the U.S. civil service by over 100,000 persons.

### Accelerationism

What makes this move toward authoritarianism especially alarming to us authors is another movement known as accelerationism. Proponents of this movement believe our governmental and societal infrastructures are hopelessly flawed (Brueggemann). The only solution is the destruction of society as we know it, so that a new order can take its place. The collapse of our way of life would include the demise of legal and social institutions. Certain financial leaders and their associates support this movement because they see great benefits for them. Project 2025 would bring about some of these changes, and backers see it aligning with their religious and political worldviews and see no use in following our democratic procedures of electing leaders to make decisions. The best and fastest means to accelerate change is through what they consider legitimate violence.

## Fascism

Fascism is no longer relegated to 20th Century history. It is trending world-wide, and its hallmarks are easy to spot via media and social media.

Project 2025 combined with accelerationism brings us to the brink of fascism. The authors of this book see the trend toward fascism as the biggest threat to American democracy. According to Project 2025, theocracy, based on Christian Nationalism, is an important component of 21st Century fascism. The most virulent strain of Christian Nationalism is a movement known as the New Apostolic Reformation. Members believe they are divinely instructed to take control of all social and political institutions. Its beliefs align with research done by Robert O. Paxton. He says fascism is harder to define because it is based more on emotion than policy. Paxton is considered the “father of fascism studies.” He observed seven “passions” of fascism.

1. Loyalty to the group trumps any other duties
2. Members of the group believe they are victims, which justifies any actions against enemies
3. Liberalism is destructive and pernicious
4. The purity and unity of the community is enforced, sometimes drastically
5. Membership and self-esteem are inseparable.
6. Male authority is taken for granted
7. Violence is admirable.

In this superficial view of government systems, we have spent most of our time on the system we love most and the system we fear most: democracy and autocracy in the form of fascism. The threat is more than a news item, more than a theory, more than a topic of conversation. We hope to alert you, to warn you, and even frighten you with our words. Why? To inspire you to act on behalf of democracy.

Some Americans believe that government is bad. Trust in the government waxes and wanes, often with no concrete reason. Anyone is free to form an opinion about the role of government, its effectiveness, its excesses, its failure. Alert: you will learn in the remaining chapters that we emphasize that actions should be based on facts.

We believe that educating yourself about government, about issues, about human nature can help you to become a part of building a more perfect union. This chapter is the first step. Ready to raise America? Hardhat optional.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

“Accelerationism.” **The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)** is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to safeguarding human rights and reversing the rising tide of polarization, extremism and disinformation worldwide. <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/accelerationism/>.

**Beauchamp, Zack.** “Accelerationism: the obscure idea inspiring white supremacist killers around the world.” Vox Nov 18, 2019, 8:15 AM CST <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/11/11/20882005/accelerationism-white-supremacy-christchurch>.

**Beckett, Andy** “Accelerationism: how a fringe philosophy predicted the future we live in.” *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in>.

**Carter, Joe.** “5 Facts about Fascism “Acton Institute: Religion and Liberty March 25, 2011. <https://www.acton.org/about>.

**Common Cause** is a nonpartisan organization. One of its primary projects is to identify and oppose efforts in states that promote gerrymandering. Contact: Phone: 202-833-1200. Website: [www.commoncause.org](http://www.commoncause.org).

“**Democracy.**” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy#Types\\_of\\_governmental\\_democracies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy#Types_of_governmental_democracies).

**Democratic National Committee.** Contact: [www.democrats.org](http://www.democrats.org) 430 South Capitol St. NE, Washington, D.C. 20003. Phone: 202-863-8000

**Foundation for Economic Education (FEE).** An American conservative, libertarian think tank founded in 1946. <https://fee.org>.

**Global Network for Securing Election Integrity (GNSEI).** [www.usaid.gov/democracy](http://www.usaid.gov/democracy).

**Kahn Academy.** <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-government-and-civics/us-gov-foundations/us-gov-types-of-democracy/a/types-of-democracy>.

**Republican National Committee.** Contact: www.gop.com. 310 First St. NE Washington, DC Phone:202-863-8500.

**Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy.** Contains programs about the basics of American democracy in easy-to-watch units. Has a Civics 101 refresher program. Offers guidelines on how to engage in civil discourse. <https://oconnorinstitute.org/>.

**Serros, Erica,** “Authoritarian Tendencies in the American Presidency” (2023). Boise State University Theses and Dissertations. 2022. <https://doi.org/10.18122/td.2079.boisestate>.

#### Books and Articles

**Ben-Ghiat, Ruth.** *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (Norton, 2021 ed.).

**Brueggemann, Walter.** *Ancient Echoes: Refusing the Fear-Filled, Greed Driven Toxicity of the Far Right* (Fortress Press, 2023).

**Corbin, Steve.** “Read Project 2025 to see how radically Trump wants to change the nation.” *Des Moines Register*, June 2, 2024. Corbin is a professor emeritus of marketing at the University of Northern Iowa. He receives no remuneration, funding, or endorsement from any for-profit, not-for-profit organization, political action committee, or political party.

**De Tocqueville, Alexis.** *Democracy in America* (Mentor Press, 1956 ed.).

**Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt.** *How Democracies Die* (Viking, 2018).

**Paxton, Robert O.** “The Five Stages of Fascism.” *The Journal of Modern History*, 70, no. 1 (March 1998): 1-23.

**Snyder, Timothy.** *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

**Wehner, Peter.** *The Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic after Trump* (New York: HarperOne, 2019).

#### **What can I do?**

- If you believe strongly in American democracy, say so! And show it! Design a brief message and/or image that shows your devotion to or understanding of democracy. Then have it put on a T-shirt and wear it.
- Begin a discussion with someone who says they favor a different “brand” of government or wants to criticize the USA flavor.

#### **What can a group do?**

- Join either a partisan or non-partisan organization whose purpose is to ensure fair elections.
- Read the suggested resources and discuss.

# 2

## Democracy: Pros and Cons

Why should I read  
this chapter?

To learn about the pros and cons  
of democracy.

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”*

**The Declaration of Independence, 1776**

Our founders set goals when they drafted the Declaration of Independence of the United States. They held three “truths” to be the most important values of American democracy: equality, rights, and government, provided, by law, for all. These rights were further defined in the Preamble to the Constitution:

*“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”*

## Created Equal

Let’s be up-front; American democracy is not perfect. Its founders also knew that, so they spoke of striving for “a more perfect union.” It would be foolish to make the claim that we are there or close to it.

**FACT:** Abigail Adams had asked husband John Adams to “think of the women,” but it was not to be for more than a century.

The rule of the people—all of us—is a critical element in our governance. That is based on the premise or vision that “all men are created equal.” Yes, we know that some

of the “founders assumed that it did not include slaves or women as equals. The grim legacy of slavery resulted not only in the Civil War, but in continuing injustice and violence into our time. Some citizens still resist educating Americans about the injustices perpetrated by slaveholding and the effects it still has on citizens of all colors. A growing trend among white supremacists is to ignore or even deny the tragedy of slavery. This is especially heinous as it is applied to public school curriculum because it fosters ignorance and encourages bigotry among our youngest citizens.

There is no lack of literature exposing this constitutional abuse. In addition to Jill Lepore’s history of the United States, *These Truths*, we recommend two additional books, both winners of the Pulitzer Prize: Isabel Wilkerson’s *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* and Nikole Hannah-Jones’ *The 1619 Project*. All three books address the parts of history ignored in white-dominated education.

**FACT:** The Fifteenth Amendment (ratified in 1870) extended voting rights to men of all races.

**FACT:** Three years after the ratification of the 19th voting amendment, in 1920 the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was proposed in Congress in an effort to secure full equality for women. It seeks to end the legal distinctions between men and women in terms of divorce, property, employment, etc.

The vision or goal of a diverse democracy in America is further challenged by disagreements about laws regarding immigration. White nationalism is not only based on opposition to Black people but to “browns” and “reds” and “yellows.” The reality of America becoming “minority majority” (already close in some states but predicted to occur nationally by 2043) is threatening to many white-skinned citizens. The number of immigrants and refugees appearing at the southern border has increased to the point that the laws on asylum are ignored and legal immigrants must wait up to three years for a hearing. While former president George W. Bush authored a book, *Out of Many, One*, painting a picture of positive contributions by immigrants over centuries, other politicians today speak of refugees and immigrants as an invasion to be fought. Ironically, most of those politicians are the grandchildren of immigrants.

There are some who argue now that certain minorities—by virtue of wealth or power, rather than ethnicity—control justices in the courts. (Levitsky and Ziblatt, *Tyranny of the Minority*, 165-197).

## Unalienable Rights

As much as we like to believe that we as individuals in America are independent because we have so much freedom, there is no guarantee that we can do anything we wish. The classic statement related to free speech is no one should yell “Fire!” in a theater when there is no such emergency. Likewise, you aren’t at liberty in a public meeting to urge people to rob a bank because they feel the government, or business has made terrible financial decisions. A different example is that we citizens are entitled to “assemble peaceably.” In our current language, this means we should be able to have a parade to honor a hero or to demonstrate against a proposed building project. But if such a gathering becomes a safety hazard, it can be stopped.

*“A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few; as we have learned to our sorrow.”*

**Judge Learned Hand, 1944**

## No One is Above the Law

We might call it remarkable, but the founders made clear that no one is exempt from being a law-abiding citizen. Their historical knowledge, bitter individual experiences with monarchies, and a philosophical perspective that humans are easily tempted to do wrong moved them to declare that their elected officials, especially those in the highest positions, are limited in their powers. While the chief executive officer, the president, has protection from lawsuits, it has long been assumed the president does not have total legal immunity while in or out of office. However, the Supreme Court made a controversial ruling about presidential immunity in 2024 [see p. 28].

If you think that our current form of government was unanimously approved when the Constitution was signed, consider this fact: historians estimate that the adult population, while different from colony to colony, was divided into thirds — one-third favored the war against England and its king, one-third wished to remain faithful British subjects, and one-third were unsure. What may not be appreciated is how many disagreements there were. The musical “1776,” gives us a sense of it; one expression that emerged was “dissent is as American as apple pie.” The beginning of this infant nation, was, after all, labeled “the great experiment in democracy.”

Despite these differences of opinions, a democracy was formed. Compromises were made, including some issues that are still unresolved, such as voting rights. One of the principles that emerged was that the common good required “country above party,” and the union above states’ rights.

## **Consent of the Governed**

A key value or truth we hold is that the majority rules. Images of “town hall” meetings reinforce the ideal that everyone has a right to participate. Our elected representatives speak for us at higher levels of government. International scholar Anne Applebaum’s Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Twilight of Democracy*, noted in her analysis of other democracies, that authoritarian leaders do not rule alone. They seduce their followers as well as political allies and media celebrities with money, power, and even nostalgia to gain and keep control.

## **Resources**

### Organizations and Online Sources

**The Bridge Alliance.** A coalition of approximately 100 organizations. Member organizations span the political spectrum. Visit the websites/social media sites of its organizations which are accessible through its All-Members page.

**National Institute for Civil Discourse.** A multi-faceted approach to encourage civil discussions on politics, from the local to the national level. It involves faith communities, schools, state legislators. Check out its media coverage.

### Books and Articles

**Applebaum, Anne.** *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (Random House, 2018).

**Brueggemann, Walter.** *Ancient Echoes* (Fortress Press, 2023).

**Bush, George W.** *Out of Many, One: Portraits of American Immigrants* (Crown Publishers, 2021).

**Hannah-Jones, Nikole.** *The 1619 Project* (Random House, 2019).

**Lepore, Jill.** *These Truths: A History of the United States* (W.W. Norton, 2018).

**Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt.** *How Democracies Die* (Viking, 2018).

---. *Tyranny of the Minority* (Crown, 2023).

**Pepper, David.** *Saving Democracy: A User’s Manual for Every American* (St. Helena’s Press, 2023).

**Wilkerson, Isabel.** *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Random House, 2020).

### What can I do?

- Research the status of the Equal Rights Amendment. How would its passage impact you and yours?
- Have a conversation with several people who are disabled. Learn how they feel about being “equal” in America.

### What can a group do?

- Research the status of DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) programs in your area. Are they effective? Are they being dismantled? Invite those affected to talk with you about DEI policies.
- In a 6-3 ruling in 2024, the Supreme Court decided that the president has total immunity from criminal prosecution when doing official acts, presumption of immunity in some other actions, but none in personal matters (23-939 Trump v. United States). Discuss with a group why this decision is controversial.

# 3

## Democracy: The Common Good

Why should I read  
this chapter?

To find common ground  
in the common good.

*“Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”*

—Reinhold Niebuhr, 1944

*“In a democracy, the highest office is the office of citizen.”*

—Attributed to U.S. Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter, 1981

*“Politics isn’t just a game of clashing parties and competing interests. The right reason is to challenge the status quo, to serve the common good, and to leave this nation better than we found it.”*

—Sarah Palin, 2008

*“No decisions should ever be made without asking the question, Is this for the common good?”*

—Michael Moore, 2010

*“I’m bothered when people don’t understand that they have an obligation to use their best measure of devotion, of resources, to sacrifice for the common good.”*

—Cory Booker, 2019

## What is the “common good?”

Just what is meant by “the common good”? American author and scholar Edith Hamilton opined, “*If we insist on being free [self-dependent] and not responsible for the common good, we cease to be free at all. Responsibility is the price we must pay for freedom.*” A leading theologian, Walter Brueggemann (the authors call him a prophet), relates a significant number of today’s problems to our self-centeredness:

*“The great crisis among us is the crisis of “the common good,” the sense of community solidarity that binds all in a common destiny—haves and have-nots, the rich and the poor. We face a crisis about the common good because there are powerful forces at work among us to resist the common good, to violate community solidarity, and to deny a common destiny. Mature people, at their best, are committed to the common good that reaches beyond private interest, transcends sectarian commitments, and offers human solidarity” (Journey to the Common Good, 1).*

Many thoughtful and well-informed Americans have been feeling lately that our democracy is now in great danger. We believe in freedom of speech, but current disagreements on the matter of democracy are not the usual kinds of disagreements on this or that policy or candidate. Rather, they are related to the practice of American democracy. Never have we faced a crisis that threatens the very foundations of democracy like this one. We need to work to preserve our democracy and protect it from dangers, overt and subtle, that are at work to subvert and destroy it. Indeed, more vigilant Americans at various spots on the political spectrum are calling to save democracy.

Like most Americans, we are convinced that a democratic republican form of government is the most sophisticated and ideal form of government. We applaud its marvelous achievements. We appreciate the sacrifices made by countless Americans to defend it. We honor those who have served it, in military and civil roles as well as in countless other capacities.

We celebrate our unique accomplishments as a democracy, but we are also aware of errors of omission or commission in our collective history. Like all awakened Americans we are aware of the sad and shameful pages of racial and ethnic discrimination, of moral deceit and legal corruption, disruption of voting, and other actions that disfigure the pages of our history. It is a matter of some consolation that American thinkers and writers are among the his-

torians in various cultures and countries that openly acknowledge the errors and derelictions of previous generations of their people.

Among the growing number of thoughtful writers who have written of late on the topic of democracy, we will mention two specific books that document the factors that destroy democratic governments. *How Democracies Die* by Levitsky and Ziblatt describes countless instances, past and present, of various methods used to topple democracies. The authors present four key symptoms of failing democracies – and yes, the USA has “caught” all of them. Likewise, *On Tyranny* by Timothy Snyder offers twenty lessons, with extensive historical evidence, on what will destroy a democracy and how to be vigilant in its defense.

Additionally, Brueggemann’s book, *Ancient Echoes*, challenges the Far Right’s argument that American democracy has eight flaws. Three of these troubling assertions are that all government is bad, white male dominance of society is preferable, and each of us is entitled to our own truth. The agenda also includes replacing democracy with Christian theocracy (Attridge, America).

Obviously, concerns about our democracy arise because we believe it is the best form of government, but what is unique about democracy? Glad you asked. Keep reading

## On what is the common good based?

Almost everyone claims they value democracy. We do not want to get you bogged down in an academic game, but we think it important to be sensitive to different interpretations of the term “value.”

Those values, rules, and norms, sometimes called “morality” have a purpose – to make our collective lives—the common good— better or at least tolerable. If that seems too abstract, think of a family, a sports team, interest group, political party, or religious community. They succeed when they work well together; we say they have good “chemistry.”

For some:

*Values are internal or universal truths*, and boy, we don’t want anyone to question them! They may come from our faith, a family tradition, or personal exploration.

Values can also be understood as *needs*. One source explains it this way, “*the basic wants and needs common to every human being*,” i.e., our inner drives for such things as love, food, and shelter.

Here’s a third interpretation: “*disposition clusters*,” a closely linked package of a person’s desires (Rescher). Sociologists and anthropologists like to make the concept of values more concrete, describing them as the *standards or rules* of a society. It should be broad enough to encompass abstractions such as justice and honesty as well as specific laws against stealing and measurable virtues such as punctuality. Seeking Common Ground

As a college student, Eboo Patel observed that there were no organizations that combined diversity, service, and faith. He founded an organization that brought together young people of different faiths, in dialogue and service to the community. Today, Interfaith America students learn respect for diverse identities as well as how to establish relationships.

The contributors to this book believe, as indicated in the Preface and Introduction, that democracy, at its best, tries to provide well-being for all its citizens. Democracy promotes individual liberties. But we are not libertarian. As parts of the body work together, so we must also at times commit to working together for the common good. Concretely, that may result in a

**FACT:** Habitat for Humanity is a nonprofit organization that helps families build and improve places to call home. We believe affordable housing plays a critical role in strong and stable communities.

community hospital or swimming pool. It may be towns sharing fire fighters, or police officers. It may be non-profits and faith communities offering “meals on wheels” and care for veterans. In summary, from decisions about roads to volunteers donating time, we seek common good solutions when problems arise. But how do we do it?

The Common Ground Committee suggests in this summary a list of strategies, or ways that contribute to productive outcomes of common good pro-

posals. This list offers some explanation of what each attribute means, adapted from the Committee’s description of the attributes of a “common grounder.” They are:

- **Identify and set aside personal biases.** Be aware of yours. Recognize when they may close your thinking to what the other person/group is saying.
- **Commit to seek agreement, progress, and solutions.** Your goal is “let’s work it out,” not “win an argument.”
- **Listen first to learn perspectives and experiences.** It’s hard to work with someone or a group if they feel you have not listened to them. After listening, you might say, “I never thought of it that way.”
- **Don’t assume but seek to understand motives and intention.** Everyone has an agenda, including you! An individual may surprise you by acting differently than others in that group. Seek points of agreement.
- **Seek outcomes all can live with but don’t compromise principles.** Be prepared to be flexible; don’t begin with predetermined expectations or outcomes. Don’t go along when you feel your values or principles are violated.
- **Accept that good people may disagree.** Yes, you can and will have some values that are different. Avoid arguments if possible. If someone is unreasonably dogmatic, and if you conclude your principles are violated, it may be best not to engage.
- **Use and accept facts.** Offer facts from the beginning.
- **Stay respectful.** Monitor what you are saying and how you say it. Is it contributing to a positive conversation? Eliminate pejoratives and avoid stereotypes. If your temperature starts to rise, take a breath, and shift to a different line of discussion.
- **Resist demonizing.** Name calling and personal attacks on groups and individuals are common in political conversations. Although tempting, do not use these methods. If attacks come your way, do not accept them, and do not respond in kind.
- **De-escalate hostile solutions.** Be alert to everyone’s temperature. Shift to a different line of discussion or a different topic before people become angry. If you find yourself in a hostile situation, do not contribute to it. Focus on what you can appreciate about the other person’s ideas.

A composer, Alice Parker, created more than five hundred choral arrangements and spirituals, and lived to be 98 years old. Her final work was “On the Common Ground” (2020). It urges those divided over values and politics to get together, as at a town hall meeting. In this song:

- Soloist sings: Help me find the common ground.
- Chorus answers: Find the common ground, yes, the common ground.
- Soloist again: Between the high and the low; between the poor and the rich.
- And on . . . (Source: Washington Post, December 29, 2023)

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Common Cause is a nonpartisan organization.** One of its primary projects is to identify and oppose efforts of states that promote gerrymandering. Contact: Phone: 202-833-1200. Website: [www.commoncause.org](http://www.commoncause.org).

**Common Ground Committee.** [www.Commongroundcommittee.org](http://www.Commongroundcommittee.org) is a non-partisan citizen-led organization founded in 2009. *Its activities include offering courses on techniques to work on “common ground” projects and sponsoring a podcast, “Let’s find common ground.” It makes a “score card” on legislators who are committed to initiating efforts in common ground projects.*

**Global Network for Securing Election Integrity (GNSEI).** [www.usaid.gov/democracy](http://www.usaid.gov/democracy).

### Books and Articles

**Attridge, Harold W.** “Review: Walter Brueggemann on What the Bible Really Says about Our Political Culture.” *America Magazine*, 18 Jan. 2024, [www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2024/01/18/review-brueggemann-attridge-bible-politics-246947](http://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2024/01/18/review-brueggemann-attridge-bible-politics-246947).

**Brueggemann, Walter.** *Ancient Echoes: Refusing the Fear-Filled, Greed Driven Toxicity of the Far Right* (Fortress Press, 2023).

---. *Journey to the Common Good* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

**De Tocqueville, Alexis.** *Democracy in America* (Mentor Press, 1956 ed.).

**Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt.** *How Democracies Die* (Viking, 2018).

**Rescher, Nicolas.** *Introduction to Value Theory* (Prentice-Hall, 1969).

**Snyder, Timothy.** *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

**Wallis, Jim.** *The (Un)Common Ground*. (Brazos Press, 2014).

### What can I do?

- Do you want to be a “common gooder?” The epilogue of Jim Wallis’ *The (Un)Common Good* (pp.197-98) offers “Ten Personal Decisions for the Common Good.”

Read one of these books:

- **Jill Lepore.** *These Truths* (W.W. Norton, 2018).
- **Isabel Wilkerson.** *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Random House, 2020).
- **Nikole Hannah-Jones** *The 1619 Project* (Random House, 2019).

### What can a group do?

- Encourage friends to read these books and discuss them.
- Organize a group singing of famed folk music composer Alice Parker’s final composition, “On the Common Ground.”

# 4

## Balance of Power

### Why should I read this chapter?

To learn about issues relating to the  
three branches of government.

**The Constitution of Virginia of 1776 included this provision, which was similarly being considered by other colonies:** *“The legislative, executive, and judiciary department shall be separate and distinct, so that neither exercises the powers properly belonging to the other; nor shall any person exercise the powers of more than one of them, at the same time.*

*“When a man unprincipled in private life[,] desperate in his fortune, bold in his temper . . . despotic in his ordinary demeanor — known to have scoffed in private at the principles of liberty — when such a man is seen to mount the hobby horse of popularity — to join in the cry of danger to liberty — to take every opportunity of embarrassing the General Government & bringing it under suspicion — to flatter and fall in with all the non-sense of the zealots of the day — It may justly be suspected that his object is to throw things into confusion that he may ‘ride the storm and direct the whirlwind.”*

—Alexander Hamilton, 1792

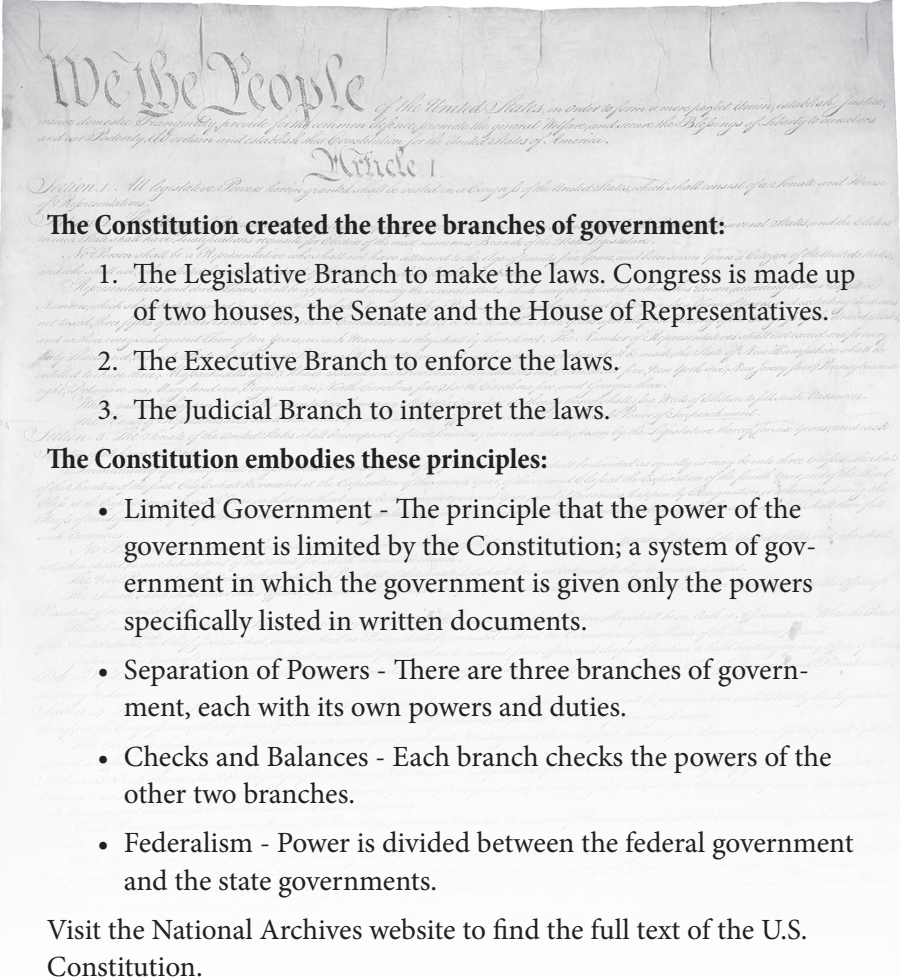
*“The U.S. has since the end of World War II had an answer - we stand for free peoples and free markets, we are willing to support and defend them - we will sustain a balance of power that favors freedom.”*

—Condoleezza Rice, 2012

Concerned about the way democracy is organized? Why give a fig about preserving our institutions? Well. Earlier, you learned about “accelerationism.” Its advocates want to accelerate the demise of America’s democracy. How are they doing it? Their incumbent office holders and candidates constantly criticize the branches of government, claiming they do not work, or delegitimize them through court delays and attacks upon their staff. The key strategy? Elect a “strongman” that they, the oligarchs, believe they can control (Ben Ghat).

Look again at how the founders wanted us to function. They established three branches of government to keep any one person or group from gaining too much power. It was to be a system of checks and balances.

## A System of Checks and Balances



**The Constitution created the three branches of government:**

1. The Legislative Branch to make the laws. Congress is made up of two houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives.
2. The Executive Branch to enforce the laws.
3. The Judicial Branch to interpret the laws.

**The Constitution embodies these principles:**

- Limited Government - The principle that the power of the government is limited by the Constitution; a system of government in which the government is given only the powers specifically listed in written documents.
- Separation of Powers - There are three branches of government, each with its own powers and duties.
- Checks and Balances - Each branch checks the powers of the other two branches.
- Federalism - Power is divided between the federal government and the state governments.

Visit the National Archives website to find the full text of the U.S. Constitution.



[www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov)

### The First Branch, Congress

Congress is comprised of elected representatives (elected every two years) and senators (elected to six-year terms) who propose and then adopt a budget. Through committees, the House and Senate also have oversight to investigate problems in the other branches, as well as to explore potential future projects for the nation's benefit, welfare, and safety. Another responsibility for the Senate is to "advise and [give] consent" to the president's judicial appointments, cabinet nominees, and department staff. In practice, the Senate influences whether the nominee is approved or withdrawn from consideration. Should the president engage in "high crimes and misdemeanors," the two legislative bodies have the power to impeach the president. If convicted by the Senate, the president is removed from office. By tradition, with the longer term, the Senate is considered the more deliberative body.

### The Second Branch, the Presidency

Elected by the people, the president, and the Office of the President over time, many believe, has become the single most powerful political position in the world. How so? First, the American president is the civilian Commander in Chief of the military. Second, through executive orders, which do not need House and Senate approval, the president can fund or withdraw funds from certain programs on the environment, transportation, healthcare, to name just a few areas.

Returning to the matter of the nation's budget, the Congress receives budget recommendations from the president and the Supreme Court. They are reviewed, frequently with heated debates, before passage. As a counter, once the Congress passes the budget, the president signs or vetoes the budget.

In addition, the president, with a few limitations, can pardon individuals previously convicted of crimes. The founders, from personal experience and history, did not want the president to have unlimited power. The special oath the incoming president takes requires him (so far, only men) to protect the country "from all enemies, foreign and domestic." While in office, the president cannot be charged with a crime. As discussed earlier, the majority opinion (6-3) in *23-939 Trump v. United States* (07/01/2024) is that the president's official acts have total immunity, and some other acts "presumed immunity."

### The Third Branch, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS)

The Supreme Court justices are appointed by the president, pending the approval of the Senate. Not until 1961 was the first Black justice, Thurgood Marshall, appointed. Sandra Day O'Connor, appointed in 1981, was the first female justice. Once confirmed, the justices have a lifetime term. Today, there are thirteen circuit courts and each justice has oversight over one or two. While there is a Judicial Council which has binding ethical standards for judges, SCOTUS sets its own ethical standards or guidelines. Congress, which determines the budget for federal courts, has tried to set some policies for the high Court, including when justices should recuse themselves.

#### **FACT:**

- There is no number of Supreme Court justices specified in the Constitution.
- The number of SCOTUS justices has changed seven times since it began.
- In 1869, with 9 justices on the bench, the USA population was 38 million in 37 states; in 2023, the USA now has 332 million citizens and 50 states.
- In 211 years, there have been 112 justices.

## **What are the real and perceived issues related to power?**

So much for the background. Let us highlight a few of the problems that media, issue groups, and political parties are highlighting. If you feel out of it, look at the "to do" box for some possibilities.

### Congress

Many citizens feel that Congress accomplishes little because of partisan fighting. Bipartisanship was subverted when Rep. Newt Gingrich discouraged compromise with the "enemy" Democrats in 1994. (Kornacki). More recently, intra-party fights have become the norm. For example: in 2015, John Boehner resigned as Speaker of the House when nineteen members of the so-called Freedom Caucus of the Republican party continually harassed him. In 2023, MAGA Republicans ousted Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

## Presidency

1. Should the powers of the Office be expanded or limited?
2. Should the president have immunity?
3. Should presidential pardon power be restricted in some ways?
4. Should there be age limits on the presidency? Should there be testing of candidates for their physical and mental abilities?

## Supreme Court

1. Should the number of justices on SCOTUS and circuits be expanded to reflect the nation's population and needs?
2. Should term limits be set for SCOTUS justices and federal judges?
3. Should the Congressional hearing process for SCOTUS nominees be modified? Should the influence of the Federalist Society be curtailed? Should the recommendations for justices be returned to a nonpartisan group?
4. Should judges be held more accountable by Congress or the Judicial Council?
5. Should the current procedure regarding the hearing of "emergency" cases be modified? Critics argue that this allows the Court to gain immense power through its so-called "shadow docket" (Vladeck).

## **Major Cases Affecting Today's Problems**

Each of the following cases has special significance. Often, it sets "precedents." The Court rarely makes rulings that are not consistent with the findings of that decision. However, those precedents are being challenged today.

*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*(1954) and *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, 600 U.S. 181 (2014-2023) and *SFFA v. University of North Carolina (UNC)* 2022

*Brown v. Board of Education* declared that "separate but equal" segregated schools were denying minority students an equal educational opportunity. It required desegregation of schools, which has not really occurred. A similar requirement to address affirmative action at the college and university level was later overturned. On June 29, 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court issued decisions that struck down race-conscious admissions policies at Harvard and the University of North Carolina.

*Chevron v. National Resources Defense Council* (1984) and *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo* (2024)

In its 1984 decision, *Chevron v. National Resources Defense Council*, SCOTUS ruled that when there are disputes about the policies and practices of federal legislation, the appropriate federal agency's understanding was to be the proper decision maker. However, in 2024 the Court overturned that precedent. In *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo*, the Court makes it easier for business owners to challenge regulations. Also, the courts will be more active in interpreting federal laws.

*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010)

In 2010, the Court decided that corporations are "persons" who could give funds to political campaigns. Critics now argue that the significant issue is that the law permits "dark money" to be donated to candidates. Donors, individual or corporate, do not have to reveal their names or the amounts given. That allows office holders or candidates to avoid indicating those who influenced voting decisions.

*Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973) and *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, No. 19-1392, 597 U.S. 215 (2022)

The precedent on women's reproductive rights set by the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 was overturned in the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision in 2023. Many thought the precedent of fifty years would be upheld although those opposed to abortions fought hard to have the high court overturn it. The political battle that ensued is ongoing and was to be a major factor in state and federal elections in 2024.

*Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013)

With Chief Justice John Roberts as the principal voice, the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The requirement that States had to monitor minority voting rights was reduced, thereby limiting protection of voting rights. The decision concluded that the states have made sufficient progress, so procedures to continue monitoring were deemed unnecessary.

In summary, ask yourself how important you believe our three branches of government are not just to you, but for your community, region, state, and

country. It is not uncommon for people to assert that “Washington is broken.” Whoever the “they” of Washington, D.C. is, they can be blamed for most of the country’s problems. But if you and I always assume someone else will take care of things, the “branches” will not be trimmed properly, or more bluntly, the legitimate balance of power will be distorted.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**American Bar Association.** Historically, a panel of ABA members made recommendations to the president for appointments to the courts. [www.americanbar.org](http://www.americanbar.org). Phone: 800-285-2221.

**American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).** Founded in 1920 to protect civil liberties, it can be contacted at 212-549-2500. It has many state affiliates. Civil liberties include: the right to vote, the right to a fair trial, the right to government services, the right to a public education, the right to gainful employment, the right to housing, the right to use public facilities, and freedom of religion.

**League of Women Voters.** A national non-partisan organization with many state chapters. For general information, go to [www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org).

**Planned Parenthood.** A nonprofit organization that provides reproductive and sexual healthcare, with offices in New York and Washington, DC. It also provides sexual education resources in the United States and globally. Phone: 800-230-7526.

**Public Citizen.** A nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that defends democracy, resisting corporate impact on Congress and the Court. USPS: 1600 20th St NW, Washington, D.C. 20009 Phone: (202) 588-1000.

**United States Supreme Court.** All decisions of the Court, including denials of orders and grants or denials of motions, are available online. If you want more specific information, consult such sources as Lexis, Westlaw, and Bloomberg Law.

### Books and Articles

**Ben-Ghiat, Ruth.** *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (Norton, 2021).

**Chemerinsky, Erwin.** *Worse Than Nothing: The Dangerous Fallacy of Originalism* (Yale University Press, 2022).

**Kornacki, Steve.** *The Red and the Blue* (Harper Collins, 2018).

**Stewart, Katherine.** *The Power Worshipers* (Bloomsberg, 2019).

**Vladeck, Stephen.** *The Shadow Docket: How The Supreme Court Uses Stealth Rulings to Amass Power and Undermine the Republic* (Basic Books, 2023).

**Whitehouse, Sheldon, and Jennifer Mueller.** “The Scheme. How the Right Wing Used Dark Money to Capture the Supreme Court” *The New Press*, 23 June 2021, [thenewpress.com/books/scheme](https://thenewpress.com/books/scheme).

### What can I do?

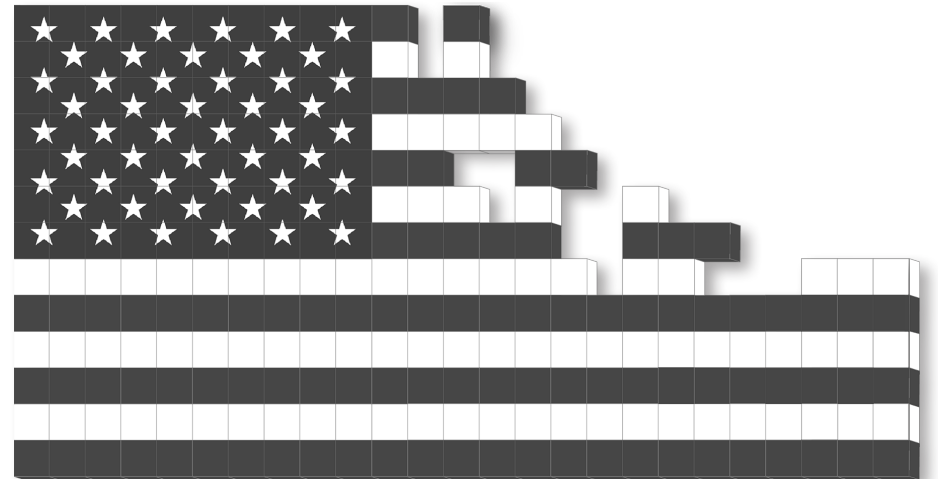
- Watch a variety of C-span programs to “get a feel” of contemporary national issues and what Congress is doing about them.
- Support more bi-partisan efforts by your representatives. No one individual or party has all the right solutions.
- Get on your House member’s email list office and/or your state representative and senator’s lists. Learn specific bills and hearings on potential legislation and share your perspective. General areas of importance: economy, environment, healthcare, and schooling.

### What can a group do?

- If only for a year, join an organization that serves persons with a specific disability. How is your state using any funds provided to the organization?
- Not only are individuals entitled to a speedy trial; the public is also. Explore the budgets (federal and state) for the judicial system. Advocate for support to provide more courts.

**PART TWO**

# **The Four Freedoms Today**



# 5

## Reaffirming Democracy's Four Basic Freedoms

Why should I read  
this chapter?

To be able to fight for these rights and  
defeat forces that want to eliminate or  
limit them.

*“Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom, must . . . undergo the fatigues of supporting it.”*

—Thomas Paine, 1777

*“Where, after all, do universal rights begin? In small places, close to home . . . unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.”*

—Eleanor Roosevelt, 1958

# FREEDOM OF SPEECH FREEDOM OF WORSHIP FREEDOM FROM WANT FREEDOM FROM FEAR

## The Four Freedoms

If I say to you, “Democracy is in trouble, and we may lose it,” that sounds ominous. The concept of democracy is broad; it is hard to link to our day-to-day lives. But, if I say, “if Bill ### is passed by our state legislature it would limit your right to vote or own property,” that will grab your attention.

We — the authors of this book — believe the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights (those first ten Amendments) spell out basic freedoms, or rights, for all American citizens. President Franklin D. Roosevelt made a creative recasting of those rights in his address to Congress in January 1941 (Lepore, 480,483), only months before Pearl Harbor and the beginning of World War II. Roosevelt proposed what he considered to be four universal human rights. During that war, Roosevelt declared, democracy must triumph everywhere in the world and function as a basis of a new moral order. “Freedom,” he said, “means the supremacy of human rights everywhere.” Later, noted American artist Norman Rockwell provided paintings to illustrate each of the four freedoms. They appeared on the cover of a popular magazine at the time, the *Saturday Evening Post*. These paintings are widely available online.

The four freedoms are the freedom of speech, freedom of worship (religion), the freedom from want, and the freedom from fear. What does each of those mean?

- **Freedom of speech.** Rockwell’s illustration suggests a New England town hall meeting. This right, in the First Amendment, means more than speaking. It includes writing letters to the editor of a paper, a television station broadcasting a controversial interview, or a group engaging in a peaceful demonstration.

- **Freedom of worship (religion)** implies that everyone is entitled to believe in and support a faith or spiritual tradition, or not be persecuted or punished because they decide to have no ties to an “established” church or belief system about a deity (i.e., the government would be neutral in religious matters). The founders of the country, having experienced religious intolerance, did not begin the United States of America as a Christian nation, but encouraged religions freedom of expression. This was the first freedom mentioned in the Bill of Rights (Balmer).
- **Freedom from want.** This principle discussed the issues of world poverty and hunger still prevalent after the Great Depression. Those issues continue today. Linked to them today is homelessness. Another matter, debated heatedly, is the growing inequity between the very wealthy and the rest of the population. Another matter is universal health care.
- **Freedom from fear.** The main concern in the 1940s was the European wars being waged by the Axis powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan. Today, we could include growing concerns about nuclear warfare, regional wars, artificial intelligence (AI), and cyberattacks.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Learning for Justice.** An organization linked to a nonpartisan effort to teach about the four freedoms. [www.learningforjustice.org](http://www.learningforjustice.org). Also connected to the Four Freedoms Fund and the Carnegie Foundation.

**World War II Museum in New Orleans** has material on the Four Freedoms speech of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941.

**Norman Rockwell Museum.** Stockbridge, Mass. [www.nrm.org](http://www.nrm.org). Background on the four paintings that represent the four freedoms.

### Books and Articles

**Balmer, Randall,** et al. *First Freedom: The Fight for Religious Liberty* (Covenant Communications, 2012). Text and numerous illustrations.

**Lepore, Jill.** *These Truths: A History of the United States* (W.W. Norton, 2018).

**Maddow, Rachel.** *Prequel: An American Fight Against Fascism* (Crown, 2023).

Describes conditions in pre-World War II America that are reappearing.

**McKibben, Bill.** *The Flag, The Cross, and the Station Wagon* (Henry Holt, 2022).

### What can I do?

Are you concerned about losing one or more rights, due to lack of privacy, gender, sexual orientation, or political viewpoint? If so, confront and question your elected officials who are threatening your rights. Join a group that is working for the same rights as you.

### What can a group do?

With a group, study recent cases related to the four freedoms. Would you be willing to send a petition to the United States Supreme Court about a decision? Or join a protest event?

# 6

## Freedom of Speech: Dissent, Media Rights, Group Protests, Censorship

### -Why should I read this chapter?

To learn how powerful speaking out  
can be when those with power  
feel threatened.

*“Without an unfettered press, without liberty of speech, all the outward forms and structures of free institutions are a sham, a pretense—the sheerest mockery. If the press is not free; if speech is not independent, and untrammelled; if the mind is shackled or made impotent through fear, it makes no difference under what form of government you live you are a subject and not a citizen. . . .”*

—Senator William Borah, 1917

*“Silence is complicity; we have a moral obligation to speak out.” [about Christian Nationalism and censorship]*

— Amanda Tyler, 2022

## Dissent

Have you always agreed with your parents? Did you follow all the rules at school or on the job? Come on! We all have disagreed or disobeyed because we thought something wasn't right. When it comes to government, we call it "the right to dissent." In the 1760s and beyond, Americans were divided between wanting to remain loyal to the King of England and those wanting independence. America was not a democracy at that time. We see echoes of that dissent or divisiveness today. We would like to believe that if a democracy

**FACT:** In colonial times and well into the early 1900s, in northern states like New York, Black people did not have freedom of speech. A young woman in Memphis, Tenn., Ida B. Wells, decided to establish a newspaper that would include stories of injustice. The name of the paper? "Free Speech." Its office was burned down.

is healthy, citizens should be able to express alternate views without threats of violence or fear of arrest. It is easy to see why freedom of speech is so important.

The principle of freedom of speech applies to local, state, and federal officials. Yes, it can be broadened to letters to CEOs of airlines, grocery chains, electronic products, etc. This

section offers some guidelines for effective messaging to emails and social media. You may want to do something more dramatic than a letter or phone call.

An aside: The authors of this book consider voting a form of free speech. We call it the "Jewel" of free speech. See Chapter 18 on voting!

## Media Rights

What we offer here are other ways to speak out. Let's begin with ways you can express your individual opinion. A traditional activity is to write a letter to the editor. But more effective in modern time are varieties of social media: Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Linked-in, X (Twitter) and YouTube are platforms for blogs and podcasts. The advantages are that you can say whatever you want and that you have an instant audience. The disadvantages are equally immediate: criticism and harassment.

How do you write a letter to the editor? See Chapter 20 Engage!

How can you prepare to speak in-person or at a meeting? See Chapter 17 Preparing and Sharing

## Group Demonstrations and Protests

Have you ever thought about "standing up" to protest what you believe is an unjust practice or to support a family member or friend who is a victim of hate speech? You won't be the first. Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of the most respected protestors in American history. Even though he has been dead for more than fifty years, his legacy is one of bringing about change through peaceful protest.

On rare occasions individuals are required to speak or act in a way others would regard as offensive. Before and during World War II, children of Jehovah's Witnesses refused to say the Pledge of Allegiance. More recently, various Black athletes felt they could no longer take part in saluting the American flag. In 1968, at the Olympics in Mexico, several American athletes raised their fists to protest treatment of Black people when the national anthem was played. Similarly, in 2016, an NFL football player, Colin Kaepernick, sat during the playing of the national anthem.




Student protests are not a recent development. In 1776, Harvard students protested the quality of butter served in the dining hall. In 1780, Harvard students petitioned for the dismissal of President Samuel Langdon because he replaced Sunday-evening singing with lengthy orations. In the late 1960s, many campuses, including Columbia University, had student demonstrations opposing the Vietnam War. At this writing, the current issue on campuses is the divestiture of endowment funds from Israel. As David Leslie pointed out in a recent article in the *Des Moines Register*, while there is merit in the goal of students wanting to talk to the trustees about divesting their endowments in companies that produce bombs, university investments are encumbered by legal conditions. Presidents of higher education cannot easily respond to demanded changes in curriculum because of factors like faculty tenure.

Peaceful protests are one matter. Physical attacks, destruction of property, and total interruption of the educational process are not consistent with non-violent principles practiced by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Censorship

A leading historian, Lawrence Cremin, commented that if citizens in a democracy have the freedom to read, they can recognize and resist authoritarian takeovers. That echoes Thomas Jefferson's remark that if he had to choose between having a "government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government," he would choose the latter. He assumed most citizens could read.

But what if public libraries and public schools are restricted to what they can offer readers? A hallmark of authoritarian regimes is that they restrict the media and censor or burn books. In recent years a growing number of state legislatures and governors (Iowa is an example) have banned close to 1,000



During the time the USA was in World War I, when he was an elementary student, a former professor of mine said he, a German immigrant, was required to kiss the American flag each morning.

books from schools. In a few communities, city councils or budget committees threatened to reduce public library funding if their librarians did not remove certain titles.

Which books are banned? Categories include those depicting sexual acts, gender orientation, and his-

torical accounts about marginalized and minority groups. Although a protest is brought by one or a few parents, it can be supported by a national organization like Moms for Liberty, an extremist political group. School boards and teacher organizations make clear that the normal pattern for choosing books is a process that ensures why and where a book fits into the curriculum. The typical policy is that parents have the right to protect their child, but that does not give them the right to restrict what other students may read.

Freedom of speech is much broader than campus protests and book banning. Everyday conflicts depend on the freedom to speak and many of those conflicts end up in court. Like any freedom, for freedom to apply to all citizens, there must be boundaries that reflect concern for a variety of situations.

Whistleblowing is a noble act. Workplace conditions, whether indoors or outdoors, in small businesses or large corporations, can prompt one to speak freely about dangerous practices or injustices in workloads. Calling out a

company or city government for injustice can result in changing laws or practices that are harmful or dangerous. However, the whistleblower can face reprisals, being fired.

Social media platforms are famous for allowing people to say whatever they feel like saying. Facts, opinions, or lies — anything goes! Controlling social media is controversial. Critics have called for corporations and government to provide more control over social media, but resolutions are complicated (if not discriminatory), and, as in many legal decisions, applying the recommendations would require coercion, which is contradictory to freedom.

A popular Facebook meme has "gone viral," as we say:

*Now imagine you did something embarrassing in 7th grade. And everyone laughed and it was awful. But someone also caught it on Snap Chat. And turned it into a meme. And a Tik Tok. And everyone in school saw it. And took a screen shot of it. And spread it further. And you couldn't get away from it. And no one forgot. And you couldn't either. And people were still resharing it months later.* (Jackie Tate, McEwen, Tennessee)

The above example is classic bullying. We think of bullying as a playground problem, but, frankly, it takes place in the workplace and in the home, too. Should the worker who cleans bathrooms be the subject of jokes in the staff lounge? Should the boss be excluded from holiday gatherings? Should the preacher preach only the sweet side of Jesus? Should older siblings beat up younger siblings? These are the dust on the desktop of free speech.

How does freedom of speech apply when someone reserves a room at the library for a speaker and the librarian brings in protesters who disrupt the meeting (*Moms4Liberty vs. Yolo Library*)? How does freedom of speech apply when a speaker is heckled to the point that the presentation is shut down?

Censorship is not just annoying. It can be dangerous.

If information about healthcare is blocked or distorted, the repercussions create a chain reaction of sick people and lost work time. When teachers are required to withhold information about science, students could be at a disadvantage in a higher educational institution or in a career that depends on science. Failure to act based on the evidence of climate change exacerbates the change and leads to more destructive weather.

Freedom of speech is a powerful right given to us by the Constitution. Like any manifestation of power, it can be productive or destructive. Peaceful protests, which are respectful of people and place, reflect the common good. On the other hand, attacks, destruction of property, and total interruption of day-to-day operations are not consistent with the spirit of the Constitution. Protests can take surprising turns, from peaceful to violent.

We, the authors, hope that we have given you options that can bring about change peacefully.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression.** www.ABFFE.org. USPS address: 333 Westchester Ave. Ste. 5202 West Harrison, NY 10604.

**American Civil Liberties Association.** Founded in 1920, its purpose is “to defend and protect the individual rights and liberties guaranteed to every person in the country by the Constitution and laws of the United States.” Phone: 212-549-2500. To contact individual state affiliates, go to [aclu.org/affiliates](https://aclu.org/affiliates).

**American Library Association.** <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/books>.

**First Amendment Center.** Various college and university affiliates. A linked organization is the Newseum, located in Washington, D.C. It is especially interested in the freedom of the press. <https://newseum.org>.

**Freedom to Read Foundation.** Created in 1969, it is affiliated with the American Library Association. [www.ftrf.org](http://www.ftrf.org). Phone: 800-545-2433. USPS address: 225 N. Michigan Ave. Chicago, IL 60601.

**National Coalition Against Censorship.** Email: [ncac@ncac.org](mailto:ncac@ncac.org). USPS: 19 Fulton St. Ste. 407 New York, N.Y. 10038 Phone: 212-807-6222.

### Books and Articles

“The Assault on Campus Free Speech Doesn’t Just Come from Liberals.” Foundation for Economic Education, Saturday, April 6, 2019, [fee.org](http://fee.org).

**Atkinson, Grant.** “Social Media Censorship by Government Officials Cannot Stand.” Alliance Defending Freedom. November 30, 2023 <https://adfflegal.org/>.

**Boone, Rebecca.** Associated Press. “Experts say attacks on free speech are rising across the U.S.” PBS New Hour. [https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/Mar\\_15\\_2023](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/Mar_15_2023).

**Brown, Genevieve Shaw.** “Tennessee teacher’s Facebook post revealing why ‘kids aren’t ready for social media’ goes viral.” *New York Post*, April 25, 2023, <https://nypost.com/>.

**Carter, Stephen L.** *The Dissent of the Governed* (Harvard Press, 1998).

**Elsesser, Kim.** “Female Whistleblowers Face More Retaliation – Here’s How To Avoid It, According To A New Study.” *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/2022/08/09/female-whistleblowers-retaliation-study/>.

**Leslie, David W.** “Colleges can do little to meet protesters’ demands.” *Des Moines Register*, May 6, 2024.

**Lepore, Jill.** *These Truths: A History of the United States*, “Freedom of Speech,” numerous references.

**Olumhense, Ese.** The Markup. “Whistleblowing While Black: How Truth-Telling Changes the Careers of Black Women in Tech.” *Capital B News*. March 19, 2024. <https://capitalbnews.org/>.

**Picchi, Aimee.** “Some students want their colleges to divest from Israel. Here’s what that really means.” *CBS News: MONEYWATCH*, May 11, 2024.

**Pepper, David.** *Saving Democracy* (St. Helena Press, 2023), especially chapter on “Fighting Censorship and ‘Memory Laws.’”

**Vile, John R.** “Firing of Jehovah’s Witnesses for Failure to Support WWII Participation,” Free Speech Center Middle Tennessee State University, April 22, 2024

**Wilson John K.** “Canceling Controversial Speakers Is Never Justified,” *Divided We Fall*, January 31, 2024 <https://dividedwefall.org/about/>.

### What can I do?

- Read! Watch TV News programs! Evaluate what you see and hear.
- Attend public meetings that you believe need input on a community project.
- Support those opposed to book banning.
- Write a letter or make a call regarding a matter that reduces suffering or injustice.

### What can a group do?

- Join and/or contribute to one of the organizations listed in the resources.

# 7

## Freedom of Worship: Religion, Beliefs, and Public Education

Why should I read  
this chapter?

To think independently, because the  
cornerstone of democracy  
is the freedom of its citizens.

*“The essence of the religious freedom guaranteed by our Constitution is therefore this: no religion shall either receive the state’s support or incur its hostility. Religion is outside the sphere of political government. . . . An act compelling profession of allegiance to a religion, no matter now subtly or tenuously promoted, is bad.*

— Justice Robert H. Jackson,  
West Virginia State Board of Education vs. Burnette (1943)

*“No funds traceable to the government [should] ever find their way into sectarian schools’ coffers.”*

—Chief Justice William A. Rehnquist and justices Bryan R. White,  
Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy, and Clarence Thomas,  
in Zobrest vs. Catalina Foothills School District (1993)

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” — The First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

*Note: This chapter is longer than most because of heated church/state issues. Too often, from the editors’ perspective, too many have too little understanding of the rich history of this unique relationship in American democracy.*

## What the Founders Envisioned

“The Americans who framed our Constitution felt that without freedom of religion no other freedom counted.”

—Historian Henry Steele Commager, ABC-TV documentary, 1975

Who hasn’t heard the advice “never talk about religion or politics” if you want to have a civil discussion? Sorry, that is what we’ll do now. Why? Because like it or not, our founders thought it important enough to make religion the initial subject in the Bill of Rights. James Madison’s original proposal used a variety of terms: “The civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext infringed” (Stokes and Pfeffer).

The final concept was that the “free exercise of religion” clause was partnered with a second clause; there would be “no establishment of a religion.” Most founders, like Madison, but not all, did not want to establish this experiment in democracy as a Christian nation (Read). Although various colonists

discriminated against certain religious traditions, the general sentiment was that spiritual life and secular consciences were essential for individuals and communities. Some colonies gave preferences to certain traditions: Massachusetts to the Congregational Church, Pennsylvania to the Quakers, and Virginia to the Episcopalians. That was based on the practices of the earliest settlers. When the Con-

**FACT:** More than fifty percent (54%) of Americans in a 2021 poll agree that the federal government should endorse the concept of separation of church and state. Over sixty percent (63%) said that the nation should not advocate specific Christian values. (Source: Pew Research Center)

stitution was adopted, any religious requirement for an office seeker at the federal level was vetoed (Article 4).

In a sense the two clauses of “free expression” of religion and “no establishment of religion” led to a paradox that exists today. To what extent can both exist? What is the “red line” that should not be crossed? Some then and now feel that government can support at least some religions. Does a “wall of separation” really exist? And if so, should it be dismantled brick by brick?

## The Wall of Separation Between Church and State

While the “wall” image has endured for over two hundred years, religious leaders and some political groups have been trying to tear down the wall all that time. No surprise then, that today there are candidates for federal office who call the wall “bogus” or illegitimate. Why the attack? Some say the purpose of current legislation is to reroute public funds to private schools. Others believe, from their theological perspective, that public schools should adopt a curriculum that religious conservatives can accept. And some go so far, as will be discussed, to eliminate public schools or manage them under a Christian theocracy.

A view shared by many mainline Christians and members of other faith traditions was stated by the Rev. Martin L. King, Jr. Aware of dark histories when monarchs from various faith traditions did control governments, he stated, “The church should never be the master or the slave of the state. It should be its guide and conscience....” (King, 56).

## The Importance of Education for Democracy

In *School House Burning*, Derrick W. Black makes the compelling case that the first four presidents — George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson,

**FACT:** In 1802, soon after the Constitution was in force, a group of Baptist ministers in Danbury, Conn. wrote Thomas Jefferson, asking him to explain the First Amendment. His reply to them: “I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.”

—Thomas Jefferson to the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut, January 1, 1802. . . .” (See Balmer’s account of “the cheese wheel,” pp. 89-90)

and James Madison—called for sufficient government financing of public schools. Why? They recognized that voters needed to be able to read, comprehend, and debate complicated issues. Even more important, citizens should be able to discern if candidates were people with ethical standards and had the competencies that the job required.

Since the early 1800s, Americans have expected their public schools to provide graduates with the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics, as well as commonly understood values. Over time, public schools were directed to address social problems, so homemaking courses and driver education were added. After the Russian launch of Sputnik in 1957, Congress encouraged students to go into science and mathematics fields. But first, background.

## The Development of the Common (Public) School

As the white migrations to the “New World” of America increased in the early 1800s and the great experiment in democracy spread, elected officials felt it necessary for ALL children to have a common set of experiences and values. Wealthy families have always had the choice of private education, based on religious or social preferences.



Public schools must accept all students. They are required to provide for the needs of students from every background and for those with physical, mental, or emotional disabilities. The curriculum is required to meet or exceed standards set by the state and/or subject matter organizations and professional unions.

An elected school board sets the policies and hires staff; teachers and administrators must be certified. Funding is paid by the states.

While states may vary widely in how much is paid per student, the rate often does not equal the cost-of-living percentage. A counter trend in certain states, often related to one political party, is to legislate public tax money for educational “scholarships” to non-public schools.

Critics of these parental choice plans believe they undermine public education, do not save the public money, and do not improve academic achievement. Organizations such as Americans United for Separation of Church and States hold these positions (Resources).

## School Prayer and Teaching About Religion in Public School

The Court has long viewed public school teachers as “government representatives.” By the 1960s, the Supreme Court developed the legal position that government was to be neutral to the role of religion. It could not be in favor of one religion or all religions vs. no religion. Teachers, administrators, or staff could not lead prayers, although nothing prevented students praying on their own. In fact, the Court approved public schools permitting students to have after-school groups that focused on religion-related matters.

**FACT:** Overall, 53.9 million K–12 students were enrolled in public and private schools in fall 2019. Of these students, 9 percent were enrolled in private schools, and the remaining 91 percent were enrolled in public schools. In 2021, about 11.2 million students were enrolled in private schools in the United States. For public school students, this figure stood at close to 63 million students. (Source: National Educational Statistics)

Nevertheless, critics claimed that “secular humanism” had taken control. In 1963, as somewhat of a counter, SCOTUS in *Abingdon vs. Schempp* stated that teaching about religion was permissible.

In his dicta (opinion), Justice Tom Clark opined: “*It might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or of the history of religion and its relation to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here [Schempp /Murray decisions, 1963] indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment*” (See Kniker, *Teaching About Religion*).

This statement became a “prescription” over the next fifty years for public school curriculum. Materials for objectively--not confessionally--teaching about the Bible as literature, religion in history, and studying world religions were developed, ever so slowly.

## Accountability

In recent years, conservative politicians in various states have used “parental choice” to make the case that families should have the right to select the type

of schooling that best accommodates their children’s educational needs. That is not the problem. When legislatures then decide that public funds should be given to the parents who can select private or religious schools, then problems with equal access for all students and with academic accountability arise. Academically, if a school has a curriculum contrary to scientific evidence, discriminates against persons of color or persons with disabilities, or advocates violence, then promotion of the common good is challenged. Academic achievement and performance standards, required by law for public schools, are optional for private schools.

Over the past decade, Supreme Court (SCOTUS) cases have resulted in public tax funds being approved for private and religious schools. In the *Trinity* case in Missouri, public funds were directed to a religious school for repairing a playground. In a more recent case, *Carson v. Makin* in Maine, the state was required to give state money to religious schools on the grounds they were the only school in the county or region.

## Religious Freedom

Multiple polls and studies consistently report that fewer than half of adult Americans now report they are members of a religious or spiritual tradition, and a third or more say they are neither religious nor spiritual. We prefer to label this the right to express your beliefs (or conscience). That is good news for those who affirm the “free exercise” clause of the First Amendment. Those who wish to live out their religious convictions, especially at the local level, applaud that decision.

For example, some time ago, some restaurant owners refused to serve Blacks, saying there was biblical support for that. The courts said no, if you were offering a public service, you could not discriminate. On the other hand, some native Americans wanted to use peyote in their worship services, but it was denied, because of the drug, not the religious practice.

In colonial days, a requirement was that all citizens or members of a community had to belong to the “official” religion. That meant they were enrolled at birth as a member of that church, had to be married in that church, and could run for a government office only if they were a member of the church.

Consider the arguments from each side for religious freedom:

Free Exercise of religion:	No Establishment of religion:
As a pharmacist, I should not have to fill a prescription if I don’t believe in abortion.	If I am a victim of rape, why shouldn’t I be able to get that prescription?
If my family owns a business, and we don’t believe in a certain medical procedure (say blood transfusion), why should we cover that for our employees?	I I am an alcoholic or a drug user, and injured in an auto accident, should I be denied being picked up by an ambulance or turned away by a doctor because of their religious beliefs?
If our state believes K-12 students would benefit from religious instruction by a chaplain from the major faith of the area, why can’t we hire such a person?	The government should not play favorites; it should not say to a faith-based adoption agency that it can deny a Jewish or Muslim family from adopting one of the children in your care.
Should parents be able to ask public schools to ban books that violate tenets of their faith?	Because public schools teach children from many faiths or no faiths, can they limit the teachers from advocating for their particular tradition?

In recent years, the conservative members of SCOTUS were in the majority in cases that reshaped religious freedom including:

- The right of religious schools to receive state funds for playground equipment and for them to consider non-clergy staff as ministers (Russo).
- The right of a former high school teacher/coach to hold a prayer service at the school’s football fifty-yard line. Objecting parents felt it was inappropriate because players felt “forced” to attend.
- The right of a business owner to refuse to make a cake for a gay couple’s wedding.

Opponents to the encroachment of religion on public life believe standards for declaring one's religious beliefs and practices are so loose that anyone could discriminate with vague statements that could cost lives. For instance, an ambulance driver or pharmacist could deny treatments or medications when they didn't want to serve a person of a particular ethnic group (Ryan)

A second criticism is that conservative SCOTUS justices and lower court judges are basing their decisions on the controversial theories of "originalism" and "textualism" (Chemerinsky). Originalism argues that the Court's decision should use as a guide what the original intent of the founders was. Textualism broadens the interpretation to mean what was the common understanding or context of a word or phrase at the time, such as "bear arms" in the 1770s. In other words, these justices assert our laws should be based on the norms of the 18th Century, rather than on the norms of the 21st Century.

## Christian Nationalism

What is Christian nationalism? As Whitehead and Perry summarize it, "At its heart, Christian nationalism demands that we must preserve a particular kind of social order, an order in which everyone – Christians and non-Christians, native-born and immigrants, whites and minorities, men and women recognizes their 'proper place' in society" (see Resources).

More specifically, its core beliefs are:

- America has been, is, and should remain a Christian nation, as a theocracy.
- Blessed by God, it is a "chosen people," with a manifest destiny.
- Some religious traditions are better than other religious traditions.
- Voting is a privilege, not a right. Only those favored shall be voters.

Education is impacted when organizations like Moms for Liberty, through lawful and unlawful means, seek to remove books that teach about racism and slavery, or whose characters are not cisgender.

Additionally, state legislatures have introduced laws that ban teaching about racism, slavery, white supremacy, and social-emotional learning.

Two organizations that disagree with the theology and political practices of Christian Nationalism are Americans United for Separation of Church

and State and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. Both have journals which report on court decisions and practices in various states (see Resources).

## Freedom of Belief (Conscience)

If we take the position of the First Amendment that all agree that we should continue to have freedom to believe and practice a religious or spiritual tradition and also confirm that we are opposed to an "establishment of a religion," how might we summarize that today? Barry Lynn, a lawyer, minister, and now retired CEO of Americans United, shared this statement, which he called the freedom of conscience:

In many ways, the absence of "freedom of belief" religious and non-religious, is a repudiation of the crux of human rights. Every person must deal with central questions of human existence like why the world even exists and what if anything follows the life we have on earth. Similarly, she or he must construct, even if imperfectly, a moral center for their lives.

When any government refuses to allow a broad latitude in citizens for their articulating and, within reason, practicing their beliefs, beliefs become tyrannical according to the government. When a nation chooses to turn its majority religious tradition – worse, as its leaders interpret that tradition—into legal mandates, it invariably represses the rights of those who disagree with that understanding and interpretation. . . . Freedom of belief of course does not guarantee that the 'best' solution to questions of ethics or not governance will be found, but it does make those solutions increasingly likely.

Some would argue that since "religious traditions" tend to be rooted in absolutes they inhibit free dialogue and searches for "common ground." This view neglects the reality that people who have a deep and abiding sense of what guides them often feel more willing to have their ideas challenged and to alter beliefs after they examine alternative viewpoints (Lynn, in Kniker, *Spirituality*, 230).

**FACT:** Under Governor Ron DeSantis, the Florida Department of Education is offering middle and high school teachers \$3,000 "bonuses" for taking in-person and online courses that wrongly assert the Ten Commandments form the basis for U.S. law. (Source: Faithful America: June 6, 2024)

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Americans United for Separation of Church and State.** Membership is by organizations and individuals. Journal is *Church & State*, published every month except August. The staff is involved with legal cases nationally and speaks on legislation. Contact: [www.au.org](http://www.au.org). Phone: 202-466-3234. See flyer “School Vouchers by Any Other Name.”

**Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.** Supported by fifteen Baptist denominations, its journal is *Report from the Capital* (published four times a year). Contact: [BJC@BJCOnline.org](mailto:BJC@BJCOnline.org). Phone: 202.544-4226.

**Barnett, Randy, and Colby, Thomas.** “Should SCOTUS focus more on the Original Meaning of the Constitution?” Open to Debate. <https://opentodebate.org>

“The Establishment Clause: How Separate are Church and State?” : [https://billofrightsintstitute.org/activities/handout-a-the-establishment-clause-how-separate-are-church-and-state-background-essay?gad\\_source=1](https://billofrightsintstitute.org/activities/handout-a-the-establishment-clause-how-separate-are-church-and-state-background-essay?gad_source=1)

**Faithful America.** A large online community of grassroots Christians. Homepage: [faithfulamerica.org](http://faithfulamerica.org).

**Interfaith Alliance.** Founded to counteract the influence of the Religious Right. Office in Washington, DC, with state affiliate offices. Contact: [www.interfaithalliance.org](http://www.interfaithalliance.org).

**Read, James H.** “James Madison.” Original article published in 2009; published in 2023 and updated on February 16, 2024. Available on Fox News Media Interviews.

**Reiner, Rob,** speaking to Amanda Tyler of BJC (YouTube) on “Christian Nationalism” Saving Faith: How American Christianity Claim Reclaim Prophetic Voice.

### Books and Articles

**Alberta, Tim.** *The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory: American Evangelicals in An Age of Extremism* (Harper, 2023).

**Balmer, Randall, Lee Groberg, and Mark Mabry.** *First Freedom: The Fight for Religious Liberty* (Covenant Communications, 2012). In addition to text, includes color and black-and-white photographs from a program on PBS.

**Boston, Robert.** *Taking Liberties: Why Religious Freedom Doesn't Give You the Right to Tell Other People What to Do* (Prometheus Books, 2014).

**Brueggemann, Walter.** *Ancient Echoes. Refusing the Fear-Filled, Greed-Driven Toxicity of the Far Right* (Fortress Press, 2023).

**Chemerinsky, Erwin.** *Worse Than Nothing: The Dangerous Fallacy of Originalism* (Yale University Press, 2022).

**Hixenbaugh, Mike.** *They Came for the Schools: One Town's Fight Over Race and Identity, and the New War for America's Classrooms* (Mariner, 2024).

**King, Martin L, Jr.** *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press, 2010).

**Kniker, Charles R.** *Spirituality That Makes a Difference* (Wipf & Stock, 2022).

---. *Teaching About Religion in the Public Schools Fastback 224* (Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1985).

**Lieberman, Myron.** *Public School Choice: Current Issues/Future Prospects* (Technomatic, 1990).

**Ryan, Connie.** “Iowa RFRA would allow religion to excuse discrimination.” *Des Moines Register*, February 25, 2024.

**Russo, Charles J., and William E. Thro.** “A New Dawn: The Supreme Court Upholds Religious Liberty in Education” *Religion & Education* (Vol. 50, No. 1), 3-18.

**Stokes, Anson Phelps, and Leo Pfeffer.** *Church and State in the United States* (Harper & Row, 1964). Chapter 4 Constitutional Provisions, 83-103. Contains citations of the various language changes of what became the First Amendment.

**Texas Interfaith Center for Public Policy.** *Equal Liberty: Preserving Religious Freedom for All Texans* (2015). A 42-page information study of policies on a variety of religious freedom issues.

**Whitehead, Andrew, et al.** *Taking America Back for God* (Oxford University, 2020)

### What can I do?

- Read about how public schools have always been expected to teach about character and values as well as the basics. Share your facts and stories with others.
- Check to see whether there is discrimination against certain religious traditions in your community. Or are certain traditions given special treatment?
- Learn if any congregations in your area are promoting Christian Nationalism. Would you consider joining the organization Christians against Christian Nationalism?
- Do a case study that spells out the influence of such groups on school systems. Read Mike Hixenbaugh's account of Southlake, Texas, for background.

### What can a group do?

- Discuss with friends: Should public money be given to private schools?
- Discuss with friends: Should religious freedom allow businesses to discriminate against people who do not share their faith values?
- Discuss with friends: Was the United States founded as a Christian nation?

# 8

## Freedom From Want: Climate, Hunger, Health, and Homelessness

### Why should I read this chapter?

To clarify your commitment to solving climate change, eliminating hunger and homelessness, and securing healthcare for all.

*"This country cannot afford to be materially rich and spiritually poor."*

—President John F. Kennedy, State of the Union address, 1963

*"Justice in the life and conduct of the State is possible only as first it resides in the hearts and souls of the citizens."*

—Inscription at the U.S. Department of Justice building

*"The big question facing humans isn't 'what is the meaning of life?' but rather 'how do we stop suffering?'"*

—Yuval Noah Harari, 2018

What does “Freedom from Want” mean? We tend to think of food. Just look at Norman Rockwell’s painting that symbolized President Franklin’s speech on Freedom from Want — a whopper of a turkey served at a Thanksgiving dinner. We authors are interpreting “want” today as what is essential for human life — clean air, food, good health, and shelter. This chapter asks you, as one person or as a member of a social, civic, or religious organization, to make realistic choices about the jurisdiction and responsibilities of government bodies.

## How do we pay for our needs and wants?

Beyond personal income and wealth, we’ll always have debate and dissent about how much government service is needed and the efficiency of government spending. President Ronald Reagan famously said, “Be cautious when someone says, ‘I’m from the government and I want to help you.’” However, not everyone believes the government is always bad (Brueggemann). Be honest: we expect warnings about unsafe food, world epidemics, airline safety, and assistance after natural disasters.

**FACT: Where you rank by income:**

- Lower class:  
Less than or equal to \$30,000.
- Lower-middle class:  
\$30,001 – \$58,020.
- Middle class:  
\$58,021 – \$94,000.
- Upper-middle class:  
\$94,001 – \$153,000.
- Upper class:  
Greater than \$153,000.

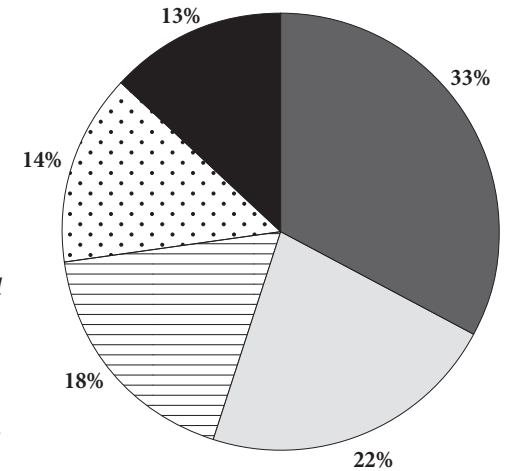
(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022)

The total estimated spending for federal, state, and local governments for 2024 wa \$10.5 trillion (see chart on page 73). As the chart indicates, the three largest items are health care, pensions, and education. How do we pay for these services? Should there be a flat amount or a percentage of your income? Should the rich pay at a higher rate than the poor? Should there be exemptions for businesses when they move into a community? Should there be only sales and property taxes, but no income taxes?

## Total 2024 Spending by Function

<b>TOTAL SPENDING \$10.5 trillion</b>	
● Health Care	\$2.3 trillion
▨ Pensions	\$1.9 trillion
⋯ Education	\$1.5 trillion
● Defense	\$1.3 trillion
● Other	\$3.5 trillion

*Spending: guesstimated*



Note:  
 1. Federal spending after 2023 is budgeted.  
 2. State spending after 2021 and local spending after 2021 are “guesstimated” by projecting the latest change in reported spending forward to future years.

Data Sources:  
 GDP, GO: GDP, GO Sources  
 Federal: Fed. Budget: Hist. Tables 3.2, 5.1, 7.1  
 State and Local: State and Local Gov. Finances  
 ‘Guesstimated’ by projecting the latest change in reported spending forward to future years.

Maybe a few more facts and trends are important. The trend is that the top one or two percent of citizens are becoming much wealthier than those below them. A bill in Congress, the *Ultra Millionaire Tax Act of 2024*, would impose an additional tax on those whose net worth exceeds \$50 million. A feature of it would add staff and resources to the IRS to go after tax cheats. What are your thoughts on this now?

## We Say We Want a Clean Environment

We all need air to breathe. Assuming there is no “Plan--et B” to move to, what is your perspective on what to do about the environment? Do you believe that the natural and animal worlds are changing so significantly that the planet will become uninhabitable? If little is done, Richard Haass, Katharine Hayhoe, Brooks Berndt and others see dramatic changes coming, such as increasing numbers of tornadoes and hurricanes, perennial forest fires and floods, savage droughts and starvation. Calls for environmental justice and stewardship have increased, climate deniers appear less vocal, but significant national and worldwide responses seem minimal. Should governments be more active in not only promoting but requiring wind and solar power and electric engines? Are you an advocate for or opponent of legislation related to water nitrate

levels? Do you believe levels of pollutants in the air that affect construction laborers and immigrant workers are unhealthy?

We urge you to become more aware of and involved with local, regional, state, and federal agencies that have responsibility for environmental remedies. At the federal level, the best known is the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The past administration and the current administration have opposite responses; the former discontinued EPA actions; the latter added more.

## We Say We Want the World to be Hunger Free

A basic human need is nourishing food. We, like others in developed countries, assume that it isn't a big problem here. Another way to gain perspective is to convert the statistics of an estimated nine million people in the world

dying of hunger each year. *That is the equivalent of three 350 passenger airplanes crashing each hour of each day in a year!*

**FACT:** 1 in 8 people is food insecure; 1 in 6 is a child.

**FACT:** In 2023, World Food Program estimated 345 million people were food insecure.

**FACT:** 9 million people a year die of hunger.

(Source: United Nations: <https://secure.wfpusa.org>)

A widespread belief is that there is enough food in the world for everybody, and that starvation would be resolved with better distribution.

First, the belief that there is already enough food in the world is false, according to Bread for the World, a nonprofit organization. Second, in addition to this, multiple issues such as climate change, gender discrimination (such as women walking miles for water and not being

able to go to school), poverty, inequality, weak governments, and inadequate health systems prevent workable distribution. Third, in too many countries including the United States, food is wasted. In some cases, the cause is lack of refrigeration. But too many restaurants and families just throw food away.

What remedies come to your mind? Has your community established food pantries and "soup kitchens?" Are you aware of local agencies which offer free meals and snacks to kids at school? Does your state offer coupons or vouchers like

**FACT:** The average American family of four wastes up to \$2,275 in food. Sadly, for a variety of reasons, in 2021, 11 million families in the USA were food insecure sometime during the year.

(Source: [www.wedontwaste.org](http://www.wedontwaste.org))

the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) federal program? SNAP's vision is to supplement the food budget of income-eligible families to buy healthful food until they are self-sufficient. Families and individuals can apply for SNAP benefits in three ways; online, paper application, or over the phone. In fiscal year 2022, 41.2 million people in 21.6 million households received monthly SNAP benefits. Programs vary from state to state, partly due to the beliefs of governors and state legislators about poor people. Ask why. Get involved; it might transform your thinking!

## We want healthcare, or do we?

Let us acknowledge that until well after the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s, healthcare and health insurance were something that individuals and families were expected to take care of themselves. The model of European governments to provide healthcare for citizens, often labeled socialism, was rejected then and still is, by some. Enough support emerged in President Obama's administration that a federal system of health insurance was adopted. Despite political party objections centered around burdensome costs, the American public wanted coverage for increasing medical costs. One aspect of healthcare is also coverage of medical prescriptions. What is your position? Go to [www.healthcare.gov](http://www.healthcare.gov) for reliable information on the status of the ACA.

**FACT:** The Affordable Care Act, formally known as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and colloquially as Obamacare, is a landmark U.S. federal statute enacted by the 111th United States Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama on March 23, 2010.

### Reproductive Rights

The debate on whether reproductive care in its many nuances is a right, as determined in *Roe v. Wade*, then overturned by *Dobbs* two years ago, is front and center. The successful opposition to *Roe v. Wade* has been due in large part to the efforts of religious communities, primarily evangelical and Roman Catholic, who believe life begins at conception. This key issue is of course related to the religious value of the sanctity of life. But even within faith traditions there are different interpretations. According to Jewish theology, when a mother or baby's life is in the balance, the mother is to be saved for the benefit of the family. Does the unborn child have more rights than the mother? Politically, this has become a major difference between the two major political parties. Important statistics are available at <https://reproductiverights.gov/>. For infor-

A family of six was expecting child #5. Toward the end of the pregnancy, the lives of mother and child were in danger. The parents had to choose which life to save, the mother's or the baby's. The parents chose to save the baby's life, thereby leaving the father with five children, including the newborn, to raise by himself. They were acting according to their faith tradition. Fortunately, both lived.

mation on this topic, contact organizations like Planned Parenthood. Key issues to consider are privacy and exemptions for rape and incest.

### **We say we do not want homelessness. Really?**

Who does not want secure shelter? It's usually called "home," said to be the most powerful word in the English language. Healthy homes provide both

comfort — safety, warmth, support, food — and confrontation — boundary setting, positive challenges, priority questions. They prepare us to succeed in the outside world.

Homelessness here means the loss of a permanent residence. More than the image of people living under bridges and spending nights in cars, it includes short-term stays with relatives and friends or in motels for an extended time. Cities like Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon, have tent cities and people wrapped in plastic sleeping on the streets. It is not unusual for a school district to have fifty to one hundred students from homeless situations.

What are the issues we wrestle with? See the "to do" section for suggestions. A related issue is how communities might address eviction problems. Matthew Desmond of *Evicted*, using Milwaukee as a case study, finds that low-income people evicted from rental units lose the stability of occupying a home, which curtails their time to hunt for jobs, go to medical appointments, and look for safer, cheaper housing. Temporary resettlement funds, Desmond found, would be lower than the long-term costs for social and therapeutic treatment for the those evicted.

You alone cannot address all the problems cited. We hope to make you aware of basic want and needs that you can realistically address. As citizens of this bountiful land, each of us has the responsibility to be involved in helping less fortunate citizens and relieving human suffering.

**FACT:** Homeless youth often become victims of human trafficking.

**FACT:** On a single night, more than 653,000 people in the United States are homeless; perhaps one in six of them is of school age or younger.

**FACT:** Habitat for Humanity is a nonprofit organization that helps families build and improve places to call home. We believe affordable housing plays a critical role in strong and stable communities.

(Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness; other agencies.)

## **Resources**

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Americans for Tax Fairness.** <https://americansfortaxfairness.org/>.

**Bread for the World** is a Christian organization, non-profit, whose goal is to eliminate world hunger. [www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org). Phone: 202-688-1084.

**Centers for Disease Control (CDC).** [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). Phone: 1-800-232-4636.

**Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).** [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov). On their website, one can sign up for various newsletters, and reports, and learn locations of various offices.

**National Alliance to End Homelessness** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose sole purpose is to end homelessness in the United States. <https://endhomelessness.org/ending-homelessness/>.

**Planned Parenthood** is a 501 nonprofit organization that provides reproductive and sexual healthcare, and sexual education in the United States and globally. Main Office, New York: Phone: 1-800-230-7526.

**Public Citizen** is a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that champions the public interest in the halls of power. [www.citizen.org](http://www.citizen.org). Phone: 202-585-1000.

**United Nations World Food Program** delivers more than fifteen billion meals a year. Headquarters are in Rome. Conduct a search for other offices.

## Books and Articles

**Bass, Dianna Butler.** *Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution* (HarperOne, 2015).

**Berndt, Brooks.** *Cathedral on Fire* (United Church of Christ Press, 2024, 3rd ed.).

**Brueggemann, Walter.** *Ancient Echoes. Refusing the Fear-Filled Greed-Driven Toxicity of the Far Right* (Fortress, 2023).

**Desmond, Matthew.** *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (Broadway, 2016).

**Haass, Richard N.** *The World: A Brief History* (Penguin, 2020).

**Hayhoe, Katharine.** *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World* (Simon and Schuster, 2021).

**Kniker, Charles.** *Spirituality That Makes a Difference* (Wipf & Stock, 2022).

**UN World Food Program USA.** "10 Facts You Need to Know about Hunger." March 18, 2024.

### **What can I do?**

- Want to find a variety of ways to work with soil, sky, water? See Diana Butler Bass, **Grounded**.
- Find websites of organizations, from farm groups to automotive corporations, for their policies and supporting facts regarding climate change.
- Do the research, then refit your home with energy panels and a heat pump. Or if allowed in your area, research wind turbine use.
- If your community or one nearby has a program serving meals or taking food to people (Meals on Wheels), be a volunteer.
- If you feel strongly about reproductive rights, or assisting the homeless, attend city council meetings and speak up.

### **What can we do?**

- A now international celebration called Earth Day (April 22) was begun in 1970. That same year the Environmental Protection Act was passed. Find out how it is observed in your area. If you agree with its goals, join in the activities.
- If you are a member of a faith or spiritual community, inquire what your local congregation or group does to help those who are food insecure. Does it help with food pantries? Solicit funds? Organize groups to pack food for those in need?
- Check with your local school district. Are volunteers needed to assist students who are homeless?
- Find sources that debate the best ways to tax citizens for services. Determine your view and share it with legislators.

# 9

## Freedom From Fear: War and Terrorism, Violence, Immigra- tion and Racism

Why should I read  
this chapter?

To be able to weigh the costs and benefits of addressing these fears; to choose how to support, modify, or oppose existing social structures.

*“Early and provident fear is the mother of safety.”*

—Edmund Burke, 1792

*“... if the mind is shackled or made impotent through fear, it makes no difference under what form of government you live, you are a subject and not a citizen.” . . .*

—Senator William E. Borah, 1917

*“Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.”*

—President John F. Kennedy, 1961

One of the basic principles of evolution is that early on humans developed the reptilian reflex when danger or the fear of danger occurs —fight or flight. Long ago, tribal chiefs and religious leaders learned that fear often was a better motivator for action than a vision of a good life to come. Today, political candidates and their party's commercials are soaked in steroids of fear. Is what they assert real or a fabrication?

In this chapter, you will be alerted to three broad “fear” issues: the costs and remedies of war and terrorism, violence (insurrection, police brutality, gun ownership), and replacement by immigrants.

## The Fears of War and Terrorism

In his State of the Union message to Congress on January 6, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt translated his fourth universal right, freedom from fear, as “a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor — anywhere in the world.”

Observing the sieges by Hitler and Mussolini in Europe, coupled with an inkling of Chinese and Japanese unrest in Asia, Roosevelt warned Americans that their dream of isolation would end. But even he could not predict that World War II would end with an estimated fifteen million military deaths and thirty-eight million civilian deaths, including six million Jews in the Holocaust.

Was that war necessary? Even if it were, was it worth the cost in lives? Advocates of peace say no. What about the economic and psychological damage? Others say reduce the actual and hidden costs of war by giving the United Nations more governance authority or using national “soft power” approaches. Soft power refers to such programs as student study abroad programs, cultural exchanges of artists and musicians, and legislative visits (Nye).

### Military Expenditures Against War

You may not see yourself or your family affected by war. Critics ask, “What if?” What if Russia succeeds in conquering Ukraine because of insufficient support from the USA and NATO? What if World War III breaks out? What if the Israel-Hamas conflict becomes a tsunami of terrorism? What if China decides Taiwan must be conquered?

Your comeback could be those are hypotheticals scenarios, not likely to happen. If you are not a Quaker (Society of Friends) or secular pacifist, you may agree that nations should maintain a military, for defense purposes. At what cost? Would you want to be drafted for military service? Or open to serving a three-year civil service deployment?

**FACT:** Defense spending by the United States accounted for nearly 40 percent of military expenses by countries around the world in 2022 (source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI]. From 2021 to 2022 U.S. defense spending increased by \$7.1 billion. SIPRI calculates that in 2022 the USA spent \$877 billion.

**FACT:** Not all 320 million U.S. citizens pay taxes. For those of us who did in 2023, it was to the tune of \$5,109 each. In a typical year, more than half the military budget goes to contractors of military equipment (Watson).

**FACT:** The United States spends more on defense than any other country. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projects that the defense share of the gross domestic product (GDP) will decline over the next 10 years — from 3.1 percent to 2.8 percent of GDP. Surprisingly, CBO noted that the 50-year average for the country has been at 4.3 percent of GDP. Is that acceptable?

**FACT:** As of September 2022, there were 171,736 active-duty U.S. military troops across 178 countries, with the most in Japan (53,973), Germany (35,781), and South Korea (25,372). Oct 25, 2023 (O'Dell).

**FACT:** The Department of Defense uses 4,600,000,000 U.S. gallons of fuel annually, an average of 12,600,000 U.S. gallons of fuel per day. High-flying aircraft are among the major users of fuel (Watson).

### Terrorism

The world changed on September 11, 2001. At least in the United States. Terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center's two towers with the loss of almost 3,000 lives and another 6,000 injured. The planet's history is filled with stories of terrorism, which Wikipedia defines as the “use of intentional violence and fear to achieve political or ideological aims, often against non-combatants.”

Once again, there are sharp differences of opinion whether these are necessary or futile efforts. We urge you to gather facts and speak to those who

served in the military and diplomatic services. What do you believe leads to a more peaceful world without fear?

**FACT:** What were the outcomes of 9/11 for American democracy? One, we went to war. Two, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) was established with a FY 2023 budget of \$10.3 billion. Beyond the Gulf War (that cost was \$120 billion), terrorism led to American military presence in Afghanistan from 2001-2022. Including operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the U.S. spent \$2.313 trillion on that war (Watson/Brown).

## Violence

From their experiences and reading, the founders understood foreign wars were not the only danger the infant American democracy had to fear. Human nature could tempt an aspiring leader or discontented group to organize an insurrection or rebellion.

The oath to the Constitution, modified during and after the Civil War, now reads: *I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.*

**FACT:** In 1862 Congress added a section to the oath of office, which became known as the “Ironclad Test Oath.” It required civilian and military officials to swear that they had never aided or encouraged “persons engaged in armed hostility” against the United States. In 2024, SCOTUS had to decide whether the Colorado Supreme Court was correct in ruling that the name of Donald J. Trump could be removed from the state’s primary ballot because he had violated Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, referencing the insurrection of January 6. The Court ruled against Colorado on the grounds that Congress would have to make that determination. The justices ignored an amicus (“friend of the Court”) brief from leading historians who believed that evidence confirmed the former president met the requirements intended by Congress when the 14th Amendment was adopted.

## The Insurrection Act

In the political climate going back to conditions following the November 2020 election, there was discussion whether the outgoing president might use the Insurrection Act. Considering the assertion that the election had been “rigged,” there were reports that voting machines could be rounded up by the president. Another report was that the former president objected to a Black Lives Matter (BLM) march and wanted to have federal troops arrest the demonstrators. For an excellent report on the Insurrection Act’s original enactment in 1792 and its uses, see the Joseph Nunn article in Resources.

**FACT:** Originally enacted in 1792, The Insurrection Act grants the president the authority to deploy the U.S. military domestically against Americans under certain conditions. Under most circumstances, the president can only respond to a governor’s request. An exception was President Eisenhower’s order that federal troops support the desegregation of the Little Rock, Ark. school system.

## Second Amendment: The Right to Bear Arms

Are you a gun owner? Hunter? A parent of a school-age child? Were you shocked by a violent death of an acquaintance? Are you someone whose skin color has resulted in a high number of police pull-overs? Your view of “gun control” can range from absolutely no restrictions, to “common sense” requirements to purchase guns to bans on military style weapons.

While more than 80 percent of Americans believe in “common sense” gun legislation, i.e., background checks and “red flag” laws, we are in a period where some states are passing laws to arm teachers. That remedy is opposed by some teacher organizations.

**FACT:** What does the Second Amendment say? “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” From 1791 until 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court had the view that its intention was solely to have the right to have a gun for military purposes. As one justice later argued, the phrase “to keep and bear Arms” was commonly used to refer to just that. However, the conservative justice Anton Scalia concluded that it meant every person had a right to a gun. [See Chemerinsky, *Worse Than Nothing*, 58-59.]

**FACT:** SCOTUS overturned the Gun-Free School Zones Act (1990). Its premise, not to allow guns near schools, was dismissed as an overreach by Congress. Consider the fact that there was an average of 118 deaths per day due to “gun violence” in 2023, and an increase in “mass shootings” [four or more persons killed or injured], a total of 656 in 2023. (Source: Gun Violence Archive.)

### Excessive Force by Police

Unfortunately, some guardians of the law exert excessive force against citizens. The forms of unwarranted actions, sometimes referred to as police brutality, include verbal abuse, harassment (including false arrest), racial profiling, assault and battery (i.e., beatings), torture, and murder. Historically, ethnic minorities more frequently experience injustice at the hand of law enforcement in the United States than whites.

Civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and National Urban League are leaders of anti-brutality campaigns. One of the cases that garnered national attention was the murder of George Floyd (Source: Leonard Moore, *Encyclopedia Britannica*).

**FACT:** There is much evidence that when “new” ethnic groups and religious traditions have come to this country (Irish, German, Polish, Chinese, Scandinavian, Baptist, Quaker, Catholic, Muslim), they become victims of job and housing discrimination, and violence. Ironically, the crime rate in communities with migrant families is lower than that of the general population.

## **Immigration and Racism**

Are you an American? Yes, you say. If I ask if you and your relatives are among the first settlers of the land of the 48 contiguous states we usually picture as “America,” odds are that you would have to say “no.” Over the human history of planet earth, migration (we define immigrants as all people who move from their original home for any reason) occurs most often when people need food and/or work. When people don’t want to leave home, but are forced to due to war, political battles or drug cartels, they are identified as refugees. (Manning and Trimmer, *Migration*; Haass, *World*).

Over the centuries, with the reality that humans move frequently, eight major

religions came to the same conclusion, that “strangers” should always be welcomed. Unfortunately, it is easier said than done. We dare not forget how “we” newcomers “moved” Indigenous tribes (the “Trail of Tears”) or “removed” (killed) the Indigenous tribes. The authors of this book hold that the “white-washing” of American history and literature books is censorship. A prime example is the expelling of *The 1619 Project* (see Nikole Hannah-Jones) from schools. To do so with the purpose of making students feel more “comfortable” is both ethically wrong (avoiding truth) and socially irresponsible.

All of us can and do become uncomfortable when we are confronted with some setting or a person who is unfamiliar to us. Fear moves us to be cautious, yes, suspicious. There is a sad history of political leaders, and yes, religious leaders, who gain or hold power by demonizing the strangers of a different country, religion, or race. Many aspiring “strongmen” who become dictators, such as Mussolini, Hitler, and Pinochet, were masters of labeling some group, caste, or race as scapegoats and enemies. Fear of the “other” occurs in all areas (Ben-Ghiat; Wilkerson; and Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman).

Because immigration at the southern border was such a divisive issue in the 2024 presidential election, it requires special attention. Blame can be given to both political parties for curtailing reform efforts. Presidents from both parties since the 1950s have made attempts to reform the system (admittedly, not major). Potential reforms in early 2024 were proposed in response to the demand for actions to the “border “crisis. However, party leadership did not approve the plan so that it could remain a political issue.

According to the latest projections from the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of the United States will be “majority-minority” in 2043. While the majority will be non-white, no minority group (Blacks, Latinos, Asian) will have a majority. Question: Should that be something to fear? How would you support or challenge that fear?

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Bill of Rights Institute.** “Can Congress Unilaterally Bar an Individual from Holding Public Office Through the Fourteenth Amendment?” Pro and Con discussion of Article 3 of the 14th Amendment.

**Brady United.** 840 First St. NE Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20002. [www.bradyunited.org](http://www.bradyunited.org).

**“Corporate Power & Profiteering | Costs of War.”** The Costs of War, [watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/social/corporate](http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/social/corporate).

**Gun Violence Archive.** An American nonprofit group with an accompanying website and social media delivery platforms which seeks to catalog every incident of gun violence in the United States.

**Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP).** Using data from Terrorism Tracker and other sources, IEP uses data from Terrorism Tracker and other resources to produce an annual Global Terrorism Index (GTI).

**O’Dell, Hope.** “The US Is Sending More Troops to the Middle East. Where in the World Are US Military Deployed?” [Globalaffairs.org](http://Globalaffairs.org), 25 Oct. 2023, [globalaffairs.org/bluemarble/us-sending-more-troops-middle-east-where-world-are-us-military-deployed](http://globalaffairs.org/bluemarble/us-sending-more-troops-middle-east-where-world-are-us-military-deployed).

**Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).** Cited by the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, April 12, 2024.

**War Budget Watch @ Win Without War.** An organization whose name makes clear its purpose. For data and reports, go to: [info@winwithoutwar.org](mailto:info@winwithoutwar.org).

### Books and Articles

**Ben-Ghiat, Ruth.** *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (Norton: 2020, 2021).

**Chemerinsky, Erwin.** *Worse Than Nothing: The Dangerous Fallacy of Originalism* (Yale University Press, 2022).

**Haass, Richard.** *The World: A Brief History* (Penguin, 2020).

**Hannah-Jones, Nikole,** ed. *The 1619 Project* (One World, 2021).

**Manning, Patrick, and Tiffany Trimmer.** *Migration in World History, 3rd ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

**Moore, Leonard.** “Police Brutality in the United States.” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (25 January 2024).

**Nowrasteh, Alex.** Cato Institute (a nonpartisan organization). “15 Myths About Immigration Debunked.” Carnegie Corporation, September 27, 2021.

**Nunn, Joseph.** “The Insurrection Act Explained.” Brennan Center, April 21, 2022.

**Nye, Joseph S., Jr.** *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Public Affairs, 2004).

**Sanders, Bernie.** “Defense Contractors Are Bilking the American People.” February 27, 2024. <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/op-eds/defense-contractors-are-bilking-the-american-people/>

**Schaller, Tom, and Paul Waldman.** *White Rural Rage: The Threat to Rural America* (Random House, 2024).

**Wilkerson, Isabel.** *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* (Random House, 2020).

**Wiseman, Paul, et al.,** “Migrants Tied to Economy’s Success,” *San Antonio Express News*, April 12, 2024.

### What can I do?

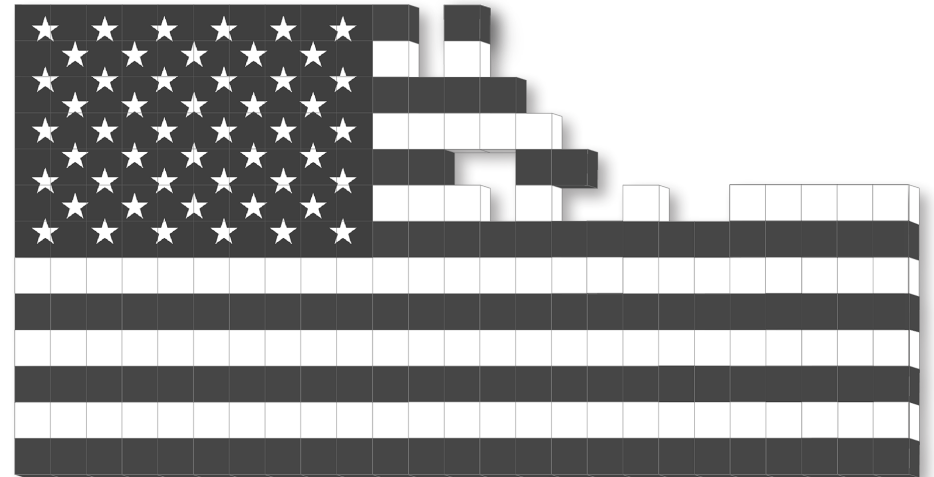
- Interview a person who is Quaker or holds a pacifist view.
- Some paramilitary groups are active in the United States. Timothy Snyder views their public participation and acceptance (of both their uniforms and their actions) as a deeply troubling sign for democracy (see *On Tyranny*, 42-49) Read this lesson and form your conclusion of what action to take.
- Keep a journal for a determined period of time. Collect comments you hear and read about race that individuals and groups make. What are the political implications of those comments?

### What can we do?

- Organize a program or debate regarding military expenditures.
- Invite your Congressional delegate to discuss their opinion on military expenditures, particularly military aid to other countries.
- Is your state changing regulations regarding the safety for students? Gather the facts and discuss pros and cons with the School Board.
- If you belong to a civic or social organization or faith community, look at any statements they have about membership. Do they welcome or discourage membership from certain racial groups? Would they welcome immigrants? Would you work to change any policies in that organization?

## PART THREE

# Fact-Finding and Verification



# 10

## Fact -> Truth -> Opinion

Why should I read  
this chapter?

To learn to differentiate  
Fact, Truth, and Opinion.

*“Sit down before fact as a little child, be prepared to give up every perceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abuses nature leads, or you shall learn nothing.”*

—**Thomas Huxley, 1860**

*“A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.”*

—**William James (attributed) 1842-1910**

*“I believe that truth is the glue that holds government together, not only our government, but civilization itself.”*

—**President Gerald Ford, 1974**

*“What American people want from their politicians is first TRUTH and then ACCOUNTABILITY.”*

—**TV interview, Frank Luntz, Republican Party consultant, 2004**

All too often disagreements in discussions arise on prominent issues. That is true even among people of goodwill who are well-informed. There are varied reasons for this. First among them is that everyone who comes to a discussion forum has their own internal values and convictions that have evolved over the years. This framework has been instilled through family and social experiences which may or may not have been tied to a religious, political, or cultural ideology. This framework can be enriched or modified by further inputs, such as the books one reads, the interactions one has with others, the news one hears and such.

## Facts

Any discussion, argument, or conviction should be based on facts. A fact is something that is evident to our sense-perceptions and normal rational mode. Facts can be quite simple, such as the presence of a candle on a table to a news item one reads or hears. In the first example it is easy to double check its veracity by carefully observing what is on the table. As to a news item, we must rely on the authenticity of the source. During times of war, this is more difficult, if you believe the statement, *“The first casualty when war comes is truth.”* (Attributed to U.S. Senator Hiram Johnson, 1918.) This may be equally true in our own time of conflicts over key issues.

**FACT:** Alternative facts exist — in someone else’s mind.

**FACT:** Fake news is believable — in someone else’s mind.

## Why “just the facts”?

“Old-timers” remember an early television show featuring a police detective (Joe Friday), who wanted “just the facts.” He did not want the clutter of rambling stories and phony alibis; those wouldn’t solve the case or hold up in court. We are not discounting the value of memorable stories and heroic events. They have shaped us and do call us to higher goals. But to repeat our theme, we need facts, analyzed wisely, for our collective lives. Data can confirm unequal treatment. Statistics can reveal how huge corporations and wealthy individuals often benefit the most when income tax rates are lowered. Public monies need accountability. Standards met or failed should be reviewed by legislatures and the public before public dollars are given again. And yet, a great-grandson of President John Adams, Henry Adams, said in 1906, “Practical politics consists in ignoring facts.”

For a more specific example of facts affecting our democratic life, consider the U.S. Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954). Although public school education results for “White vs. Black” schools were long known to be unequal, the practice of segregating schools was justified as being “separate but equal.” That legal reality had been conveniently determined by a case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896) which approved of segregating Black people from White people on trains. The 9-0 verdict of the Warren Court requiring schools to offer equal educational opportunities to all students was based, some have held, on statistical studies and interviews in addition to legal arguments. The conclusion reached was that that separate schools for Black and White children were never equal. A good example of facts destroying fiction!

This chapter’s purpose is to define facts; our discussion is on the differences. Our view is that there are scientific and tangible facts. As discussed, therefore, we do not accept the position that there are “alternate facts.”

## Truth

In any event, once we become aware of a fact, we unconsciously attach a meaning to it and give it an interpretation. This interpretation becomes the truth associated with the fact. As the following couplet says, Facts are what there is. Truths are how they seem to me.

Thus, the truth about the candle on the table may be that it is beautiful or unstable or not appropriate in that setting. We associate truths with human behavior, history, politics, and religions. Indeed, facts that affect the human condition become truly relevant, significant, and seldom simple.

A university professor known for having students arrive at “the truth” about moral issues, Robert J. Nash of the University of Vermont, said, *“The truth about Truth regarding any topic, no matter how “hot,” but especially religion and spirituality, is that it is bafflingly slippery, hardly objective . . . ; it always manages to end up confirming the prejudices of those truth-holders currently in power, whether in politics,*

This happened to one of us. At breakfast a neighbor said, “I just can’t support some of the wild things schools are teaching.” How would you respond? With facts? With stories? Ask them to show you evidence.

higher education, or the clergy. . . With only a few conspicuous exceptions . . . conservatives remain conservative, liberals remain liberal, . . . and skeptics remain skeptics” (Nash 2008).

I saw three sisters walk into the florist's one morning. I knew their father had been ill. Fact: three sisters walk into a florist shop. My truth: their father had died; nope. Opinion: they were choosing flowers for the funeral. Nope. The truth was that three sisters waked into a florist shop. That's all.

For democracy's sake, elected officials, regardless of party, have a duty to be truth tellers, even regarding current issues like the presidential election of 2020.

## Opinion

When value judgments are attached to truths relat-

ing to an issue in a particular context of general interest to a group, society, or nation, they become opinions. Truths may belong to a group as a whole and they may pertain to large issues, but opinions are usually personal and focused on specific issues.

The challenge in social interactions is to understand the nuances in each of these: facts, truths, and opinions. Let us illustrate these with two examples:

Consider a candidate running for an elected office. Citizens may know many facts about the individual. These are verifiable tidbits about the individual. But these facts are interpreted differently into truths by different people. On that basis they form their opinions about the candidate.

As another example, consider the fact that hundreds of migrants cross the southern border of the United States every day. Associated with this fact are different causes or truths: the reason they came, the reason the border guards arrested some of them, the legality or illegality of the crossing, etc. On that basis one forms opinions about that fact.

People with blatantly contrary opinions on any topic, especially political, look upon one another with scant respect. What has become an oft-repeated comment is “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.” While many credit that to former U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, it is also attributed to a 1964 remark by respected diplomat Bernard M. Baruch (Platt).

## Knowledge and Values

The conscious awareness of universally recognized facts constitutes knowledge of the matter. Knowledge enriches the mind. It also enables us to act and to create things. Everything we see around us that is not part of the natural world is the creation of human beings with the knowledge they have acquired about the world.

All normal humans function in a framework of values, whether they are consciously aware of it or not. Our actions may have little or no impact on others. Other actions affect people or animals. When we do something with a conscious awareness of its impact on other people or creatures, we demonstrate our belief in values. A value is thus part of any conscious behavior, especially as far as it has an effect, direct or indirect, on people or animals or on the world at large.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

“Alternative facts do exist: beliefs, lies and politics” <https://theconversation.com/alternative-facts-do-exist-beliefs-lies-and-politics-84692> .

“Fake News and Alternative Facts: A Guide to News Literacy” [https://lib-guides.adelphi.edu/fake\\_news](https://lib-guides.adelphi.edu/fake_news).

**The Federal Register.** <https://www.federalregister.gov/>.

**Government Accountability Office (GAO).** <https://www.gao.gov/>.

**Library of Congress.** The library's freely available digital collections and online catalog are accessible to all users via the Library of Congress website.

**Mometrix.** <https://www.mometrix.com/academy/fact-or-opinion/>. For younger learners, a video on how to distinguish fact from opinion.

### Books and Articles

**McKibben, Bill.** *The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened* (Henry Holt & Co., 2022).

**Nash, Robert.** “Facing One Another in This Place: Using Moral Conversation to Talk About Controversial Topics in College Settings.” *Journal of College & Character IX, no. 4* (April 2008).

**Platt, Suzy, ed.** *Respectfully Quoted* (Library of Congress, 1989). Note: These quotations, like others, and those on the chapter title pages are from this reference source.

### What can I do?

- Write an example or story that has all three elements: truth, facts, opinion.
- Alone or with others, take a recent statement from a commercial of a candidate. Use a fact-checking service to see how accurate it that statement is.

### What can we do?

- With a group of others (students, family, friends) listen to or watch a political speech. Then analyze it. How often was the speaker telling the truth, sharing what you regarded as “true facts.” What were examples of their opinions?
- When your family or group begins making claims, especially those you believe are dubious, share what a wise professor said, “Assertions are not proof.” In other words, What is the evidence?

# 11

## Identifying and Verifying Facts

### Why should I read this chapter?

To gain knowledge of reliable sources and suggestions for using them effectively.

*“The nation that expects to be ignorant and free expects what never was and never will be.”*  
—President Thomas Jefferson, 1816

*“To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.”*  
—Timothy Snyder, 2017

*“Democracy is far more than just knowing about voting and representative government. In some ways it seeks a balance between tyranny and rule by experts. Democracy requires, before voting —thinking, discussion, debates.”*  
—John Dewey, 1939

*“Today’s secular K-12 schools should help students become: 1) active citizens who promote the ideals of democracy; 2) thoughtful and informed agents for improving society; and 3) persons with fulfilling lives.”*  
—Diane Moore, 2007

## A Key Purpose of Education

In an earlier chapter (Freedom of Religion), we proposed that the primary purpose of public education was to have students from all economic and social levels learn common values, and to help them feel comfortable in participating in this infant democracy. But in the years following our independence, immigration and industrialization brought on the priority for new citizens to understand the way American society and government “worked.” For their jobs and their expected place in society, they were to learn the basics for jobs and careers, and critical thinking skills. While the country was still controlled by the elite, some newcomers wanted to learn how to become engaged in the governmental process, so they could fight the concentration of power in the hands of a few. For that, they needed reliable evidence.

## Reliable Sources of Information and Data

### Families, Peers, and Ethnic/Racial Groups

We know that healthy homes, immediate families, and loving relatives can be fountains of meaningful advice. Their experiences, accounts of crucible events, and family legends mold our habits and career choices. From those trusted sources of information, closest peers, and ethnic groups, we develop our primary beliefs, and in time, our worldviews. As wise as we perceive these sources to be, we cannot assume they have unbiased information. Is a recommendation or analysis based on true research or business ties? Is it passed on from a source who has experience related to the subject being examined? How can the validity of a firm’s research findings be verified?

### Schools, Libraries, and Higher Education Institutions

While some of the same questions just posed could be asked in this category, one might assume more objectivity here. Your teacher, librarian, or professor is less likely to have an agenda they are pushing. Additionally, you will have access to a greater variety of information and a greater variety of points of view.

### Government Agencies

If your topic or interest area is specific (climate, immigration, health issue, or voter profiles and trends), there are likely to be state or federal offices, bureaus, departments, or branches that have done research that relate to it. Larg-

er counties or districts may do some of this work. Check their websites. If you can speak with someone involved in overseeing the study or doing interviews, that’s frosting on the cake.

### Newsprint, Broadcast, and Social Media

A simple piece of advice from Timothy Snyder to counter tyrannies --“read long articles.” In other words, read for depth and detail to understand more clearly the entire issue or topic. Maria Ressa reveals in her book, *How to Stand Up to a Dictator*, the danger of shallow reading. The dictator, Rodrigo Duterte, became popular with Filipinos because they read and believed propaganda about Duterte posted on Facebook and other social media.

Blogs appeared on the internet in the mid-1990s. They were online diaries. The first presidential candidate to use blogging was Howard Dean in 2004. He was able to establish loyal followers through his blog when the media ignored him. Blogs are a way for diverse groups from all over the world to share information. Anyone can share interests, educate target audiences, and influence governments.

Thirty years later, blogs have become not only a medium for sharing reflections, but also a means for procuring income, via advertisers whose ads appear in the blog. Bloggers outnumber journalists and they do not have to deal with deadlines, editors, or fact-checking. Because of this, not all bloggers are reliable. As in any medium, it is up to you to distinguish between fact and opinion.

Podcasts date back to the 1980s, emerging as recording and broadcasting technology evolved. They are an alternative to traditional broadcast media because they offer a greater variety of content and can be accessed at the user’s convenience. Like blogging, podcasts have changed the way people access information. Also, anyone anywhere can start a podcast and connect with a world-wide audience. And the caveat about truth versus opinion still applies.

### Partisan and Non-partisan Organizations and Foundations

If you are following a developing story about a candidate or about a questionable bill advocated by the governor, you can go to party headquarters or the candidate’s press outlet first. Be advised, however, their first concern is protecting the candidate’s or party’s reputation. Expect delays unless the news is clearly a “winner” for them.

There are still nonpartisan organizations that address issues that relate to our freedoms and rights. The League of Women Voters works for all voters, regardless of which candidates are running for office. Similar organizations include Public Citizen and Common Cause.

Foundation backgrounds should be explored. While some are in fact promoting research without favoring a particular political flavor, others are clearly liberal or conservative and promote a particular ideology, or cause. For example, the Sierra Club focuses on environmental preservation. Other groups exist to promote ethnic identity, the arts, childcare, gun ownership, and workplace issues. Likewise, religious and fraternal institutions publish information about the issues that are significant to them.

### Polls

If you follow politics, you quickly learn that there are different kinds of polls. First, know that pollsters are hired by or committed to one of the major political parties or a candidate. In Iowa, the Iowa Poll is considered to be independent and dependable. The major networks and cable news channels have their own polling staff. PBS (Public Broadcasting) is considered one free from ideological bias.

Polling agencies may be topic specific, such as those conducted by Mayo Clinic while others, such as the Gallup Poll and Pew Research, survey a wide variety of topics, including religion. There are subject matter research firms (on a drug, crop, consumer products, chemicals), both commercial and private. Universities are known for polls on consumer confidence.

### Legal authorities

Since judicial and jury verdicts are based on facts and not opinions, one might think it would be easy to look at transcripts of cases, and then, based on the verdict, accept what the facts are. However, our system allows for appeals. Then, the facts of a case can be reviewed and reevaluated.

### Unions and Cultural Communities

Statistics suggest that the number of labor unions is increasing and membership in traditional unions is increasing. More favorable settlements for labor seem to be occurring also. Organizations for workers in nonprofit organi-

zations also seem to be growing. That said, these organizations should be contacted for data related to the public's involvement with and support for the arts and other fields. Not only are there studies on the financial well-being of citizens, but there are also studies relating to physical and cultural well-being.

### Religious Organizations

All communities of faith determine their own stances on secular as well as sacred issues and they deliberately meet to write their official beliefs and distribute them to members of their community. Many denominations have regular publications that include articles describing what the denomination's beliefs are on issues such as abortion, gay marriage, incarceration, hunger, and human trafficking. Because these publications support the theology and polity of the organization, they need to be examined carefully. This is one of those instances where one must discern whether the information is fact, truth, or opinion.

### Charismatic Characters

It is common today to assert that some politicians are charismatic; they attract followers. Anthropologists use another term — a cult leader. Frequently, they deny or discourage fact-finding. Why? It relates to the purpose of the cult. What is a cult? In a cult, the leader controls the “truth,” its teachings (platform), its practices, and its membership — who is in and who is out. Years ago, a cult leader, David Koresh, caused many deaths by asserting only he knew what actions God wanted. Today, if you can imagine a political leader brandishing a Bible or a copy of the Constitution and saying, “Obey me, for I alone know how to interpret what it means,” you have a cult leader. Said another way, cults and the core of their believers—the insiders — believe they are accountable only to themselves.

## **Trends in Education**

Current technology, including AI (artificial intelligence) and devices like smart phones, points to a future with more emphasis on independent learning rather than classroom-based schooling. Not surprisingly, some turn to social media for what they judge to be true. Ironically, we know that the algorithms used by its managers are used to get the viewer to respond to what they find disturbing rather than affirming.

In summary, when looking for facts, take the time necessary to understand the context of situations, the backgrounds of those quoted, the defense of and the criticisms of the actions taken. Solutions are rarely simple. Consider the number of eyewitnesses involved, and their link to the situation.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Allen, Robbie.** The Impact of Blogging. Dec 20, 2005. <https://medium.com/>.

**The American Press Institute** issues reports and offers guidance on issues relating to misinformation and polarizing news coverage.

**Ballotpedia** is a digital encyclopedia about American politics and elections. Its goal is to provide accurate and objective information at all levels of government. Contact: [Ballotpedia.org](https://ballotpedia.org).

**Church History Review** gathers church news, emerging historical study, and historical theology from ancient to modern, from local to global. <https://churchhistoryreview.org/denominational-publications/>.

“Do People Still Read Blogs? What You Must Know in 2023.” *Polly Clover Writes*, [www.pollycloverwrites.com/blog/do-people-still-read-blogs](http://www.pollycloverwrites.com/blog/do-people-still-read-blogs).

**The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget** seeks to be a source of objective fiscal policy analysis. They engage representatives from both Republicans and Democrats as they develop their findings and recommendations. Contact: [www.crfb.org](http://www.crfb.org). It has several projects such as FixUs, to heal the divide in the parties regarding fiscal matters.

**International Insights** is a nonpartisan nonprofit and education organization that promotes science-based information. Contact: <https://intentionalin-sights.org>.

**Interfaith Alliance** is committed to protecting the integrity of religion and democracy in the United State. Through advocacy and education efforts, building relationships with policymakers, and partnering with other faith and civic groups, they unite diverse voices to uphold shared values and challenge discrimination and extremism. <https://interfaithalliance.org/>.

**National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.** The NCC brings together 37 member communions and more than 30 million Christians in approximately 100,000 congregations. <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/>.

**Tobin, Stephanie J., and Rosanna E. Guadagno.** “Why People Listen: Motivations and Outcomes of Podcast Listening.” *PLOS One*, vol. 17, no. 4, 6 Apr. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0265806>.

### Books and Articles

**Black, Derek W.** *School House Burning: Public Education and the Assault on American Democracy* (Public Affairs, 2020).

**Pepper, David.** *Saving Democracy: A User’s Manual for Every American* (St. Helena Press, 2023).

**Ressa, Maria.** *How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future* (Harper, 2022).

**Yasmin, Seema.** *What the Fact? Finding the Truth in All the Noise* (Simon & Schuster, 2022).

### What can I do?

- Choose an issue that is relevant to you. Begin with the Resources Lists in this and other chapters, or on your own, do a search for organizations that compile data related to your subject or topic. Keep it simple at this point, focusing on what facts you believe are trustworthy. It would be interesting if you know another person who would search for facts independent from your search. Then compare results.

### What can we do?

- Is there a little-known issue in your area? If so, with several others, use the resources we have suggested and others to construct a picture of that issue. As a group, present your findings to an elected official.
- With the help of a teacher or instructor, find examples of misinformation and disinformation on an issue of interest — climate change, immigrants in your area, crime rates rising or declining, drug use. Share this information with the affected group.

# 12

## Conspiracy Theories

### Why should I read this chapter?

You don't know what you don't know.

*"In some causes silence is dangerous; so, if any know of conspiracies against their country or king, or any that might greatly prejudice their neighbor, they ought to discover it."*

—St. Ambrose (340 – 397 CE)

*"The best defense is a good offense."*

—George Washington, 1779

*"A good conspiracy is unprovable. I mean, if you can prove it, it means they screwed up somewhere along the line."*

—Jerry Fletcher, *Conspiracy Theory*, 1997

*"Whenever you're faced with an explanation of what's going on in Washington, the choice between incompetence and conspiracy, always choose incompetence."*

—Charles Krauthammer, (1950-2018)

Do you have someone in your life who was drawn in by a conspiracy theory? Has their behavior changed, and are you worried for their sanity and safety?

Perhaps your parents ventured down the QAnon rabbit hole and sent you a daily stream of articles and YouTube videos about how the government is controlled by pedophiles. When your family all got the COVID-19 vaccine, perhaps your mom warned you that the government implants chips in the vaccine to monitor people.

Or a friend is constantly talking about how white people are being replaced by “non-white” people and that the government is letting in massive numbers of immigrants so they can vote for Democrats.

## **What are conspiracy theories?**

Conspiracy theories are defined in a variety of ways. In general, they reject established and accepted narratives, implying that sinister and powerful forces are manipulating various events and situations behind the scenes, usually for political gain. For example, a conspiracy theorist might claim that the U.S. and Israeli governments orchestrated the 9/11 attacks to stoke public outrage against Israel’s antagonists in the Middle East, or that the British royal family conspired to murder Princess Diana because they disapproved of her then-boyfriend.

Conspiracy theories have been around for centuries, and often emerge from a need to make sense of the world around us. Conspiracy theories, such as the great replacement theory, are often associated with various right- or left-wing ideologies, while others transcend political lines, like those surrounding Area 51 or the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

While some conspiracy theories are relatively harmless, other theories sow division, undermine trust in institutions and justify violence. They can also demonize groups of people, such as false claims that LGBTQ+ people are “grooming” children or assert that a Jewish cabal controls world governments. Under the right circumstances, conspiracy theories can motivate people to violence, as seen during the January 6, 2021, insurrection.

## **Why do people get drawn into conspiracy theories?**

You may be better able to empathize and help someone if you understand the psychological reasons that motivate people to believe conspiracy theories. Dr. Karen Douglas, one of the leading scholars in the field, lays out three psychological motivations to explain why people get drawn into conspiracy theories:

1. **Epistemic:** This motivation is a need for knowledge, information, and certainty. When people feel uncertain in specific situations, they are drawn into conspiracy theories to help provide that certainty. Another key factor is people’s educational backgrounds; they may lack the critical thinking skills necessary to differentiate between credible and non-credible sources of information. As a result, they are looking for knowledge and certainty but do not have the tools and understanding to look in the right places.
2. **Existential:** This motivation drives the need for people to feel safe and secure in their world. People need to feel they have power over the things that happen to them and, conversely, they don’t like to feel out of control or powerless in their lives. Conspiracy theories help them believe that they have information that explains why they lack control in specific situations and more generally. Therefore, people who feel powerless tend to gravitate towards conspiracy theories.
3. **Social:** This motivation reflects people’s desire to feel good about themselves as individuals and good about the groups to which they belong. On an individual level, believing you have access to information and the truth, while others do not have that knowledge, gives a feeling of superiority over others that can feed self-esteem. On a group level, those who believe conspiracy theories tend to have an inflated sense of importance of their group(s) and yet feel their group(s) are under-appreciated. Believing your group is “good, moral and upstanding” and other groups are not draws people to conspiracy theories.

## How do conspiracy theories work and how can you spot them?

There are real reasons for people to distrust governments, corporations and other powerful figures and groups. Actual conspiracies and cover-ups occur quite regularly; Watergate, the Tuskegee experiments, and COINTELPRO were all real events. However, while real conspiracies do exist, this does not mean that every event or situation is the result of a nefarious plot or that powerful figures are always trying to hide the truth. This conundrum poses an important question: How do we differentiate between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories?

**FACT:** The term “Watergate” has since become synonymous with various clandestine and illicit activities conducted by Nixon’s aides, including the bugging of political opponents’ offices in the Watergate Office Building.

**FACT:** COINTELPRO was a counterintelligence program conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from 1956 to 1971 to discredit and neutralize organizations considered subversive to U.S. political stability.

**FACT:** The Tuskegee Experiment was a deeply racist and unethical clinical research study that took place between 1932 and 1972 in Tuskegee, Alabama, under the auspices of the United States Public Health Service (USPHS). The study investigated the natural progression of untreated syphilis in African-American men.

*The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*, published by Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky, a professor of cognitive science at the University of Bristol in the U.K., and Dr. John Cook, a professor at the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University, outlines seven traits of conspiratorial thinking, summarized with the acronym CONSPIR:

- **C**ontradictory ideas: People who have bought into conspiracy theories can simultaneously believe in ideas that contradict each other. For example, some believe that Covid-19 is a U.S.-created bioweapon but also that the virus is a hoax and does not actually exist.
- **O**verriding suspicion: Conspiracy theorists will dismiss “official” sources and any information that does not “fit” neatly into the theory. They promote the idea that “traditional” sources of information—such

as mainstream news outlets and academic researcher—are unreliable and are even “in on” the conspiracy, attempting to distract people from the truth.

- **N**efarious intent: The people and groups behind these conspiracies are always presumed to have nefarious intentions — their motivations are never benign.
- **S**omething must be wrong: Even if you can debunk a conspiracy theory, believers will still believe the theory because they fundamentally believe that “something must be wrong.” For conspiracy theorists, nothing is as it seems.
- **P**ersecuted victim: Conspiracy theorists believe that they are victims of the conspiracy. They also view themselves as heroes who are brave enough to stand up against the conspirators. If a fact-checker debunks a claim made by a conspiracy theorist, they are seen as simply trying to discredit the believer and cast doubt on the truth.
- **I**mmune to evidence: Conspiracy theories cherry-pick “evidence,” selectively choosing bits of information that support the narrative and casting aside anything that contradicts the claim. Evidence that contradicts the conspiracy theory will be re-interpreted as originating from the conspiracy.
- **R**einterpreting randomness: Conspiracy theorists encourage believers to “do their own research” and collect their own “evidence” to prove the claim, looking for ways in which various events, people and situations are related. Events that have nothing to do with the conspiracy theory will be re-interpreted as being caused by the conspiracy.

Today, conspiracy theories are spreading more rapidly than ever. While the internet has made it easier for us to connect with each other and share information, it’s also made it easier for conspiracy theories and misleading information to spread. We can all fall for conspiracy theories and unintentionally aid their spread. That’s why it’s crucial for all of us to learn how to spot them. Here are some suggestions:

- Check the source of the information. If you have not heard of the author or publication, do some research to assess how trustworthy they are. Is

the social media user who shared this information dependable? Are they attached to a reputable organization or are they self-proclaimed experts? Where did they get this information? Additional red flags should be raised when articles contain lots of grammatical errors, lack sources, or are all written by the same author, or if a website contains an unusual URL or lacks an “About Us” section.

- Check multiple sources. Are other, credible news outlets and experts sharing the same information? If a story is real, assume real publications will cover it. Have fact-checking sites like Snopes and PolitiFact refuted the claims?
- Evaluate photos and videos that accompany stories and social media posts. Conspiracy theorists will often use old and/or manipulated images to support their stance. Conduct a reverse image search on Google or TinEye to see if the image has shown up elsewhere and if it has been manipulated. If it has, there’s a good chance you’re being played.
- Think before you share. Does the story sound too good (or bad) to be true? Is the tone objective and factual, or is it sensationalist? Does the headline accurately reflect the story? Conspiracy theories and misleading information thrive by invoking a strong reaction from believers. If the information upsets you or makes you angry, it could be a sign that you’re being manipulated.

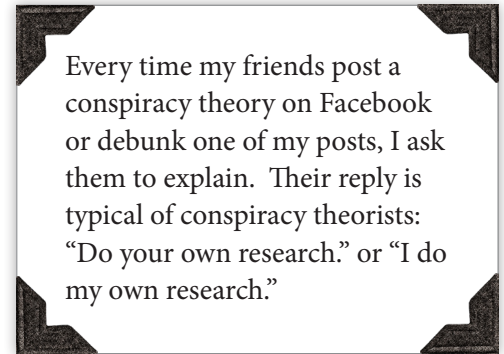
## What You Can Do (or not do) to Help Those Who Believe Conspiracy Theories

Rather than debunking conspiracy theories after they have spread, a more effective strategy is to “pre-bunk” conspiracy theories, which means inoculating people before they are exposed. This involves “warning people that a specific piece of information is false and explaining why a source might lie or be misinformed about it before they encounter the information organically,” according to researchers.

Pre-bunking by an individual is a matter of timing. At the first sign of someone sharing questionable information with you, ask them to help you understand it. Then, having already done your research, give them ideas that show some other ideas about the theory.

Pre-bunking requires effort on your part, because you must be able to guess which theories will be emerging and how opportunities for conversation will present themselves. Online research is the easiest way to prepare.

Be aware that there are differences between false information and half-truths. Half-truths are often the result of jumping to conclusions. For instance, if you see a person walking into a funeral home and you know their spouse is in the hospital, you may conclude the spouse is dying. When you see a police officer knocking on your neighbor’s door, what conclusion would you draw? Could you assume the neighbor’s live-in grandson is being arrested for vandalism? Your neighbor has called the police to complain about your barking dog. Do you know that either conclusion is true? Repeating one conclusion or the other makes you the accomplice in spreading half-truths.



Half-truths can be clarified with contrasting information. False information is harder to refute because it has its own “research base” and trusted sources.

Pre-bunking is most effective when published by social media platforms, government agencies, and public health organizations. Those entities can deal with misinformation about health, voting, and other issues such as climate change.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Abrams, Zara.** “Controlling the spread of misinformation.” Psychologists’ research on misinformation may help in the fight to debunk myths surrounding COVID. 19 March 1, 2021. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/03/controlling-misinformation>.

**Anti-Defamation League.** “The Great Replacement:” An Explainer: <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/great-replacement-explainer>.

**ADL. Extremists Target LGBTQ+ Community During Pride Month.**

<https://www.adl.org/>

**ADL. How Conspiracy Theories Can Kill.** <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/how-conspiracy-theories-can-kill>.

**ADL. QAnon** <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgroundunder/qanon>.

**Douglas, Karen, et al.** “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, no. 6, 2017, pp. 538–542, [kar.kent.ac.uk/61995/1/Douglas%20Sutton%20Cichocka%202017.pdf](http://kar.kent.ac.uk/61995/1/Douglas%20Sutton%20Cichocka%202017.pdf)

Books and Articles

**Lewandowsky, Dr. Stephan.** *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

**McQuade, Barbara.** *Attack from Within: How Disinformation Is Sabotaging America*. (eBook: Kindle Store, 2024).

**Stengel, Richard.** *Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle against Disinformation & What We Can Do About It*. (Grove Press, 2019).

**What can I do?**

- Sites such as Google Trends (<https://trends.google.com/trends/>) track the topics that are currently being searched.

**What can we do?**

- Online games such as Bad News and Troll Factory show players how fake news spreads and thus educate you to be more skeptical of false information.
- When you are among others, listen for talk that sounds like conspiracy theories have taken hold.
- If someone offers what sounds like a conspiracy theory to you, ask them to it explain further.

**13**

# Coping with Media

## Why should I read this chapter?

To learn how to identify media bias and disinformation; to use strategies to counter them.

*“The first case of disinformation occurs in the Bible, when the snake tells Eve it is all right to eat the apple.”*

—unknown

*“A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both.”*

—President James Madison (1822)

## Facts Require Comprehension

Before considering the impact of various media, let's consider how many Americans are literate; that is, who can read with comprehension. On average, today (reported in 2024), 79 percent of U.S. adults nationwide are literate and 21 percent illiterate. More specifically:

1. Fifty-four percent of adults have a literacy rate below a sixth-grade level, including 20 percent who are below fifth-grade level.
2. Thirty-four percent of adults lacking literacy proficiency were born outside the U.S.
3. On average, 66 percent of fourth grade children in the U.S. could not read proficiently in 2013 (Craft).

## Print Media: Newspapers, Periodicals, & Blogs

Newspapers are declining. In 2022, the estimated total U.S. daily newspaper circulation (print and digital combined) was 20.9 million for both weekday and Sunday, down eight percent and ten percent respectively from 2021. Large cities are down to one paper; midsize and smaller cities may have none. Another problem is that the corporations that own chains of papers, like Gannett, have their agendas, conservative to liberal. Their editorial pages, and issues that have in-depth coverage reflect their values. The major newspapers today with political coverage are *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

Consider periodicals. We recommend that you get a subscription to at least one journal or magazine, either in print or online. Why? As stated earlier, one of Timothy Snyder's lessons is to read "long articles" or stories, to gain a perspective that short bits on radio or television can't provide. While offering light, entertaining articles from time to time, their focus will be on significant issues that relate to the common good—from environment to health to government. Numerous faith or spiritual communities have a regional or national journal. Similarly, civic organizations like Rotary, Lions, and PEO have journals. If you prefer to focus on social, cultural, and political issues, consider such journals as *Time*, *The Atlantic*, *The Economist*, or *National Review*.

## Broadcast Media: Radio, Television, & Podcasts

If you are in a conversation with someone, it could well be that their information comes from a talk show radio program, or podcast. If you want to understand where they are coming from, you might want to listen to a program or two. More than 15,000 radio stations reach 82.5 percent of adults, and more than 53 percent of 15–to 24-year-olds. Radio has an impact. In 2020, one study indicated fifteen of the top talk shows had fifteen million listeners; twelve of them were conservative. Without getting too deep in the weeds, it is interesting to note that the "Fairness Doctrine," a requirement that news reports had to be "fair and balanced," i.e., all sides receiving equal treatment, was repealed in 1987. Another meaningful change is that local ownership has been replaced by regional or national ownership groups. A 2023 Pew Center study reported that 42 percent of Americans ages twelve and older listened to a podcast in the past month. Among regular listeners, two-thirds say news is discussed on the podcasts they listen to (See Naomi Forman Katz).

One of the easiest ways to find out if your family member, colleague, or stranger is conservative or liberal is to ask what television channel they watch for news. The general view is that Fox News is conservative, Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) is neutral, CNN is left of center, and MSNBC is the most liberal.

## Media Bias

See the Resources section for a guide on how to analyze what is called "media bias." Media bias looks at such factors as: What sources are contacted for the story? How much time is allowed? Is an alternate source mentioned or interviewed? Another factor to consider is who owns your local channels. Do an internet search to find or call the station. Why is this important? You should know whether that station will be neutral toward various candidates in the race or have its favorite. You can also listen for bias regarding significant issues.

## Definition and Facts About Social Media

Social media is the means of interacting among people in which they create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. The most popular platforms are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), LinkedIn, Snapchat, and TikTok. No wonder this form of communication is used not only for staying connected with family and friends, but also for

advertising merchandise and services and political information. Our concern is how social media can affect democracy, positively and negatively.

## Confirmation Bias Vacuum

The first concern is that it is often hard to determine if information is coming from a trustworthy source. Yes, there are fact-checking sites, but not everyone is going to fact-check everything they read.

There is also another issue for how platforms work. They are supposed to adapt themselves to the specific individual users, based on their interests, content, and usage. This can lead down the slippery slope of “confirmation bias vacuums.” People will tend to seek out information that confirms what they already believe. For example, using algorithms, Facebook will send individuals information related to their beliefs which could also inflate their view of the number of other individuals who also believe that same information.

Are social media platforms responsible for “conjuring mass fear and anger?” The book, *Chaos Machine*, explores that question. A review (see Resources) of the book reported “no one quite knows how the algorithms that govern social media actually work.” But a common conclusion is that social media can promote extreme negative emotions that often lead to divides in ideals among large sections of the population. For example, when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe vs. Wade* there were many TikToks that centered on this content. Given the kind of platform that TikTok is, there were many people, inside and outside the United States, offering their opinion with only a handful of creators citing outside sources. That contrasts with the print and broadcast media, who would more likely first talk with witnesses to the event, if an event took place, and then interview experts in fields related to the event.

## “Enshittification” and Algorithms: Twisted Fact-Finding

Unfortunately, there is an aspect to social media platforms called “enshittification,” which describes the practice whereby platforms shift from working for the users to working for companies to make money. When a platform is new it wants to attract new users and make their platform seem better than others in order to be competitive. It creates an algorithm that tailors itself to the interests of the user, promoting content that will appeal to them. In time, the

algorithm is not tailored to the user. A combination happens — the user gets a mix of what is useful to the user as well as to the platform designer. However, the designer has purposes that are not relevant to the user.

## Not Always Deliberately False

Another issue is misinformation. Misinformation has a grain of truth but is biased. Only a select few facts are shared, so that people make decisions based on incomplete evidence. Also, this makes it harder to correct fake news or get people to see other sides. People are not being blatantly lied to, but their trust, at some point, in the source is reduced. One example is the possibility of foreign governments using social media to support certain candidates. The temptation is quite strong for special interest groups to deliberately use partial information — disinformation — to sway voters about a candidate, or to support or reject a bond issue.

## Regulation

Considering the force of social media for right or wrong, federal level officials and social media firms continue to debate how much regulation is acceptable. Some citizens hold that our right to free speech should mean no laws. Others contend that evidence shows harmful messages have caused escalations in youth suicides and promotion of dangerous and illegal drugs. Should the media owners be required to ban information that is blatantly false? Where is the line to be drawn? Who can be trusted to make the judgement? Should the “fair and balanced” law be reinstated?

**FACT:** Fairness doctrine, U.S. communications policy (1949–87) formulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) required radio and television broadcasters to present fair and balanced coverage of controversial issues, including granting equal airtime to opposing candidates for public office. □



**FACT:** In 1987, the FCC abolished the fairness doctrine, prompting some to urge its reintroduction through either Commission policy or congressional legislation. The FCC removed the rule that implemented the policy from the Federal Register in August 2011.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/19847/4176> (TikTok)

<https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/>

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/media-bias-criticism-definition-types-examples.html>

### Books and Articles

**Craft, Sandra.** *ThinkImpact*, January 8, 2024.

**Fisher, Max.** *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World*. (Little Brown, 2022).

**Forman-Katz, Naomi.** “For National Radio Day, Key Facts and Radio Lists...” August 17, 2023.

“The Media and the Message.” *The Economist*, Dec.16, 2023.

**Ressa, Maria.** *How To Stand Up to a Dictator*. (Harper Perennial, 2022).

### What can I do?

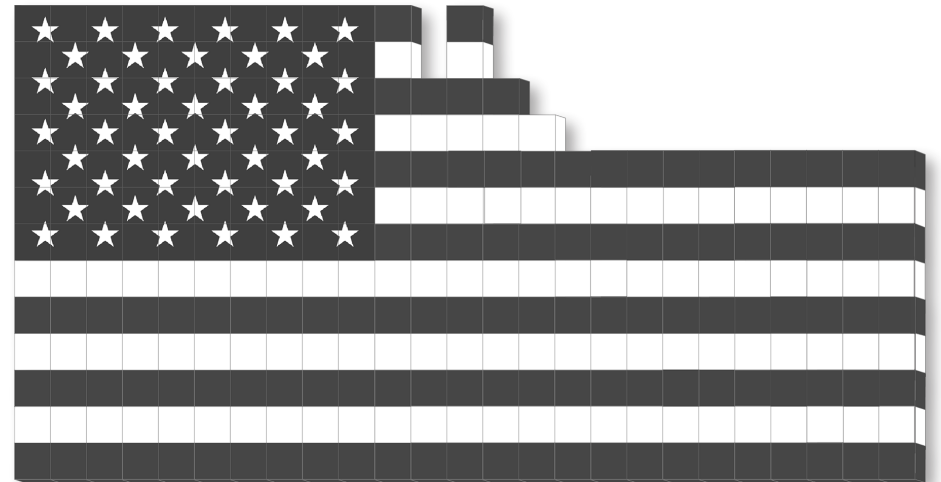
- Ask yourself these questions: Am I stuck in an ideological vacuum or bubble? Am I getting the full story from my source(s)? Are they biased? Am I open-minded, willing to look at other sources that may go against my beliefs?
- Take time to reflect on what you see on social media platforms with a grain of salt. Has the information been fact-checked?
- Develop healthy doses of curiosity and skepticism. That doesn't mean that you go all the way to being pessimistic.

### What can we do?

- With a group of friends, discuss the accuracy of social media messages. If you feel a platform has allowed something entirely false or too hurtful, voice your opinion with messages or phone calls to the provider.
- If a friend or someone you know is deliberately and unfairly attacked, generate messages of support.

## **PART FOUR**

# **Special Situations**



# Responding to Alternative Views

Why should I read  
this chapter?

To know steps to take  
when others disagree with your facts  
or criticize your beliefs.

*“Don’t be in a hurry to condemn because [the other] doesn’t do what do you or think as you think, or as fast. There was a time when you didn’t know what you do today.”*

—Malcolm X (1925-1965)

*“The battle among men is not between good and evil, but about different ideas of what is good.”*

—unknown

*“Peace can only last when human rights are respected, where the people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free.”*

—14th Dalai Lama, 2011

## Dissent is Normal

To remind you, our primary analogy is of a barn, destroyed by lightning, being raised when neighbors — with differences — can agree to do something for the community’s good.

We know that strong differences will remain on issues like gun control, reproductive rights, climate crisis, and immigration policies, so do not expect everyone to understand the issue the same way you do. Because we want you to engage in the most positive experience possible, we offer ways to prepare for difficult conversations.

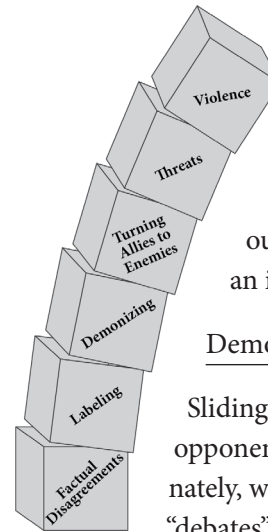
## A Spectrum of Strategies

Let us keep our discussion in the political arena, although we know these strategies are used in personal and business situations — because we’ve been their victims or, admit it, we have used them! The range or spectrum, beginning on the left, runs from the most polite or civil to the most dangerous on the far right — verbal threats to actual physical violence. We do not mean that one political position, left or right, correlates with the spectrum. Any group left or right, red or blue, can and will use these tactics at some time.

### Factual Disagreements

The most civil response you or your opponent can make is to say that the facts presented are inaccurate, incomplete, or irrelevant to the specific topic discussed. However, how you make those charges could advance or destroy the conversation. Pad the sentence with a direct address, a caveat to warn the person of something that may offend, your own understanding, THEN a coordinating conjunction, and then your point. “Harvey, I have a question. My understanding is that “XYZ, is correct” so I do not understand your assertion that “ABC” is correct.” Do not say directly that “ABC” is inaccurate. Do not attack with “Harvey, the real fact is proved in Source HIJ.” Again, soften it. “Harvey, when I researched this topic, I also found \_\_\_\_.”

If you are presenting, anticipate what arguments are likely to surface. Conversely, prepare to ask the speaker for facts they are likely to ignore or misinterpret. Again, be gentle. “Harvey, I’m wondering about ...”

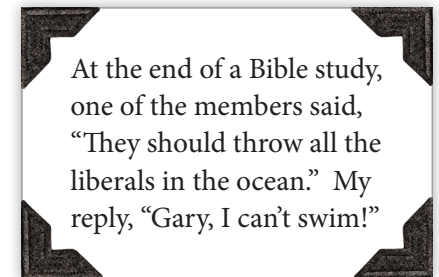


### Labeling

Labeling is a tactic to stop thinking. If I label you “snowflake,” “fascist,” “a loose cannon,” I am inviting the audience — in person or online — to stereotype you and then dump you in a group they regard as dubious. With humor, assert that you want to be evaluated as an individual.

### Demonizing

Sliding along the scale, a more negative tactic is to depict an opponent as being not only wrong, but morally evil. Unfortunately, we see far too much of this, in on-stage attacks during “debates” as well as in candidate commercials. Let us acknowledge that there are moral consequences to our actions. When one country invades another country, how can it be justified? When children are separated from their parents, is that ethical? We must be sensitive to ethical differences before we casually use the phrase, “that person/nation is evil.”



### Turning Allies into Enemies

Stories abound about political opponents heatedly debating each other on the floor in legislative debates but joining their colleagues for an after-event drink or meal. One of the signs that Levitsky and Ziblatt believe marks the decline of democracy is when elected officials give up on collaborating with their political opponents for the common good, as allies, and view them as enemies. Compromise is no longer an option. “Lock her up” or “Put him in prison” be-

**FACT:** Demons and demonic influence are central to the beliefs of the New Apostolic Reformation, the most powerful expression of Christian Nationalism. Those who do not subscribe to their views are seen as possessed or under demonic influence.

come common chants for candidates and their followers. Legislation stalls or goes off the rails.

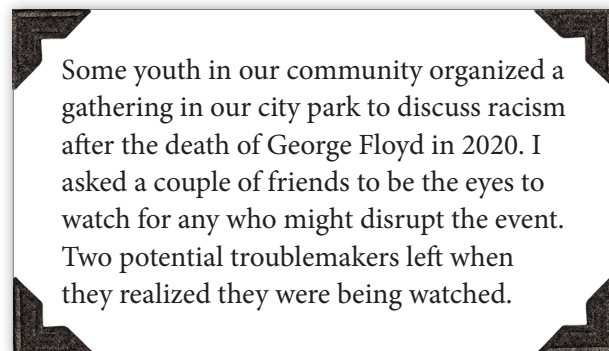
### Threats

Most parents would admit that when they are frustrated with their children misbehaving, they have threatened

some outlandish dreadful action, “you’ll never . . .” Yet, in America’s political history there have been verbal threats by congresspeople that ended in fights, and even death. Today, we witness verbal and written threats to elected officials and judges. We have seen state capital buildings occupied by gun-carrying citizens whose purpose is intimidation.

### Violence

Any act of violence is not acceptable. Increasingly, we see election workers and legal authorities, from clerks to judges, threatened and attacked. Be aware of the potential for violence. In some instances, it is good to ask a couple of friends to attend as “secret police,” if someone needs to be gently removed from the room.



## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Americans United.** One of the most contentious issues in America – historically—is the differences in religious practices. This organization’s journal, *Church & State*, and its legal actions support the concept that there should be a “wall of separation” of the two institutions. The staff is experienced in how to respectfully disagree. Contact: americansunited@au.org. Phone: 202-466-3234.

**Anti-Defamation League** is a New York-based international Jewish non-governmental organization. It specializes in civil rights law and aims to combat antisemitism and extremism. Media inquiries should be directed to adl-media@adl.org. To contact an ADL office in your area, visit its directory of regional offices.

**Baptist Joint Committee.** Similar in some ways to Americans United, it also focuses on church and state issues. Its legal staff is active in cases representing school districts and faith communities that respect the separation of religious bodies from government interference. Its publication is *Report from the Capitol*. It sponsors a group called Christians against Christian Nationalism. Contact: BJC@BJCOnline.org. Phone: 202-544-4226.

**The Chautauqua Institution.** This historic adult education program in western New York (founded 1874) today features nine-week summer programs with week-long programs on significant themes. Each week is filled with lectures as well as small group discussions. Contact: www.chq.org. Phone: 716-357-6250.

**Southern Poverty Law Center.** Among its activities, building upon its legacy of civil rights work, it has a Learning for Justice section. It provides ways to teach about race as part of American History (www.learningaboutjustice.org). It also produces a map locating Hate Groups in the USA. Contact: 888-414-7756.

**Work Group for Community Health and Development.** University of Kansas. “How to Respond to Opposition Tactics.” Contact: <http://communityhealth.ku.edu>. Phone: 785-864-0533.

### Books and Articles

**Alberta, Tim.** *The Kingdom, The Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (Harper, 2023). A stirring account of specific evangelical congregations, indicating how members are drawn into conspiracies. One pastor concluded members are making America their “idol.”

**Hixenbaugh, Mike.** *They Came for the Schools: One Town’s Fight Over Race and Identify, and the New War for America’s Classrooms* (Mariner, 2024). A case study of how different residents of Southlake, Texas, used a variety of strategies to defend or attack the other side.

**Wehner, Peter.** *The Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump* (HarperOne, 2019). A conservative and speechwriter in the Bush administration provides examples for constructive dialogues for those with different political viewpoints.

**Wiinikka-Lydon, Joseph.** “The New Dominion Tries to Rule.” The Southern Poverty Law Center. June 04, 2024. <https://www.splcenter.org/year-hate-extremism-2023/new-dominionism-tries-rule>.

### What can I do?

- Change the subject.
- You don't have to disagree.
- Instead of presenting your own alternative facts, use this tactic: “I don't understand; can you tell me more?” Be genuinely curious about the person's views and reasoning.

### What can we do?

- Among friends, share experiences of engaging with conspiracy theorists. Give each other advice on how to handle future encounters.
- If a group discussion becomes unruly, use this simple technique. Take an object—a wooden spoon, a soda can, a pair of glasses—designate it as a “microphone.” Only the person holding the object may speak.

15

# Talking with Friends and Family

## Why should I read this chapter?

You may be able to maintain healthy relationships despite differences on controversial issues.

*“The strength of the nation derives from the integrity of the home.”*

—Confucius (551–479 BCE)

*“Receptivity without confrontation leads to a bland neutrality that serves nobody. Confrontation without receptivity leads to an oppressive aggression which hurts everybody.”*

—Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 1995

*“A family is a risky venture, because the greater the love, the greater the loss... that's the trade-off. But I'll take it all.”*

—Brad Pitt, 2011

*“Family should be the place where you can be your most complete self. Where you're accepted and appreciated, seen, and valued, even in moments of disagreement. It should be your soft place to fall, the place where you're reminded that what happens to you, in the face of your deepest challenges, you're loved.”*

—Oprah Winfrey, 2022

At the reading of my mother's will, we acknowledged that our mother had been a financial wizard. Then my brother-in-law put in his two cents: "The Democrats will take it all away." He, of course, was clearly aware that I am an active Democrat. His two cents had as big an impact on me as the sum my mother left to me.

Authors of other books tell us audience members and students share their sadness that they cannot talk about political differences in their families. Frustrated, they ask the same question we hear, "What do we do about it?" They

want to hear and share potential actions, in confidence, respect, and trust, with their families.

Why is this familial division significant? It can break trust and cause conflict about more than political positions. The conflict can lead to division about more important matters, such as care of a family member, childcare for grandchildren, loss of friendships among cousins, and, sadly, legal disagreements

A university professor whose expertise related to climate shared his observations about the human impact on rainfall with his brother, a farmer. The farmer wouldn't accept that human behavior made much difference. When asked, "How do you explain it?" the answer given was that in the eons of time, God allowed such variations. The professor dropped the subject, hoping another opportunity would arise based on the farmer's own observations.

over property. Sometimes the conflict leads to illogical behavior that is not related to the issue: name-calling, insults, accusations, even physical harm.

We are not the only ones who are hearing these "distress signals." Multiple articles have been published, in print and online, about the frustration of dis-

rupted family relationships. We are going to cite from three diverse sources, boldly copying and pasting. While some sources may overlap, each offers a different approach. Use these different approaches to your advantage; decide which actions apply to your particular situation (Lilliana Hogan and Pamela White-Cooper (Resources)).

## Planning for Tough Talks (Hogan)

**Preparation.** Think about what you are going to say in advance. Also, remember past conversations you may have had with them. Remember if there are any sore spots for your family members and be considerate. Finally, strategically think of the best way to enter whatever it is you want to talk about based on your past experiences.

**Cultivate positivity.** Going into a conversation with negative expectations will only hinder you. Instead, attempt to envision the way the conversation would go if you lived in a perfect world. Envision the relationship or solution you would like to have by starting this conversation.

**Find time and space.** Agreeing on a time and place to have this conversation ahead of time is immensely helpful. It allows your family to prepare for a serious discussion and lessens the chances of not being distracted by loud noises or unexpected interruptions.

**Make a time limit.** Time limits can help difficult conversations move along and ensure that they are productive. For example, limit the discussion to an hour and if you need more time, extend it. This is especially true if children are involved.

**Agree on the terms of the conversation beforehand.** Shared ideas of how to keep the conversation positive for everyone can be constructive. Terms like no shouting, interrupting, or personal attacks make the conversation safe for everyone to share.

**Listen to people when they talk.** It can be easy to formulate what you will say next rather than listen to someone as they are speaking. The key to an effective conversation, especially in adverse circumstances, is listening deeply.

**Practice self-awareness.** Watch your mind as you have your difficult conversation. Question your assumptions or reactive thoughts and feelings. Try to take a step back and clearly see the situation for what it is.

A friend informed me he had a close friend who worked in the federal government. They have a difference of opinion of the direction of the nation and, sadly, decided the only strategy was one of avoidance.

**Know that you could be wrong.** Be prepared for the possibility that you could be in the wrong or that your behavior could be contributing to the difficulties.

**End the conversation gracefully.** When it's time to end the conversation, don't just abruptly end it. Instead, come up with a summary of the discussion, develop solutions, or decide that you can agree to disagree. Thank them for talking with you and let them know how much you love and appreciate them, even if your conversation was complicated or some points surprised you.

## Resolving Family Differences of Opinion

These family disagreements came to the attention of *Time* magazine. Belinda Luscombe, in the February 19, 2021, issue, after interviewing Seth Freeman of Columbia University, summarized his three-step recommendations. She acknowledged Freeman's three steps are like Braver Angel's four-step process (or CPPP):

- Step one: Clarify (Paraphrase). The foundation of a conversation should be respect for your loved one. So begin, after carefully listening, to repeat what you have heard. "I believe you said this . . ." The other person then can affirm it "yes, you said it correctly" or modify it, "you missed x or y." This shows the willingness to understand the other. The goal is to build understanding.
- Step two: Agree (Praise). Based on what is heard, each should try to find some value in what the other supports. Can you agree to some part of what the other advocates? Are you both striving for a common good but proposing to do it differently?
- Step three: (Pivot). If the conversation is civil, this step allows each to offer a distinct perspective. That could lead to a new road that both can travel. But if there is strong resistance, the conversation may end.
- Step four: (Perspective). The goal would allow each, respecting each other, to have gained an insight into the reason(s) why that position is held. It could set the groundwork for probing further in a second conversation.

Luscombe, quoting Freeman, agrees using "facts" in an argument is a "trap." While we think they may help us begin a productive discussion, he holds it begins arguments. Considering our assertion that democracy depends on facts, we need to discuss that with him!

## Tips for Using Your Words Wisely

Another writer, Tej Gokhale, former Civic Action Lead at DoSomething.org, suggested tips to use when reengaging with family members who disagree profoundly about political matters. The table includes examples of helpful comments and questions:

Family drama is nothing new. What is new is that it causes what used to be minor, even private, issues to become dealbreakers and major issues.

<b>Tip 1.</b> What do you hope to accomplish?	"We may not agree on [the topic], but I'd like to learn your perspective."
<b>Tip 2.</b> Best if one-on-one	"I'm more interested in your view than the family's." "If not now, can we talk later?"
<b>Tip 3.</b> Hear their opinion	"Now I understand what you find important."
<b>Tip 4.</b> Gain insights with Q & A	"How about more on that?" "Would you explain that again?" "I'd like you to share more about your point."
<b>Tip 5.</b> Reinforce listening	Look for signs that BOTH of you are "working" at listening – eye contact, stay on topic, nod agreement.
<b>Tip 6.</b> Make it personal	Hint: "I" hear you; "I" see "you believe;" avoid group stereotypes; use family examples; impact on family.
<b>Tip 7.</b> Check if you're still on target	"I feel we're on something else." "Are we ready to move to a new topic, or do we need to finish this?"
<b>Tip 8.</b> Expand the talking	"Hey, can we continue this next ....?" "You made some good points. If you have time, let's talk about more."
<b>Tip 9.</b> Positive or Negative?	Assess — Support? Attacks? Respect?

Personal feelings can arouse resistance rather than solutions. If the teenager comes home after curfew, do you ground them or tuck them in? If a family member insults you, do you return fire or do you change the subject? We don't have an answer: it's up to you.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Civil Conversations Project** is a part of the On Being Project with Krista Tippet. For a list of many groups working to bridge political differences, go to <https://cccr.tc.columbia.edu>media>icccr>.

**Center for Courage and Renewal.** This organization uses Parker Palmer's book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, as a discussion guide. It has also produced videos. Contact: <https://couragerenewal.org>.

**DoSomething.org** is an international nonprofit organization that seeks to inspire young people to do positive things. It has many projects in the USA and 189 countries. [www.dosomething.org](http://www.dosomething.org).

**Make America Dinner Again.** An organization providing toolkits and an online coordinating platform for organizing small 6-to 10-person dinner discussions to start bridging partisan divides.

### Books and Articles

**Cohen, Geoffrey L.** *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* (W.W. Norton, 2022).

**Cooper-White, Pamela.** *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism* (Fortress Press, 2022). "Talking Across the Divide," pp. 102-135, is especially helpful for family discussions.

**Hogan, Lilianna.** "How to Have Tough Talks with Your Family," Medically reviewed by Dan Brennan, M.D. August 24, 2021, in WebMD. <https://www.webmd.com/balance/features/how-to-have-tough-talks-with-family>.

**Palmer, Parker.** *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

### What can I do?

- If there is a difference of opinion in your family, take the first step and see if a meeting can be arranged. Use suggestions provided by the sources of this chapter.

### What can we do?

- For the moment, avoid discussing the "hot topic" that ignites disagreement. Focus on a possible "common good" project.
- In some instances, especially those with legal implications, call in a mediator.

# Civil Conversations in Small Groups

Why should I read  
this chapter?

To learn how to guide  
dialogues within groups.

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”*

—Margaret Mead, anthropologist, (1901-1978)

*“Individual commitment to a group effort — that is what makes a teamwork, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.”*

—Vince Lombardi, (1913-1970)

*“I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things.”*

—Mother Teresa, (1910-1997)

You may be part of a group that would be a “natural” for civil conversations. Or you could be a member of a group that is open to exploring “delicate” or “hot” topics. Or you may not be a member of any formal small group but would like to establish one. The suggestions given below are from people and organizations that have years of experience with small groups. Obviously, they can only be general guidelines that cannot account for the diversity of clubs, classrooms, faith communities, or nonprofit organizations.

## Starting a Small Group

Before going into what small groups can accomplish or how to maintain them, let's consider the factors behind forming successful small groups. Then, we will review strategies for keeping groups vital and vibrant. College chaplains James Franklin and Becky Zartman (147-48) offer these tips in *Belovedness* :

- Select a facilitator who knows the topic and who is good at moderating discussions.
- Be clear about who is to be invited. Will they have similar or diverse backgrounds? What are the benefits and negatives of your criteria?
- Individual in-person invitations are best. Ask first-joiners for names of others they know who could be interested.
- Make clear acceptable and unacceptable behaviors at the outset. Anticipate difficult scenarios and prepare accordingly. Being truthful is essential if you want to build trust.
- What about the number of participants? See advice from Searcy and Thomas in the next section.

Eventually, you will need to decide on “housekeeping” details, such as what can be shared or not shared from discussions, smart phone policies, place, and time of meeting, and what constitutes dismissing participants.

## What Makes Small Groups Work?

What about the group's dynamics? What makes them effective? A classic book you might want to read (and buy) relates to effective church groups. Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas wrote *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups*.

- *Idea #1: Think from the Inside Out, not from the Outside In* — Conventional Wisdom: Take care of those on the inside first. Reality: Small groups

that focus on serving their own members rather than on reaching out to others quickly become inwardly focused and stagnant. Wrong question: How do I get people to sign up again? Right question: How do I get new people to sign up?

- *Idea #2: Think Larger . . . Not Smaller*. Conventional Wisdom: Smaller groups lead to increased deeper relationships and more significant growth (intellectually and spiritually). Reality: Groups with seven members or fewer are difficult to lead and more likely to fail, which means they have little to no chance of fostering healthy relationships, while groups of 12 to 15 people do both more effectively.
- *Idea #3: Think Friends . . . Not Intimacy*. Conventional Wisdom: Small groups are a place where intimate relationships are formed. Reality: Small groups are a place where new friendships can be developed.

## “Must” Virtues for Conversations with Friends and Student Groups

At various times in life, you may need to have a tough conversation on a “right or wrong” issue—that's another way of saying a moral issue (the Latin and Greek roots “moral” focus on patterns or standards.) A basic assumption is that you will treat each other with dignity. The key, according to a model developed at the University of Vermont, is that both of you must agree to interact with these three “virtues”(Nash).

### Virtue of Humility

Put it this way; every participant will say: 1) We are willing to find the truth in what we oppose, or said another way, as much as we may oppose; in other words, we recognize the other has some merit; 2) we are willing to admit that we may have an error in what we advocate. What we want to avoid is behavior like boxers: they want to throw punches, score points, and win. They aren't interested in exchanging ideas.

### Virtue of Respect

Every participant should say: If we respect the other, we will evoke rather than invoke or provoke. Evoke means to “call forth,” to make a connection, to truly listen to the other's voice. When we provoke, we are either attempting to put

down the other, or discredit the person, which usually promotes anger. When we invoke, we cite experts or examples that say my way is better than yours. This encourages the other to pit his or her experts against yours.

The kind of questions we ask can show respect. Questions that “do no harm” include: What do you mean? How did you come to hold that position? Do I understand your opinion to be...? Responses such as “I want to understand your position.”, “Am I correct in believing you support ....?” start civil conversations. Here are some conversation stoppers: “You won’t give in, will you?” “How could you hold that position?” or “That doesn’t make sense, does it?”

### Virtue of Generosity

Third, every participant should conceive of generosity to mean that the other can be an ally not an enemy. Yes, with individuals we should respect the other as a person, although we can be critical of their ideas. The opposite of generosity is selfishness. I am right. I am important. I want decisions that please me, even if it is at your expense.

If you are doing this “moral” or “civil” conversation well, it becomes more dialogue than monologue. Another positive sign is that it will focus on what is best for the group.

## Promoting Interfaith Dialogue

Because there are groups related to religious and spiritual communities, here are some basic principles related to interfaith dialogue. From a Roman Catholic source (Scarboro).

- Enter dialogue so that you can learn and grow, not to change the other.
- Everyone must be honest and sincere, even if that means revealing discomforts with your own tradition or that of the other.
- Everyone must assume that everyone else is being equally honest and sincere.
- Everyone must be permitted to define their own religious experience and identity, and others must respect this.
- Don’t feel that you are the spokesperson for your entire faith tradition.

- Admit any confusion or uncertainty you might have if a puzzling question arises.
- Don’t assume in advance where points of agreement or disagreement exist.
- Everyone should be willing to be self-critical.
- All should strive to experience the other’s faith “from within” and be prepared to view themselves differently because of an “outside” perspective.
- Trust is necessary. Confidence is an imperative within the group. Everyone should feel “safe” to express their ideas and feelings without fear.

The **Swidler Dialogue Institute of Philadelphia** has outlined each participant’s perspective and potential “agenda.” Here are some of the perspectives, which are called principles: 1) the primary purpose is to gain a new understanding of reality; 2) the dialogue must reflect both sides; 3) each one must come with full honesty and sincerity; 4) avoid comparing one’s best practices and ideals with the other’s worst; 5) no predetermined assumptions about key disagreements; 6) dialogues are based on mutual trust by equals; and 7) each person must be willing to criticize himself/herself (Resources).

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**The Scarborough Foreign Mission Society** is a Roman Catholic missionary society, located in Toronto, Canada. Contact: 416-261-7135. <https://www.scarboromissions.ca/interfaith-dialogue/principles-and-guidelines-for-interfaith-dialogue>.

**Swidler, Leonard.** “The Dialogue Decalogue,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Vol. 20, No.1), 1-4. Article has ten principles outlining what participants may gain from small group participation. The principles suggest what organizers should provide. Dr. Swidler’s Institute is in Philadelphia. Contact: <http://dialogueinstitute.org/>.

### Books and Articles

**Beadle, Diane Faires, and Jamie Lynn Haskins, eds.** *Acting on Faith: Stories of Courage, Activism, and Hope Across Religions* (Chalice, 2020).

**Franklin, James, and Becky Zartman.** *Belovedness: Finding God (and Self) on Campus* (CPI Publishing, 2020).

**Nash, Robert J., et al.** *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus* (Wiley and Sons, 2008).

**Searcy, Nelson and Kerrick Thomas.** *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups* (Baker Book, 2008), especially pages 10- 20.

### What can I do?

- Organize a group within your current group to discuss a relevant political topic your community or region is facing. Consider being the organizer or facilitator.
- Attend a local meeting or function of a political party.

### What can we do?

- If not part of a group, consider collaborating with a local school or college to have a short course on a political topic led by a teacher of government or political science.
- If so interested, the group might wish to make it a project that ends with support (financial perhaps) for a needed service. Or form a group of persons, deliberately from different political or religious perspectives, to take on a building project or delivery of social services (Beadle and Haskins).

# 17

## Preparing and Sharing

### Why should I read this chapter?

To learn how to prepare  
presentations for larger groups.

*“ . . . Every time we turn our heads the other way when we see the law flouted—when we tolerate what we know to be wrong—when we close our eyes and ears to the corrupt because we are too busy, or too frightened—when we fail to speak up and speak out — westrike a blow against freedom and decency and justice.”*

—Robert Kennedy,  
Attorney General, 1961

*“When Hitler attacked the Jews . . . I was not a Jew; therefore, I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the Catholics, I was not a Catholic, and therefore, I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the unions and the industrialists, I was not a member of the unions, and I was not concerned. Then, Hitler attacked me and the Protestant church—and there was nobody left to be concerned.”*

—Rev. Martin Niemöller  
Germany circa 1945

*“The dominant culture ‘sets the rules,’ on such matters as civility, and at times, some procedures and practices must be challenged if changes are to be made.”*

—James Cone, 2004

Let's begin with the assumption that you are concerned about an issue facing democracy that you believe is not being addressed at all, or a solution has been improperly proposed or even legislated. You feel, as the quotations on the previous page indicated, that justice and peace demand that you act.

## **Conversations Before and After You Do a Presentation**

If you are speaking to a larger group, it is typical that you will have some informal conversation with some of the planners. The Common Ground organization described in Chapter 3 has five tips for such conversations. They are:

- Examine your motives. What is your goal? Is it to build bridges or get the others to change their minds? Guess which has the better chance of success.
- Do not go in cold. Be genuine; show your authentic concern. Remember, everybody is human.
- Listen to understand and show it! Everyone has an agenda. Are you actively listening, or creating your list of points to score? People can tell.
- Look for shared values. Try to connect with something you all value.
- Know when to redirect. A key point we have made in the book is that we find, accept, and then use facts. If the trust is not there, and the attitude that each of us can be wrong and should be open to learning, then you may have to redirect the conversation. Need help with that? Watch the Common Ground webinar, Living Room Conversations and Bridge USA.

If you are thinking that even these helpful tips won't work in all conversations or meetings, explore the work of those in a field called "conversational receptiveness" (Yeomans, et.al). There are four key elements: You acknowledge understanding with statements like "I see your point . . ." and "I understand." Second, find points of agreement: "I agree" and "you're right." Next, focus on things that can be said positively rather than "no" and "wrong." In short conversations, you want to avoid grandiose claims and a know-it-all attitude. Some in this field, like politicians, call it the ABC method (Affirm, Bridge, Connect). Thankfully, this can work with people who disagree.

A similar and simple piece of advice Sarah Ruger of the Charles Koch Institute offers on civil conversations is based on scientific evidence. It includes three things in conversations. First, do something together, from walking to preparing a meal, enjoying humor. Second, begin with stories rather than facts. Storytelling can promote similar memories. Third, identify common ground. (Look at Chapter 3 again.)

## **Organization of Facts**

To be effective, as we have said before, you need to have the facts to make an impact, especially if it is to stop an inhuman practice from continuing, to restore funds for a needed group, or to support or oppose controversial legislation. From reliable sources (government agencies, nonpartisan political organizations, legal authorities, foundations, media), you may have gathered a spectrum of tangible data — from barely any to truckloads of data, along with a mix of personal interviews, personal stories, and community legends. Often, a dramatic story can inspire laws passed to fund a new project or stop a disgraceful practice.

Your major temptation will be to flood the group to whom you are speaking with ALL the facts, information, and stories you have. Learn how many minutes you may speak. What can you learn about your group's history? What is their perspective, what are their goals? Are you invited to speak because you are or will be directly affected by their recent actions or future vision? Were you invited because you are an "expert" or experience in this area? You should also learn if there will be speakers who will take the opposite stance from you.

We hope you will have someone close to the situation to advise you about what is expected in a presentation. In my first presentation as a staff member giving a report to the State Board of Regents, I was told to give a five-to-ten-minute report. I had assumed that I could give an analysis of the data, which I included. The regents found that interesting, which generated questions. Later, the advice was to give only key data. Of course, if you are challenging the status quo, your time is likely to be brief. Regardless of time, the bare bones of a presentation are, in my terms:

- Begin with a one or two sentence statement of purpose.
- Use a "hook" — a story or statistic that rivets why your "solution" or evidence is relevant, requiring action.

- Bring in supporting data, trends, projection. Unless you have a longer than 15-20 minute speech, focus on two or three points.
- If using visuals, never read what is on the screen (the audience can). As a visual guideline, do not use more than seven lines of text.
- Concluding story or statement, restatement of needed decision.
- Invite questions and comments.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Braver Angels** is a national organization uniting red and blue Americans, in small groups, to bridge the partisan divide by understanding the other's perspective. They seek to build trust and goodwill. Website: [braverangels.org](http://braverangels.org).

**Public Citizen** is a nonprofit citizen advocacy group. It works in the halls of Congress, specifically concerned about reducing the influence of large corporations. Contact: 202.588-1000; email for membership: [member@citizen.org](mailto:member@citizen.org).

### Books and Articles

**Ruger, Sarah.** "Science gives us recipe for civil conversations." *Des Moines Register* Feb. 23, 2020. Ruger is director of free expression at the Charles Koch Institute. Also, she is a vice president at Stand Together.

**Yeomans, M., J. Minson, H. Collins, F. Chen, and F. Gino.** "Conversational Receptiveness: Improving Engagement with Opposing Views" in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decisions Processes*, 160: 131-148.

### What can I do?

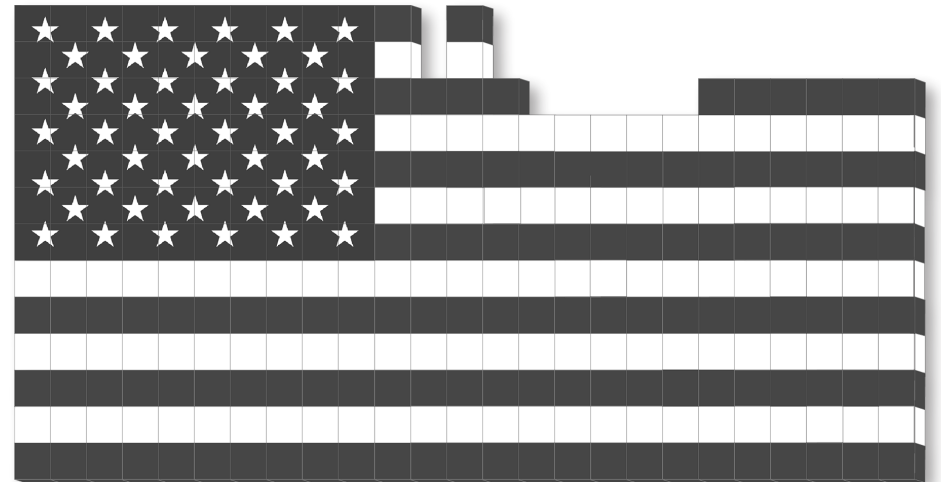
- Pick an issue that you feel strongly about in your local community, school district, or a state law. Gather facts that support your stance. Write a letter to the editor (usually they are limited to 200 or 300 words) in support or rebuttal of the issue.
- Explore what is being done to address the problem or issue. Is it getting better or worse? If nothing is being done and some group (age, medical condition, low income, etc.) is being affected, contact relevant office staff or legislators.

### What can we do?

- If a public hearing will be scheduled, have a group attend and have a representative speak.
- Organize an interfaith group to volunteer at a facility or go on a fact-finding mission.

**PART FIVE**

**Action!**



# VOTE!

## Why should I read this chapter?

To learn why to vote,  
how to support voter rights  
and how to defend the integrity  
of the voting process.

*“The right of voting for representatives is the primary right by which other rights are protected. To take away this right is to reduce people to slavery, for slavery consists in being subject to the will of another; and those that have not a vote in the election of representative are in this case.”*

—Thomas Paine, 1795

*“So long as I do not firmly and irrevocably possess the right to vote I do not possess myself. I cannot make up my mind — it is made up for me. I cannot live as a democratic citizen, observing the laws I have helped to enact — I can only submit to the edict of others.”*

—Martin Luther King, Jr., 1957

*“My dear friends: Your vote is precious, almost sacred. It is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have to create a more perfect union.”*

—John Lewis, 2012

*“Voting is the expression of our commitment to ourselves, one another, this country and this world.”*

—Sharon Salzberg, 2016

While there is consensus that the largest jewel in democracy's crown is citizens voting, there are different opinions about who should vote, how secure the process is, and what changes would make it more representative. Americans do not have as high a percentage of voters participating as do some other democracies. However, in the 2020s, voter turnout was the highest in thirty years, due to an increased use of nontraditional methods, such as early voting and vote-by-mail. Another positive was that youth voter turnout almost doubled from 2016. During the midterm elections and special elections on issues like reproductive rights, voter turnouts have also increased.

## Vote Regularly

In American democracy, elections are the responsibility of the states. If you are of the age that allows you to vote, if you are a new resident of the state, or have moved within a state, you need to find out how to register to vote. Each state has an office responsible for elections; usually it is the office of the Secretary of State. You may use your state's website to find it. In some states, you may register through a county or district office or even at the polls on the day of the election. Be aware that if you vote infrequently, some states may take you off the voter registration lists or require you to re-register.

Does your voting make an impact? Yes! There are stories about elections being decided by a few votes or even by just one. Accounts of unexpected voter turnouts, generated by charismatic candidates or significant issues, can reverse a ballot "sure thing." It is to your advantage to be a regular voter.

## Encourage Others to Vote

Too many elections are won or lost due to low voter turnout. In off-year elections particularly, fewer than 25 percent of voters cast ballots. Yes, an honest hard-working official in an office or qualified candidate wins, but sadly, that person could also lose. If you are offered an "I VOTED!" sticker as you leave the polling place, wear it with pride. Encourage family, friends, and neighbors to exercise their rights. If you hear the excuse, "I don't know who the candidates are," share your knowledge about them, or direct them to a source that summarizes the candidates and their stances. As the cliché says, "If you don't vote, you lose your right to complain."

## Volunteer as a Poll Worker

Let's assume you are or will become an active voter. You know the routine. When you go to your polling place, you check in, confirm registration information, obtain a ballot, and complete it, then turn it in for counting—by hand or by machine. There are always poll workers helping you to receive and complete your ballot. Typically, the voting process works smoothly, and voters can feel confident that it is secure. Why? Because over the years, even with different state and local procedures, committed volunteers make that happen. It is not an accident; it requires training to make it a smooth process.

You can make an impact by being a poll worker on election day. Want to find out the responsibilities? The Election Assistance Commission (EAC) has a *Poll Worker Preparedness Checklist* that explains their experiences (see Resources list).

Or you can do this first. Go to the *State Compendium of Election Worker Laws and Statutes*. There you will find out:

- if you must be a registered voter in the state.
- if there is an age requirement.
- if there is a residency requirement.
- if a political party affiliation is required.

If you qualify, then contact your local election office. No doubt their staff will be thrilled to have you on the Election Day team!

## Support Voter Rights

If you believe that voting is a "jewel" of democracy, then it follows you want all eligible voters to participate. You should support efforts that increase and enhance the voting experience. One of the ongoing debates is how to make sure all voters are legally qualified. One party calls for "voter integrity," arguing that there are too many cases in which ineligible voters cast ballots. Their solutions: require all to have IDs (identification); reduce the number of days and hours polls are open; limit the number of drop boxes; and eliminate or reduce voting by mail. The opposing political party alleges that the other party is overreacting to the decline in votes for their candidates.

**FACT:**

- At least 14 states have enacted 17 restrictive laws, all of which came into place for the 2024 general elections. Many of these new laws target voting by mail.
- At least 6 states enacted 7 election interference laws, with all 7 taking effect before the November 2024 elections.
- At least 23 states enacted 47 expansive laws, highlighted by comprehensive pro-voter legislation in Colorado, Michigan, and New York. All but one is in full effect for the 2024 general elections.

(Source: Brennan Center for Justice)

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed the discriminatory voting practices adopted in many southern states after the Civil War. However, in 2013, SCOTUS (Supreme Court of the United States) determined that a key provision in the Act was unconstitutional (*Shelby County v. Holder, Holder, 570, U.S. 529*). According to critics, it allowed southern states to eliminate minorities once again from voting. To restore measures to have full participation, the House of Representatives in 2023 passed the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2021 to restore some voting rights. At this writing (2024), it has not been passed by the Senate.

## Defend the Integrity of the Voting Process

Let's face it. Many Americans still believe that Joe Biden lost the election in 2020. Despite the evidence presented in court decisions (where facts, not opinions, matter) we know that there are election "deniers" among those who hold public office. Nor will they agree with federal judge (now retired) J. Michael Luttig, that not accepting the decision is a danger to maintaining the nation's history of a peaceful transfer of power.

## Do All Votes Count the Same?

No! While most elections are won by the candidate with the largest number of votes, the election of the President and Vice President isn't. The founders created the "Electoral College" to ensure that the votes of all individuals in the different states were represented. In plain language that means each state has the number of electors equal to its total number of members in the Senate and House of Representatives. So, California, with two senators and fifty-three representatives, has fifty-five electoral votes. Iowa has two senators and four

representatives, or six electoral votes. Currently, a presidential candidate must win 270 of the 538 total electors to win.

Bottom line: pundits and political activists focus on seven "swing" states: Arizona, Michigan, Wisconsin, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Nevada, and North Carolina. For that reason, candidates spend a disproportionate amount of time and resources campaigning in those states. You can understand why various individuals and groups favor doing away with the Electoral College to have the winner elected by popular vote.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Brennan Center for Justice.** The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law carefully examines allegations of fraud to get at the truth behind the claims. The Brennan Center has analyzed fraud cited by state and federal courts; multi-partisan and bipartisan federal commissions; political party entities; state and local election officials; and authors, journalists, and bloggers. Usually, only a tiny portion of the claimed illegality is substantiated — and most of the remainder is either nothing more than speculation or has been conclusively debunked. Contact: [www.brennancenter.org](http://www.brennancenter.org).

**Common Cause.** An organization advocating for government that is accountable. A key issue is equal rights and better representation of ordinary citizens. Contact: [www.commoncause.org](http://www.commoncause.org). Phone: 202-833-1200.

**Election Assistance Committee (EAC).** It is an independent agency of the United States government created by the Help America Vote Act of 2002. It assists state and local officials to have safe and secure elections. Contact: [www.eac.gov](http://www.eac.gov). Hotline phone: 202-451-2852.

**Public Citizen.** A nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that champions the public interest. Founded by Ralph Nader, it emphasizes reducing corporate interests in favor of citizens. Contact: [www.citizen.org](http://www.citizen.org). Phone: 202-588-1000.

Books and Articles

**The Center for Election Science.** "Approval Voting FAQs: How Does Approval Voting Work?" January 10, 2024. Includes a comparison of Approval Voting instead of ranked-choice voting. <https://usafacts.org/articles/catalog/gov>. See USAFacts Team, October 21, 2022, "How Many Americans voted in 2020?"

**In Common.** The Official Newsletter for Common Cause Members (Spring 2024).

**The Midterm Monitor.** "7 Facts About Voting—and Myths Being Spread About Them." November 2, 2022.

**Pepper, David.** *Saving Democracy* (St. Helena Press, 2023).

**What can I do?**

- Vote every time you can. [In some states, you can be removed from the rolls after missing two consecutive general elections.]
- Volunteer to work at the polls.
- Volunteer to drive or take persons to vote. In some states you can deliver ballots for those unable to travel to voting locations. Be sure of the law in your area.

**What can we do?**

- Circulate a petition to overturn an election practice in your state which you believe unfairly punishes prospective voters.
- Become involved in urging your Congressional representative to pass the John Lewis Voting Rights bill.
- Join and/or support, with letters or with funding, an organization such as League of Women Voters, to advocate to ban disinformation by social media and broadcasting media.
- Are you in favor of or opposed to making the day of general state and federal elections every two or four years a holiday? Discuss with friends.

19

# Join In, Join Up!

## Why should I read this chapter?

Because you need help.

*"Unless someone like you cares a whole, awful lot. Things aren't going to get better, they're NOT!"*

—Dr. Seuss, 1971

*"We thought that we had the answers, it was the questions we had wrong."*

—Bono, 1983

*"My reputation in the community was established not by my job performance, but by my volunteerism."*

—Dianne Prichard, 2023

You see a falling-down house, you hear about hungry children in your own school district, you hear that there are too few volunteers for the nursing home bingo games, you see that the sidewalk in front of the grocery store is uneven, you see nobody has repaired the broken swings in the park.

Why isn't someone helping?

You fret over the inaction of the city council; you see kids walking around without coats in the middle of the winter; you go to the food pantry, and it is a mess.

Why isn't someone doing something?

You observe elected officials using city property for their own benefit. You watch public events become "by invitation only"; you are appalled at the actions and words of elected officials.

These observations can be the first step in finding solutions. However, you can't repair a house or fix a sidewalk or influence a representative by yourself. You need the help and the cooperation of others.

The most efficient way to be involved in solving a community problem is to find a like-minded group of people who will welcome your help.

United we stand...divided, we scatter into the wind and disappear.

Uniting is tricky, even risky. How do you find people who share your values and, more importantly, who will work to maintain those values? Whom can you trust? Who will trust you? What qualifications do you have? What will you gain by joining? And what might you lose? Where do you start? Our book poses a lot of questions, and our purpose is to give you as many answers as possible. The answer to this question is to join an established organization.

## How do you find an organization?

Talk to colleagues and friends about your concerns. They have connections and networks and may share some contacts with you.

Go to the local Chamber of Commerce. Chamber directories list all the organizations, including not only businesses, but any group that is formally organized and, in many cases, affiliated with other similar groups, such as Lions, Rotary, Kiwanis, and League of Women Voters.

Search online under "service organizations" or "opportunities to volunteer near me."

## Why join an organization?

The greatest advantage of joining an existing organization is that the methods for volunteering are already set up for you.

The organization will know causes of problems and have a record of past attempts to remedy the situation.

Another advantage of an organization is that they work within the law. Building tents in the middle of a city park may be illegal. In some cities, feeding homeless people is illegal.

### BONUS

If you are new to the community, it is the fastest way to meet people and establish friendships.

The greatest advantage of being part of an established organization is that you will see action and both short-term and long-term results.

## Concerns

You may find that your ideas for helping the cause vary from that of the organization. There are good reasons for that. One is that your perspective is limited to your past experiences with the issue. The organization, having a longer life, has had more experience with the issue and is aware of complexities that you have not observed.

Maybe you don't have much free time. Some organizations host once-a-year events, and you can volunteer for that day.

Maybe your schedule doesn't allow you to attend meetings. Many of the tasks required for projects can be done at your convenience, such as baking for a bake sale (old-fashioned, but still effective) or stuffing envelopes or entering data.

What if you do not know what skills are needed?

Ask the people who are in charge or the people who have worked on this project in the past. Google "matching skills to volunteer opportunities" and you may be surprised at what you have to offer to your community.

Once you're in:

Set limits. Do not say yes to every request.

SAY YES	SAY NO
if you have the needed skill set	if you don't have the talent or the time
if you know you have the time (find out how much time is involved)	if you don't have the money. Volunteering can be expensive when you have to buy your own supplies
if you have clear instructions	if nobody else is volunteering; don't be a martyr
if you respect the other volunteers on the task.	if you don't like the people with whom you have to work.

### What makes you a good volunteer?

Surprisingly, it may not be your ability to play the piano or wield a pole saw. Many of the qualities of a good volunteer are the “soft” skills.

Are you compassionate? Tolerant? Curious? Creative?	Is the truth important to you?
Do you think outside of the box?	Do you appreciate clear instructions?
Do you admire people with a strong work ethic?	Are you easygoing? A critical or impulsive person can be a distraction rather than a help.
Do you like to work as a team member?	Do you like to work alone?
Do you learn quickly?	Are you a good listener? Do you enjoy hearing other people's stories?
Are you reliable —punctual, accountable?	Are you flexible?

### What are the drawbacks of volunteering?

Volunteering takes mental and emotional energy as well as physical engagement.

It also requires choices. Some of those choices have the potential to estrange you from friends and colleagues who have differing perceptions about issues or problems. Your activity in a specific group could alienate you from members of other groups. For example, helping immigrants to gain legal status can be seen as undermining the current workforce or you might be seen as a hero who is helping people to enjoy the same privileges you enjoy.

You could be stereotyped by your volunteer activities—labeled as a snowflake or a RINO. (Republican In Name Only).

You could, if your volunteering is conspicuous, receive repercussions in the workplace or at the family reunion. Your volunteering may be seen as positive to society or dangerous to the status quo. Vandalism to your property may seem like a cheap shot, but people who commit vandalism, such as scratching cars or throwing paint at houses, are operating out of fear of what you stand for. They are not able to articulate their frustration or lack of understanding and revert to simple, but visible ways of retaliating.

One of the keys to any task is open communication. On the other hand, gossip and mocking the efforts of others is a fast way to end the productivity of a project.

Find your passion and feed it. Volunteer because you want to change something. Volunteer because you want to improve something. Volunteer because you want to start something.

Be motivated by optimism, by believing that you can make someone's life better or that you can make living in your neighborhood or your country the best possible choice for citizens.

## Resources

**Chamber of Commerce:** Your local Chamber of Commerce will have a list of all the organizations in your community.

**Google “volunteer organizations.”** Look for sites that are unique to your area or state. Example: <https://volunteer.iowa.gov/>. Each state has similar services.

**Volunteer Match.** <https://www.volunteermatch.org/> asks you to put in your zip code and matches you with nearby organizations.

### What can I do?

- Investigate organizations that promote your values and beliefs. Join one.
- Read the local newspaper or follow local social media accounts.

### What can we do?

- If you are a member of an organization or formal group, ask the group to explore a civic issue in your community. Learn the facts, then organize an event to raise funds and awareness. Use the funds to create more awareness.

# 20

## Engage!

### Why should I read this chapter?

To hold your elected officials accountable.

*“I am only one. But still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”*

—Edward Everett Hale, 1891

**Founder of the Lend a Hand Society; later, chaplain, United States Senate**

*“This bill is about maximizing meaningful public participation in the boards and commissions process, and it increases state government accountability and efficiency by eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy.”*

—Chris Cournoyer, Iowa Senator in *Bleeding Heartland*, 2024

When I started working on this chapter, I joked with friends that I had written only two words: “Why bother?”

Seriously, very seriously, if you and I don’t engage our county and city boards, mayors, governors, representatives, and members of Congress, they will forget that they have been elected to represent our best interests. They will listen only to those who think like them, and even though we don’t like to believe it, they will listen very closely to the people who fund their campaigns. In other words, they can be bought. They do not seek funds to support our infrastructures, our schools, our health systems. They need money for only one thing: reelection.

We have one power to hold over them. We have one power that is free from compromise, free from price tags, and free from bribery or corruption. We can vote! We can vote them into office or out of office.

However, what happens after they are elected or reelected is still our responsibility. The oath they swear says nothing about us:

*I do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitution of the State of \_\_\_\_, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of \_\_\_\_\_ according to the best of my ability.*

That’s it. Nothing about representing my interests or your interests. That is assumed, implied, understood, taken for granted. Fortunately, our federal and state constitutions give us much of the protection we need, but not all.

After they are elected, we have the grave responsibility of holding them accountable for the oath they swore when they took office. We have the responsibility to question them, to inform them, to educate them and to remind them that supporting the Constitution is not about protecting a piece of paper or an ideology, but about protecting us.

Engaging elected officials has become increasingly challenging. Knowing how and why this has happened cannot help you to overcome the obstacles of partisanship and tribalism. So, what can you do?

Engage, engage, engage. This is the political version of the real estate maxim:

Location, location, location. Engaging is location.

- Engage in person.
- Engage via telephone.
- Engage via email.
- Engage via paper mail.

## Engage in Person

Where can you meet with them in person?

I have had good luck in a variety of places. My luckiest encounter was in our local cafe. I was sitting in my usual booth when a gentleman walked in, looked around, and waited to be noticed. I noticed immediately: it was our governor. I waved to him and he joined me for coffee and conversation. Because I had been following certain developments that pertained to people I loved, I asked him questions and he gave me answers. I didn’t like the answers, but I understood more about the legislation that had been passed; that information helped me to continue to advocate for my issue.

Most legislators return to their districts periodically to talk to the constituents. Sometimes these are invitation-only gatherings; sometimes they are public forums. Public forums are ideal, because you can take your friends and you can meet other people who have concerns about the efficacy of the elected officials.

Political parties and other organizations host events where elected officials are invited to speak. You can engage them one-on-one as they move among the crowd. It is helpful to be on an organization’s email list so that you can be informed of these meetings. It can be a non-partisan or partisan organization. All are diligent in sending out pertinent information.

You can also invite your elected official to speak to a group to which you belong. Arrange this through their staff office.

You can visit them in their offices, but most of the time, the offices are staffed by assistants. Part of their work is to pass on information to the boss.

Engage the community by writing a letter to the editor. The ACLU website gives great directions.



[www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)

My elected officials tell us at legislative coffees that they are eager to talk to any of us. One actually said, “We’re human, just like you.” It is good to remember when you talk to your representative, that your elected officials are made from the same flesh and blood and bones as you. But there may be differences in the way you and they perceive issues and in the way you and they reason. Knowing the values that guide your elected officials can be difficult to discern.

Observe what motivates your representative to support a bill or vote. Is it good because it saves money? Is it good because it prevents waste? Is it good because it benefits a certain group? Is it helpful to most people or does it cater to a specific group? Does it ignore important information?

Whether you write or speak to an official, you want to be organized and concise.

- Prepare your concern in a brief statement ahead of time.
- Then prepare questions about specific legislation and the reasons for supporting or amending legislation. Make sure your information is up to date. In a group, it’s a good idea to focus on topics that are of concern to others in the group. You may find some allies who will speak in support of you. You are allowed and encouraged to ask questions if you disagree with the information. Always ask for clarification if the answer is vague or off-topic.

Anyone who runs for office, that is, any politician, quickly learns the need to double speak, for evading the question, for avoiding committing to an opinion or promise. Euphemism and metaphor steer us away from the gravity of the issue.

At a recent meeting, our legislators were asked about water quality and the connection to Iowa’s growing number of cancer cases. They had two answers:

1. That was their absent colleague’s area of expertise.
2. They talked about the water levels in our aquifer.

Nothing was said about water quality, which in our state is an important and controversial topic. And cancer—zip. Another time, when I visited the State Capitol, I asked my Senator about wideband internet. She replied that that had been approved the year before. What I didn’t ask about was funding. Always ask about funding.

## Engage by Phone, Email, or Mail

I am grouping these three methods because the result is most often the same: you will reach a staff person. Likewise, your approach is similar. Some sources say that representatives prefer email; others say telephone. You need to learn what your representative prefers. Regardless of your preferred method: these rules apply:

- Courtesy demands that you address the person as Representative XYZ or Senator XYZ.
- Identify yourself according to the auspices under which you are contacting the person. e.g., I am your constituent in XXX county, or I am the mother of a child with XXX, or I am a member of XXX Union.
- Mention the specific issue or legislation. It is helpful to have the number of the bill, if there is a bill pending. House File #xxxx or Senate File #xxx.
- Explain your position and share evidence. Personal stories are considered evidence.
- Offer to provide more information.
- Thank them for considering your concern.
- Include your contact information.
- Follow up with further communication.

### KEEP ASKING

Correspond regularly with your representatives. When you can, compliment or thank them when they act in your favor.

### PREPARE

Look up bills that affect you. Check the status of the bill: in committee, vote pending. Ask their opinions on the bill (not the issue in general) and how they came to those. Tell them how their vote affects you.

## What Happens When You Contact a Legislator

Method	Con	Pro
personal visit	hard to arrange; may require travel, buying tickets	you will be remembered by the elected official at future encounters
letter to the editor	not read by official unless brought to their attention by staff	read by public; others may also speak out
letter to the official	read by staff only	may be read by official if staff find it significant
phone call	answered by staff	meaningful conversation; information may be shared
visit with staff person	can be ignored	meaningful conversation; information may be shared
visit with the official in person	can be ignored	meaningful conversation; information may be shared
donate money	will you put you on a mailing list asking for more money	will put you on a mailing list for legislative updates

Ideally, your opinion influences how your legislator votes. Usually, your legislator or their staff will respond via the same medium (phone, letter, email) to thank you for contacting them and explaining their views on the topic. In some cases, you may be asked to testify before the larger body. This really happens! On Thursday, June 23, 2011, a friend of mine testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions about the failure of trickle-down economics, the effect of corporate buyouts and the inability to maintain a middle-class lifestyle in professions that used to guarantee financial security. Did her testimony make a difference? You decide.

Why bother? As of this writing, we still live in a democracy. In an atmosphere of conflict, with the rising threat of totalitarianism, under the creeping menace of an oligarchy, you live in a democracy. You have a voice. Use it!

### AVOID THE CIRCULAR FILE

- Be brief.
- Cover only one issue.
- Avoid abbreviations or technical jargon.
- Grammar, spelling, sentence structure and punctuation make an impression.
- Be polite and reasonable.

**DO NOT** use sarcasm.

**DO NOT** insult the person or their work.

**DO NOT** use sample or form letters sent to you by organizations. Be original.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

Learn from other organizations that share your concerns. Many organizations routinely post about legislative issues germane to the group. Examples include:

**American Geriatric Society.** Founded in 1942, the American Geriatrics Society (AGS) is a nationwide, not-for-profit society of geriatrics healthcare professionals dedicated to improving the health, independence, and quality of life of older people. <https://www.americangeriatrics.org/>.

**American Civil Liberties Union.** In November 1919 and January 1920, Attorney General Mitchell Palmer began rounding up and deporting so-called radicals. Thousands of people were arrested without warrants and without regard to constitutional protections against unlawful search and seizure. In the face of these egregious civil liberties abuses, a small group of people decided to take a stand, and thus was born the American Civil Liberties Union. <https://www.aclu.org/>.

**Animal Welfare Institute.** Through engagement with policymakers, scientists, industry, and the public, AWI seeks to alleviate suffering inflicted on animals by humans. <https://awionline.org/content/who-we-are>.

**Center for Medicare Advocacy.** The Center for Medicare Advocacy's mission is to advance access to comprehensive Medicare coverage, health equity, and quality health care for older people and people with disabilities by providing exceptional legal analysis, education, and advocacy. <https://medicareadvocacy.org/>.

**Common Cause.** Common Cause has an innovative, pragmatic, and comprehensive pro-democracy agenda. Our work leads and defines the democracy reform movement, promoting solutions already succeeding in some communities to shift power to the people and away from wealthy special interests and partisan ideologues. <https://www.commoncause.org/>.

**International City/County Management Association.** Adopted in 1924, the ICMA Code of Ethics defined the principles that today serve as the foundation for the local government management profession. It sets the standard for excellence. <https://icma.org/>.

**League of Women Voters.** The League of Woman Voters is a nonpartisan grassroots organization working to protect and expand voting rights and ensure everyone is represented in our democracy. It empowers voters and defends democracy through advocacy, education, and litigation, at all levels. <https://www.lwv.org/>.

**National Volunteer Fire Council.** The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) is the only organization created solely to support volunteer firefighters, EMTs, and rescue personnel through a wide range of programs and benefits. Become a member of the NVFC to get what you need to be your best for you, your crew, and your community. <https://www.nvfc.org/>.

**Think Babies.** Think Babies was created to make the potential of every baby our national priority and focuses on six key policy areas: paid leave, child care, Early Head Start, infant and early childhood mental health, family support, and economic security. <https://www.thinkbabies.org/>.

### **What can I do?**

- Prepare a list with all the contact information of all the elected officials in your community.
- Sign up for the elected officials' newsletters or follow them on social media.

### **What can we do?**

- Choose a local issue about which you feel strongly. Gather facts that support your stance. If nothing is being done and some group (age, medical condition, income, etc.) is being disproportionately affected, contact relevant office staff or legislators.
- In a group, visit meetings or offices of elected officials. Be prepared to speak to staff members as well as the official.

# Run!

## Why should I read this chapter?

To learn why and how  
to get on the ballot.

*“When a man assumes a public trust, he should consider himself as public property.”*

—attributed to Thomas Jefferson, 1834

*“The office should seek the man, not man the office.”*

—attributed to Silas Wright, 1884

*“There is no cause half so sacred as the cause of a people. There is no idea so uplifting as the idea of the service of humanity.”*

—President Woodrow Wilson, 1912

*“Politics ought to be the part-time profession of every citizen who would protect the rights and privileges of free people and who would preserve what is good and fruitful in our national heritage.”*

—President Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954

The bravest, most foolhardy, most patriotic thing you can do is to run for public office. All you need is unlimited funds and a photogenic face. If you have those resources, keep reading. Otherwise, skip to the next chapter.

Just kidding! Even if you don't have unlimited funds and you're not hung up on your looks, you can and should run for office. More important than money and makeup is a passion for the well-being of your community. Passion is the force that energizes, heals, and revitalizes a candidate and inspires the voter. Passion propels the campaign forward.

Passion must be directed, informed, and organized to be effective.

### **Why would you consider running for office?**

- Someone may ask you to run. Why? Because your actions and words in the community have inspired others.
- You may have interacted with elected officials and realized that you have much in common.
- You may have interacted with elected officials and decided that you could do a better job serving the community.

### **What do you know about yourself that makes you a strong candidate?**

I will grant you, there are between 10 and 50 characteristics that voters look for in candidates, but the first and most important that you need to look for in yourself is resilience. In the year of our writing, candidates are exposed to every kind of violence, from racial slurs to kidnappings to vandalism. Much of this violence manifests itself verbally, rather than physically, but the wounds are just as deep. What will you say when someone accuses you of hanging out in a hot tub with high school boys? What will you say when someone harasses your children on the school bus? What will you do when your elderly mother is barred from the mahjong group?

Exaggeration can be funny, but politics is funnier—or weirder. Or meaner. Yes, politics, as we call it, is dirty, but who better than you to come in as the cleansing agent, the soap on a rope, the grime grabber, the soaker-upper?

The qualities we listed in the chapter on volunteering apply equally well to being a candidate for office. This reminds me of an old saying: everyone should

be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Ask a group of your closest friends to help you recognize your strengths and weaknesses.

### **What do you know about your community that makes you a strong candidate? What are your connections to the community?**

- You grew up there.
- You work there. You live there.
- Your connections to the people, history, the everyday paths of everyday people in your community can give you integrity.

### **What do you know about government and law-making that makes you a strong candidate?**

- Be familiar with “on-the-floor” rules, written and unwritten.
- Make friends with someone who is currently serving.
- Learn about what motivates office holders.
- Learn about being “thrown under the bus” for petty reasons.
- Learn about how decisions are made, how laws are processed, not only in public, but in private.
- Know which laws excite or anger your constituents. What have you observed about voting records?
- Equally important, know which laws are under your domain.

In my county, if you run for Board of Supervisors, you had better understand the laws about drainage ditches. As a college trustee, I must know about the laws regarding social media and diversity.

### **What do you know about your reputation?**

People like to say they vote for the person, not the party.

Your reputation may be based on your vocation or career or on your participation in community activities, such as coaching youth sports. It could be based on where you are most often seen. I am most often seen at the local cof-

fee shop, which means I am seen by a large, but select demographic. However, I have many other connections through organizations and the workplace. My work in the community as a teacher and preacher has connected me to hundreds, maybe even thousands of people. What are your connections?

## What next?

Now that you've decided to run for office, there are some necessary tasks to complete before you are on the ballot. The fastest way to learn about these tasks is to go to your Secretary of State's website. You will learn how, where, and when to file nomination papers, whether or not you are eligible to run, and what to expect after the election.

We live in an age of visual stereotypes. Because of our intense exposure to media personnel, we assume that the news anchor, the talk show host, and the reality show contestant look "right." We judge what we see in the mirror against those faces and bodies. Sometimes the self-imposed verdict is "loser." I have observed candidates being criticized for the color of their coat, the length of their hair, the size of their gut, none of which has to do with the qualities we say we admire in a person. Again, look at the qualities we suggest for volunteers—compassion, tolerance, punctuality, flexibility. Those are your strengths. As far as your face goes, my experience shows that eye contact and a ready smile are the most effective cosmetics — because it's NOT cosmetic — not fake! Your eye contact and smile communicate to the constituent that you are interested in them, not in yourself. There is nothing more genuine than that one-on-one, instant connection.

You cannot run for office by yourself. You need all kinds of people from all walks of life. You will need people who can raise money for you. You will need people who can keep track of the money. You will need people who can help you spend your money—wisely. You will need someone to tell you where to go and what to say. You will need someone to publish your name and face over and over and over. If you are affiliated with a political party, you may find some resources, especially from experienced political personnel. Get to know people who have run for office. These people will know how to promote your candidacy, how to connect you with as many voters as possible and how to keep you from burning out. They will also help protect you and your family as needed.

Speaking of family, your family members think they know you better than

you know yourself. Before taking out papers, sit down with them and explain that they are **never, ever** to tell anyone else what you say or believe or promise without first hearing it from you — and within the last week. They can repeat only what you tell them to repeat about your plans, your hopes, your strategies, and especially, your experiences. This includes cute stories about the time you fed your brother what he thought was chocolate pudding while you were playing in the sandbox.

I wish I didn't have to say this but make arrangements to protect your family. They can be effective campaigners, especially going door to door, but opponents and their committees can be malicious. Prepare your family to respond and to stay safe.

The most demanding part of campaigning is fundraising, so use experts, use committees. Everyone who has ever run for office has tried to come up with a unique, clever, attractive plan for siphoning money out of people's bank accounts: corn boils, pie auctions, dances, hog wrestling. What will people give you in exchange for an hour's distraction? Political donations are not forgivable like charity donations. You are not a tax write-off.

And, frankly, you're going to spend HOURS on the phone asking for money. You will likely be given lists of names and phone numbers. After that, get comfortable and start dialing. (Why do we still call it dialing?)

People have to know what you want to provide before they give you money. What can they expect from you that will benefit them?

Maybe it sounds like candidates say the same thing over and over. You should, too; that is a safe way to avoid making claims that cannot later be verified and to avoid making promises that can't be kept.

What can you provide? Don't promise what you can't provide. You may *imply* what you *could* provide. You can talk in first person plural—*WE* all want, *WE*

**FACT:** A U.S. Supreme Court decision *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010), in a 5–4 decision, held that the freedom of speech clause of the First Amendment prohibits the government from restricting contributions for political campaigns by corporations, including nonprofit corporations, labor unions, and other associations. Today, **Public Citizen** and other groups are supporting a drive to amend *Citizens United*.

all hope for. Run on your integrity, not your dreams. Your dreams belong in the beginning phases of crafting your campaign. Share them with your committee; let them help you make them into an image of how you will care for the community. Most of the time, do more listening than talking.

Campaigns spend most of their money on advertising. Media is fluid. What works one year may not work another. Newspapers are going out of style; television is incredibly expensive. Social media is a form unto itself. Seek out and count on experts.

Does it sound a bit fake, a bit contrived? One of my favorite definitions of politics is “groups of people making decisions together.” The decision you have made to run means you will always be helping people by making decisions together. Your dedication in running is selfless and generous because you are bringing better choices to your community. You are following laws that help people to work together. You may even repeal laws that hinder the benefits of living in a community. Your contribution should be strategic, deliberate, and constructive.

You are making yourself vulnerable to vulnerable people. No one will vote for you if they don't know you.

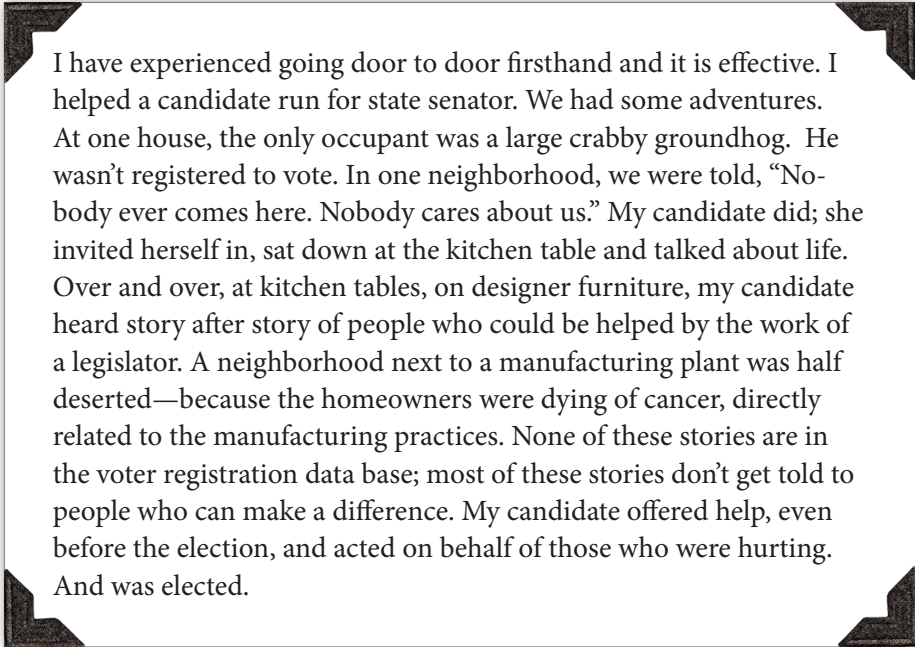
Another way to know people is to attend public events. County fairs, city celebrations, ball games, holiday observances, pancake breakfasts, fish fries. Your campaign chair should set you up with assistants to introduce you to guests. Because I like county fairs and I know a lot of people who attend fairs, I once escorted a candidate around the fair and introduced him to everyone I knew. I will grant you that I may have introduced him to a lot of people who probably voted for his opponent, but I don't know that for sure, and he was elected. It's important to attend the event with someone who is known and respected among the crowd. “Stranger danger” is more deeply embedded than ever, so being connected to someone who is “safe” is strategic. Visit events that are new to you—this is a fantastic way to learn more about the people you want to help. If a small-town tavern hosts a dart tournament, if the local American Legion has a feather party, if a flea market pops up in a warehouse, drop by for a bit and introduce yourself.

Be prepared to be insulted or harassed. Handle it with humor if you can, but if you don't have a quick comeback, continue the conversation with this reply: “Please tell me more. I don't understand where you're coming from.” Some-

times, it is best to walk away. But oftentimes, you'll get another story, one that may make you angry or break your heart or inspire you to help, whether you get elected or not.

As we said from the beginning of this chapter, the bravest, most foolhardy, most patriotic thing you can do is to run for public office.

If you run, you may lose. So what? On the other hand, you might be the best thing that ever happened to the voters.



I have experienced going door to door firsthand and it is effective. I helped a candidate run for state senator. We had some adventures. At one house, the only occupant was a large crabby groundhog. He wasn't registered to vote. In one neighborhood, we were told, “Nobody ever comes here. Nobody cares about us.” My candidate did; she invited herself in, sat down at the kitchen table and talked about life. Over and over, at kitchen tables, on designer furniture, my candidate heard story after story of people who could be helped by the work of a legislator. A neighborhood next to a manufacturing plant was half deserted—because the homeowners were dying of cancer, directly related to the manufacturing practices. None of these stories are in the voter registration data base; most of these stories don't get told to people who can make a difference. My candidate offered help, even before the election, and acted on behalf of those who were hurting. And was elected.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Public Citizen** is a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that champions the public interest – your interests – in the halls of power. <https://www.citizen.org>

**State of Iowa** <https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/candidates/faq.html#1> Other states have similar sites.

**Parks, Miles, and Chloe Weine.** “How to run for office.” NPR WBEZ Chicago October 17, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/15/770332855/how-to-run-for-office>.

#### What can I do?

- Run for office.
- Contact public citizens for support.
- Visit with those who know the political landscape.

#### What can we do?

- Support candidates with time and money.
- Urge those whom you feel are qualified to run for office.
- Ask political parties what openings are likely in the future.

# 22

## Serve!

### Why should I read this chapter?

To understand the services provided by civil servants .

*“As soon as public service ceases to be the chief business of the citizens, and they would rather serve with their money than with their persons, the State is not far from its fall.”*

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1761

*“You can’t divorce religious belief and public service. I’ve never detected any conflict between God’s will and my political duty. If you violate one, you violate the other.”*

—President Jimmy Carter, 2012

*“I think there’s no higher calling in terms of a career than public service, which is a chance to make a difference in people’s lives and improve the world.”*

—Jack Lew

Ambassador to Israel, 2015

## The Significance and Scope of Civil Service

Government employees are public servants. Public servants serve both the government and the citizens they represent. Their accountability lies with the elected government rather than with any specific political party or political leader. They are tasked with developing and implementing public programs or services, contributing to policymaking processes, and offering evidence-based guidance to decision-makers. Their main duty is to gain and keep the public's trust by striving to make life better for the people they serve, making sure they act fairly, honestly, and without criticism.

**FACT:** Nearly seven percent of Americans work as non-elected government employees, which is comprised of 19.23 million individuals who work at the state and local government levels and 2.87 million individuals who serve in federal government. (Source: <https://www.statista.com/>)

Every American depends upon public servants every day. Who are public servants? They are the government employees who ensure that public services are delivered to a community. A public service is a resource offered by an organization, typically a government agency or nongovernmental business, intended to support members of

a community. Examples of nonmilitary public services include public health, law enforcement, education, libraries, energy, telecommunications, public transportation, urban planning, waste management, sanitation, water supply, environmental protection, natural resources management, consumer protection, parks and recreation, economic development, agriculture, and emergency and disaster response. Public servants are responsible for the infrastructure, processes, and systems we use to exercise our freedoms and liberties.

## Similar State and Local Government Systems

State and local governments in the U.S. often have public (or civil) service systems like the U.S. federal civil service, who coordinate with the federal level departments and agencies. The federal civil service was established in 1871 and has been reformed through legislation multiple times to ensure that government employees are hired and retained through merit and not at the whim or at the pleasure of a political party or administration. This is to ensure that in the peaceful transition of power between administrations, the government will continue to function and provide services to American citizens in

a transparent and predictable way, and not be used to enact authoritarian or personal actions of the president, Congress, or the courts.

## Federal Civilian Service: Three Categories of Employees

- The competitive service — employees selected based on merit after a competitive hiring process for positions that are open to all applicants. These are positions in which all qualified applicants may apply.
- The Senior Executive Service (SES) — classification for senior leadership positions filled by career employees, transitioned employees, or political appointments. The SES positions bring in individuals with strong leadership education and experience and can be used to hire executives from other sectors to inform and learn about government service.
- The excepted service (also known as unclassified service) — typically used for security, and intelligence functions (e.g., the Central Intelligence Agency Federal Bureau of Investigation, State Department, interns, foreign service professionals, doctors, lawyers, judges, and other specialized needs.)

All federal civil servants are required to swear to the following oath of office.

*I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter. So help me God.*

## The Benefits of Public Service

In general, public servants are driven by a desire to make the world a better place for others, not by personal profit or advancement. In multiple studies, those who serve in government positions identify the following as reasons to sacrifice private sector benefits for public service impact.

- **Sense of Purpose:** Public service jobs often involve work that directly contributes to the well-being of society. This can provide a deep sense of purpose and fulfillment, knowing that your efforts are making a positive impact on people's lives.
- **Community Engagement:** Public servants often have the opportunity to

engage directly with the communities they serve, building relationships and fostering trust. This connection to the community can be rewarding and meaningful, enhancing job satisfaction.

- **Potential for Impactful Change:** Public service can provide a platform for driving positive change at the local, national, or even global level. Whether through policy development, advocacy, or direct service delivery, public servants have the opportunity to address pressing social issues and improve quality of life for others.
- **Higher Levels of Responsibility than Private Sector Counterparts:** Public servants often have roles that provide more influence and responsibility than equivalent jobs in the private sector.

According to research from the Partnership for Public Service, far more Americans agree the federal civil servants are “doing public service” and are hard workers than disagree, by almost a 2-to-1 ratio. However, only 35 percent of Americans say they trust the federal government and tend to express negative views about the government on several dimensions.

The discrepancy between relying on public servants (at the local, state, and federal levels) and distrusting them may be attributed to a lack of understanding of the restrictions and constraints that government employees must work within to perform their duties. If only seven percent of the population has experience with a government job, building trust in government and achieving high levels of performance, accountability, transparency, and stability may be hindered.

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Brian.** “Review: Politicraft, A Fun Card Game that Models Civic Engagement.” *The Civic Educator*. <https://civiceducator.org/review-politicraft-civics-card-game/>.

**Partnership for Public Service.** At the Partnership for Public Service, we believe that our future and our democracy depend on our ability to solve big problems—and that we need an effective federal government to do so. For more than 20 years, we have helped make this vision a reality, working across four different presidential administrations to help our government address

the challenges of the moment and those to come. <https://ourpublicservice.org/our-solutions/rebuilding-trust-in-government/dashboard/>.

**Statista** is a global data and business intelligence platform with an extensive collection of statistics, reports, and insights on over 80,000 topics from 22,500 sources in 170 industries. <https://www.statista.com/>.

### Books and Articles

**Alexander, Cedric.** *In Defense of Public Service: How 22 Million Government Workers Will Save our Republic* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2020).

**Quinn, Kenneth M.** “Here’s to 100 Years of Bravery from US Foreign Service.” *Des Moines Register*, May 5, 2024.

**Zacka, Bernardo.** *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency* (Belknap Press, 2017).

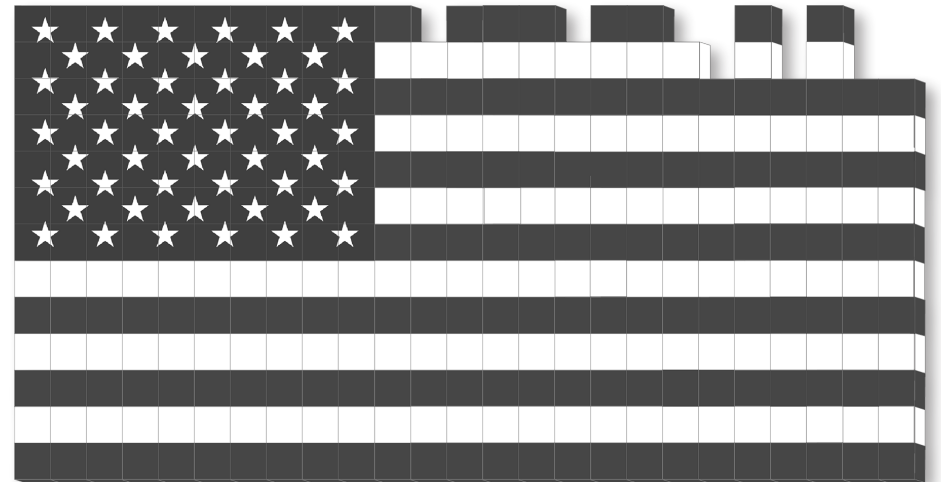
### What can I do?

- Identify who in your community is a government employee and take the time to talk with them about why they selected a public service position, what the challenges of the position are, and how you can support them.
- Review the strategic plan, budget, or annual performance report of a local, state, or federal agency to see all of their priorities and activities.
- Seek an internship, or temporary assignment working with a public sector organization, to understand their mission and how they achieve it.
- Apply for a job and work in a government organization for at least two years to get a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that government careers provide.

### What can we do?

- Seek out opportunities to engage with a local, county, state, or federal agency on social media—ask questions about their goals, objectives, and opportunities for citizen engagement.

# Facing the Future



# What about agreeing to disagree?\*

Why should I read  
this chapter?

To consider that another's stance may  
be unethical.

*“Don't be in a hurry to condemn because [the other] doesn't do what do you or think as you think, or as fast. There was a time when you didn't know what you do today.”*

—**Malcolm X (1925-1965)**

*“I read every word, and when I am done my fuel tanks are once again topped off for my next round of encounters with all those who have yet learned how to think.”*

—**Neil deGrasse Tyson**

**Astrophysicist and Director of the Hayden Planetarium, NYC**

*\*This chapter is a blog written by John Pavlovitz and is used with his permission.*

## No, I Can't Agree to Disagree Over Trump. You Are Wrong. By John Pavlovitz

To Whom it May Concern,

We recently found ourselves in a now familiar location hopelessly stuck in an unnavigable impasse on our respective paths, unable to find a way forward. And, as in so many times before, when the friction became too great and the exchange too heated and the tension too uncomfortable, you dropped an all-too-familiar final salvo designed to stop conversation and temporarily defuse the situation: "We're just going to have to agree to disagree." **I disagree. I refuse these terms.**

Such a concession assumes that we both have equally valid opinions, that we're each mutually declaring those opinions not so divergent that they cannot be abided; that our relationship is of greater value than the differences — but that isn't exactly true for me.

We don't just disagree here — you're wrong.

I believe you're deeply, profoundly, and egregiously wrong; the kind of wrong about the kinds of things that I can no longer excuse or make peace with or overlook—because that would be a denial of who I am and what matters to me, the values I have spent a lifetime forming.

This is not a disagreement. We are not simply declaring mismatched preferences regarding something inconsequential. We can disagree about which team has the best offensive line in the NFL, or about what craft beer pairs best with a cheesesteak, or about the sonic differences of CDs and vinyl. On such matters (though I will provide spirited debate), I can tolerate dissention.

We're not even talking about clear misalignments on especially important things: how to best address climate change or what will fix our healthcare system or how to reduce our national debt or what it will take to bring racial equity. Those subjects, while critically important, still have room for constructive debate and differing solutions. They are mendable fractures. But this, this runs far deeper and into the marrow of who we each are.

At this point, with the past few years as a resumé, your alignment with the

former president means that we are fundamentally disconnected on what is morally acceptable—and I've simply seen too much to explain that away or rationalize your intentions or give you the benefit of the doubt any longer. I know what your reaffirmation of him is telling me about your disregard for the lives of people of color, about your opinion of women, about your attitude toward science, about the faith you so loudly profess, and about your elemental disrespect for bedrock truth. I now can see how pliable your morality is, the kinds of compromise you're willing to make, the ever-descending bottom you're falling into, in order to feel victorious in a war you don't even know why you're fighting.

That's why I need you to understand that this isn't just a schism on one issue or a single piece of legislation, as those things would be manageable. This isn't a matter of politics or preference. This is a pervasive, sprawling, saturating separation about the way we see the world and what we value and how we want to move through this life.

Agreeing to disagree with you in these matters would mean silencing myself and more importantly, betraying the people who bear the burdens of your political affiliations—and this is not something I'm willing to do. . . (some words omitted). Our relationship matters to me, but [here is what is morally wrong]:

Your devaluing of Black lives is not an opinion.

Your acceptance of falsehoods is not an opinion.

Your defiance of facts in a pandemic is not an opinion.

Your hostility toward immigrants is not an opinion.

These are fundamental heart issues.

I'm telling you this so that when the chair is empty this Thanksgiving, or the calls don't come, or you meet with radio silence, or you begin to notice the slow fade of our exchanges, I want you to know why: it's because I have learned how morally incompatible we are. It doesn't mean I don't respect you or even love you, but it means proximity to you isn't going to be healthy.

Were we talking about anything less than the lives of other human beings, I'd be more than willing to disagree with you, but since we are talking about the lives of other human beings—I can't.

I believe you're wrong in ways that are harming people.

You're wrong to deny the humanity of other human beings.

You're wrong to justify your affiliation with this violence.

You're wrong to embrace a movement built on the worst parts of who we are.

I simply can't agree with that.

John Pavlovitz

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Pavlovitz, John.** <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2023/9/4/2191543/-No-I-can't-agree-to-disagree-over-Trump-You-Are-Wrong#comments>. This is Daily Kos Story 1409.

### Books and Articles

**Pavlovitz, John.** *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community* (Westminster John Knox, 2017).

--- *If God is Love Don't be a Jerk: Finding A Faith That Makes Us Better Humans* (WJK Press, 2019).

---. *Worth Fighting For: Finding Courage and Compassion When Cruelty is Trending* (Fortress Press, 2024).

### What can I do?

- If you believe this blog was worthwhile, please notify [www.dailykos.com](http://www.dailykos.com) that it should be shared with more readers. You may want to use this specific information: See also John Pavlovitz blog: *Stuff That Needs to Be Said*.

### What can we do?

- Form a reading group. Each of John's books is great for discussions. In his book *Worth Fighting For*, he has a specific chapter on "The America Worth Fighting For."

24

# Coping with Hopelessness

## Why should I read this chapter?

To know the odds and ignore them.

*"May I possess always the integrity, the courage and the strength to keep myself unshackled, to remain a citadel of freedom and a beacon of hope to the world."*

**Otto Whittaker**

**"I Am the Nation" 1976, celebrating the nation's 200th anniversary.**

*"In the United States today, we have more than our share of the nattering nabobs of negativism. They have formed their own 4-H Club — the 'hopeless, hysterical hypochondriacs of history.'"*

**Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, 1970**

*"Hope is a double-edged sword. It is a feeling of admitting you are powerless and not in control of a situation, while providing the comfort and encouragement that the situation will change for the better."*

**Joclyn Krevat**

**In Sickness and in Health: A Memoir by Joclyn and Jeremy Krevat (2018)**

## Why hope?

After reading these chapters, looking at the powerful forces that are reducing our four freedoms today, you may feel it is hopeless, or that if you make a change, it will only be minuscule. It is hopeless. No question. One can say, as does Miguel A. De La Torre in *Embracing Hopelessness*, that powerful financial forces and government inertia make positive gains fleeting and fragile.

*For those who occupy spaces within the dominant culture, please refuse the temptation to insist the oppressed must have hope. Those living with privilege see as normative a life full of hope for the future. But hope cannot be imposed. . . The answer will never be charity but rather restructuring power structures. I conclude this book embracing hopelessness, believing it to be more productive if we don't rely so heavily on hope, specifically the hope of the dominant culture, which serves as a tyranny. . . To be blunt, I hold little, if any hope for justice in my work. . . The disenfranchised undertake this work because no other alternative exists. Even in the absence of any assurance of future success, the work toward justice continues for its own sake. . . To be hopeless is desperation refusing to give up, a recognition that the struggle for justice . . . could plant seeds that might blossom in some future. . . Justice probably will not be the determined future of humanity; nevertheless, its pursuit is what makes life worth living in the present—and maybe, just maybe, there is what it means to hope against all hope. – Miguel A. De La Torre, 155-56.*

What can you do? You have a choice: do nothing, or do something that your faith, moral code, or soul tells you to do. May the stories that follow provide you with some consolation and courage.

## The Myth: We Can't Legislate Morality

Consider this a modern “parable.” In southern Illinois in the early 1900s, small towns decided to install traffic lights as automobiles became more popular. However, several farmers thought it was silly and unnecessary. To protest the lights, they would often slow their trucks or cars until there was a red light. Then, they would drive through the intersection. Did that protest reverse the installation of lights? No. What exactly brought about a change in accepting the lights? One must assume a combination of the reports of accidents and the reality of tickets – **facts**.

Consider this sobering account of a medical practice change. In the mid-1800s in Europe, a tragic statistic was the number of healthy young mothers who died in the days following the successful deliveries of their babies. At that time, physicians commonly wiped their hands on their white coats. One of those doctors, Ignaz Semmelweis, a 19th-century Hungarian doctor, is now known as the pioneer of handwashing. He developed the now-basic hygienic practice to stop the spread of infection in 1847. During an experiment in a Vienna hospital's maternity ward, he concluded that the reduction in maternal deaths was due to doctors washing their hands instead of wiping them on their bloody coats. His first report at a medical conference was rejected, and even ridiculed. Sadly, his proposed change led to the loss of his career and his mental breakdown. Conclusion: Another case of facts, while accurate, were rejected for far too long. When is the last time you have seen a doctor with a bloody white coat?

Back to the question: can we legislate morality? Consider this: Morality refers to our behavior toward fellow humans in society. Historically, humans learned that instinctive behavior based on self-interest and selfishness is hurtful overall to society. In an ironic way, it is the same selfishness, but directed to society rather than to individuals, which was recognized by the people of wisdom who were the pioneers of the religions of the world. This, in turn, led to the collective morality that is the basis of laws governing civilized societies.

One of the most successful efforts at legislating morality in the United States occurred in 1964 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Perhaps the biggest impact was the abolishment of “Jim Crow” laws, which had been upheld by the Supreme Court in 1896 (*Plessy v. Ferguson*). The Civil Rights Act specifically prohibits discrimination not only based on race, but also gender, religion, or national origin. The law applies to the workplace, education, and voting.

### Hope

Hope has holes  
in its pockets.  
It leaves little  
crumb trails  
so that we,  
when anxious,  
can follow it.  
Hope's secret  
is it doesn't know  
the direction –  
it knows only  
that all roads  
begin with one  
foot in front  
of the other.

**Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer**

Democracies have deficiencies and defects and are vulnerable in the face of military, financial, and personal power. Legislative guard rails and good will have been shown to be fragile safeguards from authoritarian ideologues and religious extremists. Alert citizens must protect their system from falling prey to other modes. Ergo, look alert!

## Resources

### Organizations and Online Sources

**Americares** is an international medical and health care organization. Their primary focus is on poverty issues. Contact: [www.americares.org](http://www.americares.org). Phone: 800-486-4357.

**Interfaith America.** Chicago-based nonprofit that encourages college-age young adults to be involved in neighborhood improvement projects. Contact: [www.interfaithamerica.org](http://www.interfaithamerica.org) or [info@interfaithamerica.org](mailto:info@interfaithamerica.org). Phone 312-573-8825.

**Project HOPE.** A global health and humanitarian organization that has trained more than one million health workers in more than one hundred countries. 844-349-0188.

### Books and Articles

**De La Torre, Miguel.** *Embracing Hopelessness* (Fortress Press, 2017).

**Patel, Eboo.** *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Beacon Press, 2018).

**Trommer, Rosemerry Wahtola.** "Hope." *All the Honey* (Samara Press, 2023).

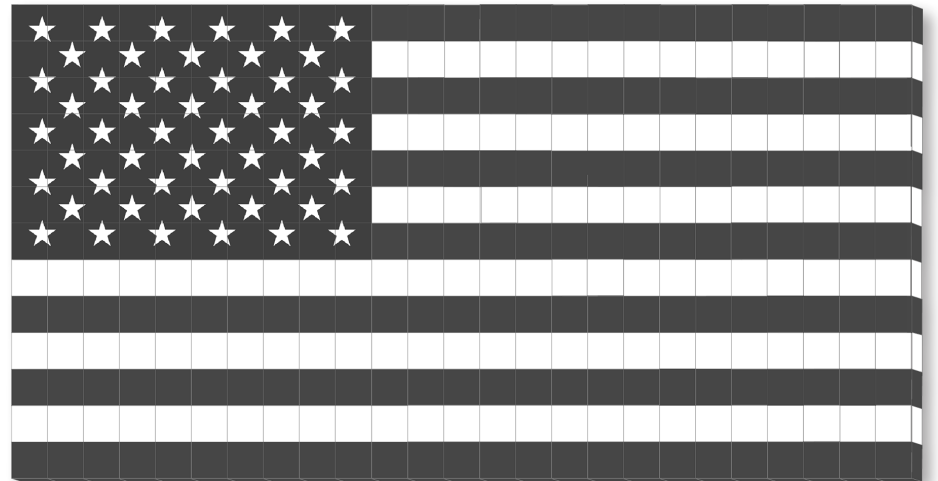
### What can I do?

- Contact Southern Border Cross Coalition, an organization of more than sixty faith communities. [www.southernborders.org](http://www.southernborders.org). for information about volunteer programs.
- Are you losing hope? Contact local mental health assistance agencies or call one of the organizations on the Resources list.

### What can we do?

- Organize a fundraising event for a candidate or project that believes in a better future.
- Support, as volunteers or donors, the work of the Southern Poverty Law Center and its Action Fund. Headquartered in Montgomery, Ala., it can be contacted at 334-956-8200.

# Gratefully



# Epilogue

***“Conversation is a game of circles.”***  
**–Ralph Waldo Emerson**

You have finished the book. May we remind you of the analogy with which we began it? It is of a community “raising” a barn of a neighbor, whose building was destroyed by lightning. Those who participated included relatives and friends, but also those who barely knew the husband-and-wife owners. Later, they remarked that some of their neighbors disagreed with them, politically and religiously. Can you not agree, that American democracy has also been hit by “lightning” events and needs to be raised? Can that image point us to making common good decisions, at the local, state, and federal levels? We must have conversations.

In 1841, Emerson observed that conversations are like a game with circles that bump into each other. First, think of a person blowing soap bubbles. Some bubbles represent our primary beliefs, Others represent family values, tribal loyalty, political preferences, state pride. When bubbles collide, many burst. But some merge. That is our vision. Not always, but hopefully, for the sake of preserving American democracy, we must recognize and then share fundamental rights and the benefits of our unique multiracial, multicultural American democracy. A projection is that by 2043 the United States will have a no-majority country. That is, no white, Black, brown, Asian-American group will have a majority of the American citizenry.

In each chapter, we have offered possible actions that respond to the pleas we have heard that ask what can be done. We hope those “to do’s” will counter the strategies some Americans are employing to divide Americans. As noted in the outcomes, success depends upon citizens knowing basic knowledge about our country’s founding and laws, developing skills to communicate them, expressing their willingness to become involved, and actively engaging.

Easy to say, hard to do. Become involved. We must. To repeat once more, a truth about our system of governance: dissent has always been a part of this

country's legacy. We the people will never be unanimous on every critical issue. To save the nation, there should be healthy debates.

Realistically, some who want fame, fortune, and power, individually and collectively, are willing to do anything to win elections, and then build power as they remain in office. As much as our "to do's" promote civil conversations, we recognize that the "bubbles" that are not willing to change must be confronted. Hateful speech, forgotten or minimal treatment of those in need, ethical malpractices must be identified and opposed.

In short, the four basic freedoms discussed must be preserved, not only to preserve democracy, but to make the world a safer and healthier place for all.

What are the general guidelines that we hope you will observe and pass on to others? They are similar to others from a variety of sources. They include:

- Respect the other person, group, organization.
- Listen actively to the other point of view.
- Focus on the issue(s) and the verifiable facts that both sides have.
- Review what the other position or group offers. Will it improve your relationships? Avoid stereotypes. Don't compare your best to their worst.
- Identify individuals and groups that both sides agree need support or protection.
- Seek to find laws, budgets, projects, that both agree will improve others.
- Support public media outlets that are truth-tellers.
- When others (individuals, organizations, legislators) do not accept the peaceful transfer of power that has been legally confirmed, you must decide whether or not to engage in conversations with them, and to support or oppose them.

## A Final Thought

And as for the reality that Miguel A. De La Torre raised—the hopelessness we face, we offer the perspective of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

*Nothing that is worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by*

*love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.*

Source: **Irony of American History**, 516.

Sincerely, Charles and Dianne

## Authors and Editors



**Charles R. Kniker** is a professor emeritus of education at Iowa State University and former staff member of the State of Iowa Board of Regents and author of multiple books. As an ordained United Church of Christ minister and former president of Eden Seminary in Webster Groves, Missouri,, he has served congregations in six states. His book--*Spirituality that Makes a Difference* (2022) sums up his belief that all are called to engage with loving justice to make the world a more peaceful place.



**Dianne Prichard** recalls that when she was four years old, she had two visions of herself: as a pastor and as a farmer. When she realized she was a girl, the vision was lost to the prevailing culture of the time; however, she retained the traits of pastoring and farming. Both thrive on caring—caring for people, caring for the earth—and what else do we have besides people and earth? She has a penchant for seeing solutions within problems, from making Shakespeare fun (with sword fights and matchmaking) to organizing mask-making volunteers (250 volunteers delivered 11,000 masks during the COVID epidemic) to filing for office at the last minute (and winning) to saving democracy (this book). Like Charles, she served as a teacher (high school) and now serves as a preacher in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

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## Contributors

- **John Pavlovitz** is a minister and blog wizard, whose masterful language, and communication skills challenge all to reexamine the call of our faith perspectives and ethics, so that we act with courage and compassion to live the best of democratic practices and resist acceptance of indifferent and inhumane options. One of John’s blogs is Chapter 23.
- **Miguel A. De La Torre’s** career is a living testimony to what benefits immigrants can bring to American life and whose realism assists us to accept small victories with grim impatience. The theme of Chapter 24 is based on Miguel’s book, *Embracing Hopelessness*, with comments made as a Theologian-in-Residence in Ames, Iowa, in 2023.
- **Ted Kniker**, author of Chapter 22, “Serve!,” is an internationally recognized expert in organizational performance improvement as well as a facilitator, trainer, and business coach. He specializes in helping communities and organizations listen to their stakeholders to identify actionable strategies to achieve excellence and improve the wellness of their customers and employees. He works with public sector and community-based organizations to increase civic engagement and empowerment for ac-

countability and transparency. He spent much of his career supporting and guiding the development of democratic civil societies in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and the Near East.

- **Alexis Kniker** is a researcher and data analyst with a dual degree in psychology and film and media studies. She studies how people think and act in relation to media and how media and information are designed to shape perceptions and actions. In addition, Ms. Kniker has an interest in forensic psychology. A graduate of William & Mary University, she contributed to Chapters 12 and 13.

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- **Beverly Gelwick** (deceased). Professionally, a clinical psychologist. A visionary, her activist life included many marches and protests, and in her last years, numerous phone calls to elected officials.

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Charles Kniker appreciated his contact with Robert Nash and was given permission to use the description for the model for moral conversations in *Spirituality That Makes a Difference*.