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# A House Divided

**What Would We Have to Give Up to Get the Political System We Want?**



# One Way to Hold a Deliberative Forum

**1.**

**Review ground rules.  
Introduce the issue to be deliberated.**

**2.**

**Ask people to describe how the issue has affected them or their families.**

**3.**

**Consider each option one at a time.  
Allow equal time for each.  
What is attractive?  
What about the drawbacks?**

**4.**

**Review the conversation as a group. What areas of common ground were apparent?  
Just as important: What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?**

## Ground Rules for a Forum

- **Focus on the options.**
- **All options should be considered fairly.**
- **No one or two individuals should dominate.**
- **Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.**
- **Help the moderator keep the conversation on track.**
- **Everyone is encouraged to participate.**
- **Listen to each other.**

# A House Divided

## What Would We Have to Give Up to Get the Political System We Want?



EVERY AMERICAN IS AFFECTED by the divisions and outrage that prevent us from making progress on urgent problems. This issue guide is designed to help people deliberate together about how we should approach the issue.

These are difficult questions, and there are no easy answers:

- **Should we** require more accurate, respectful discussion in the media and online, or would that stifle free speech?
- **Should we** reform politics and government to encourage compromise, or will that mean giving up on the changes we really need and want?
- **Should local communities** set policies in areas like health care and the environment, or would that risk the progress we've made and make further progress nearly impossible?
- **Should we** crack down on money in politics, or will people just find new ways to evade the rules?

# Introduction

WE ARE HAVING TROUBLE making important decisions and solving problems in the United States. Americans find it harder and harder to even talk with one another, and it is damaging in multiple ways:

*Major problems, such as the national debt, immigration, health care, and Social Security get kicked down the road again and again.* The US national debt, for example, rose above \$21 trillion in 2018. The inability of policymakers to agree on annual budgets has routinely led to government shutdowns. Yet we appear unable to confront these or many other urgent problems.

*Too few Americans vote or participate in public life.* The most recent numbers show that people in many other developed countries vote at higher rates than Americans, many of them much higher. While recent national elections generated interest, local election turnout is generally low. There are also indications, according to a 2018 study from the University of Maryland, that the rate of volunteering has declined.

## US Voter Turnout Low Compared to Other Countries

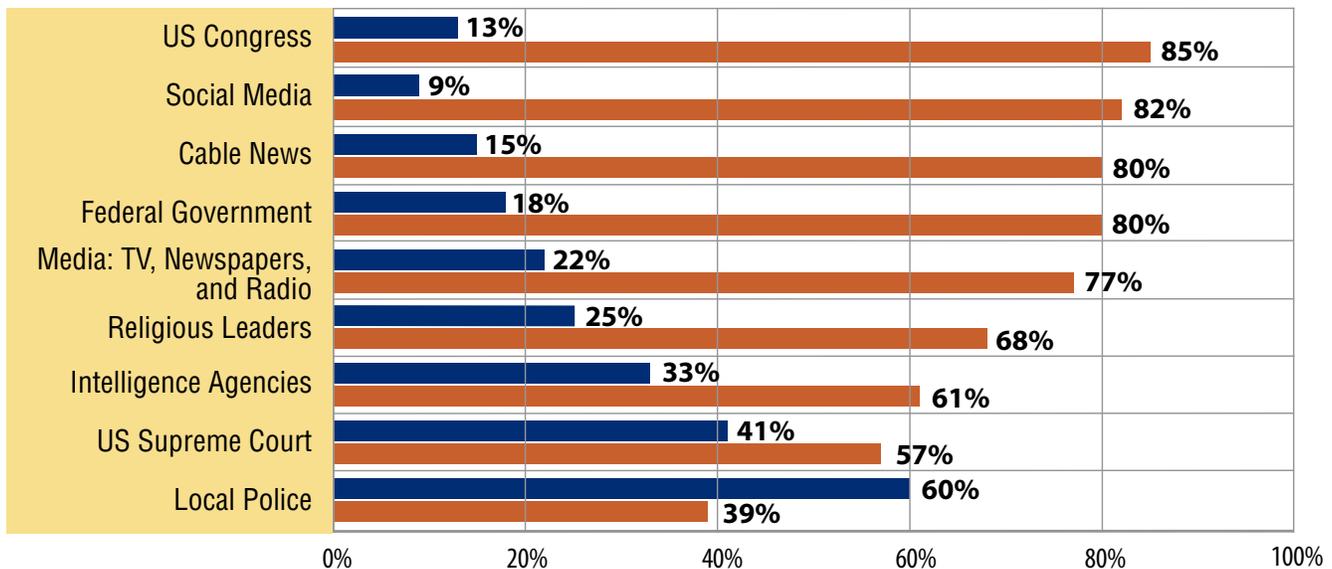
● % of voting-age population that voted in most recent elections



Source: Pew Research Center, 2018

## Americans Have Low Confidence in Nearly All Institutions

■ % Great Deal/Quite a Lot   ■ % Some/Very Little



Source: The Democracy Project, democracyprojectreport.org, 2018

*We have lost confidence in our national institutions.* A survey by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center, in December 2017, found that only 18 percent of Americans said they trusted the government in Washington to do what’s right “just about always” or “most of the time,” a drastic decrease from even 15 years ago.

“American politics is a bicycle with a rusty chain, flat tires, and no brakes,” said Steve Chapman in the *Chicago Tribune*. “It’s broken, and it’s not taking any of us where we want to go.”

Perhaps equally disturbing to many people is that, rather than working together to solve problems, we often seem to be simply shouting at one another. It has produced an atmosphere in which political differences have even led to acts of violence.

How did we get here? There are many possible reasons. The internet has unleashed a torrent of anonymous rage that has spilled over into public life. More money than ever before is flooding into political campaigns. Round-the-clock cable coverage demands constant drama to fuel ratings.

**“American politics is a bicycle with a rusty chain, flat tires, and no brakes. It’s broken, and it’s not taking any of us where we want to go.”**

—Steve Chapman, *the Chicago Tribune*



*Protesters march on the anniversary of the deadly Charlottesville demonstration in 2017 in which Heather Heyer was killed.*

While people may differ over the causes, they agree on the effect: dysfunction. Six in ten Americans say “significant changes” are needed in the United States government, according to Pew Research. And an AP-NORC survey found that just 10 percent of Americans say they have a great deal of confidence in the political system overall; 38 percent say they have hardly any.

What should we do to get the political system we want? What should we do to revive our ability to work together on the most urgent problems? What are we willing to give up in order to do so?

This issue guide presents three options for deliberation about difficult problems for which there are no perfect solutions. Each option offers advantages as well as risks. And each reflects different ways of understanding what is at stake, forcing us to think about what matters most to us.

The research involved in developing this guide included interviews and conversations with Americans from all walks

of life, as well as surveys of nonpartisan public opinion research, subject-matter scans, and reviews of initial drafts by people with direct experience with the subject.



# Option 1: Reduce Dangerous, Toxic Talk



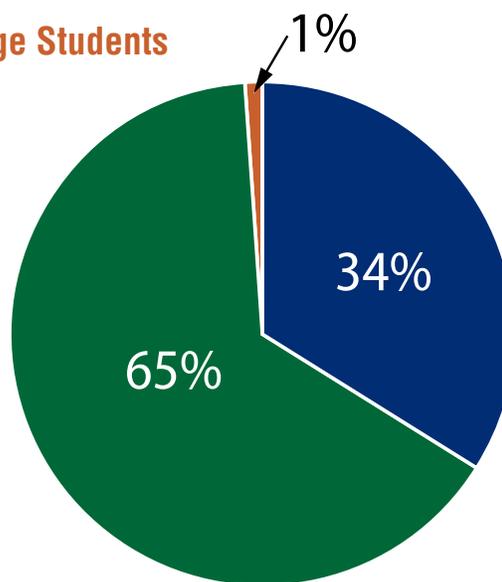
WATCHING CABLE TELEVISION SHOWS or scrolling through web pages, it does not take long to find examples of Americans calling each other the worst possible names or making accusations that once would have shocked us but now merely join the torrent of rage. And it is not just intemperate talk; much of it is premeditated. Political candidates have accused their opponents of all sorts of things—connections to terrorists, for example—without any basis in fact.

If we want to solve pressing problems such as the national debt and Social Security, we should stop rewarding outrage and begin talking to each other like human beings again, according to this option. A 2018 study by the Pew Research Center found that

## Most Say It Is More Important to Expose College Students to Diverse Views, Even If Offensive

If you had to choose, is it more important for colleges . . .

- . . . to expose students to all types of viewpoints, even if they are offensive or biased against certain groups.
- . . . to prohibit offensive speech on campus that is biased against certain groups.
- . . . Don't know/No answer



Source: Cato Institute: Free Speech & Tolerance Survey, 2017

in just two years, more people on both ends of the political spectrum had come to view their counterparts as holding extreme views.

“It’s not that [television] hosts simply disagree with their opponents’ policies; their opponents are bad people,” said Tufts University professor Sarah Sobieraj, who, along with her colleague Jeffrey M. Berry, examined the problem in *The Outrage Industry*. “They’re portrayed as inept, manipulative, dangerous.”

Many also say there is too much emphasis on “political correctness.” If a public figure—politician, celebrity, business leader—says something slightly out of line, commentators and journalists pounce on it. Bad jokes or a reference to the wrong historical figure can result in the shredding of reputations and careers within days or even hours.

News networks and other media have increasingly taken partisan stances, freely mixing news, opinion, and entertainment, and the result is that viewers have trouble knowing whom or what to believe. Many of us choose to avoid news sources or even people with whom we disagree, building a “bubble” of like-minded people and voices around ourselves.

Some of us even move to places where others will agree with us, walling off those who don’t think as we do.

This option holds that we should put a stop to unfounded accusations and compel people to either back up their charges or not make them at all. Social media companies should vigorously enforce rules that prohibit the use of slurs against others and threats of physical violence. No one should be allowed to use such platforms for dangerous ends.

A key part of this option is maintaining balance: differing views should be aired not just on another network or in some other political bubble; they should be presented side by side. Whether on a news show or a college campus, people should have the opportunity to hear all views in ways that allow them to make reasoned judgments.

**A Primary Drawback of This Option:** *This gives media and internet decision-makers enormous power to determine what people can say about each other or about public issues. Who gets to decide what’s “outrageous” and what’s not?*



## What We Should Do

### Kick Abusive People Off Social Media

Intrusive data mining, trolls, hate speech—in 2018, a great many of the internet’s problems seemed to be landing at Facebook’s door. The ubiquitous social media platform moved to the center of the debate over how Americans relate to one another online.

But Facebook was not the only area of concern. Twitter, YouTube, and other apps became the starting points for horrifying campaigns of intimidation, in some cases forcing people to go into hiding. Often these online and offline assaults revolved around politics.

“People are mean online, and bullying, harassment, and mob behavior make online spaces unusable for many people,” wrote Ethan Zuckerman, director of the Center for Civic Media at MIT, in the *Atlantic*.

This option maintains that platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and others should be swift and decisive in removing

users who promote violence or aim slurs at other people. They have contributed significantly to the toxic atmosphere that is paralyzing the democratic process. And everyone using social media should stop “liking” or sharing posts that contain lies or abusive language.

Facebook and Twitter published new community standards and began enforcing them in 2018. Although both companies were criticized later for delays in taking down pages and banning users in violation of its standards, it was a step forward and, according to this option, one that all social media platforms should emulate and enforce.

### Require Opposing Views on Television

For 40 years, the federal government required television and radio stations to provide airtime for discussing public issues and to present contrasting views on those issues. In 1987, the Federal Communications Commission ended the



*Employees work inside Facebook’s new “elections integrity war room” as part of the company’s effort to deal with public concern about fake accounts, misinformation, and foreign interference.*



policy, called the “Fairness Doctrine.” This option holds that the rule should be reinstated either by the FCC or by an act of Congress.

The effect of dropping the rule has been to allow partisan channels, both on television and radio, where people hear only one take on an issue. Worse, these views are sometimes built on inaccurate reporting, further distorting what listeners hear. Reimposing the Fairness Doctrine would set responsible standards for discussion of public issues that could change the tone of television and radio shows.

The rule was not intended to benefit any particular political viewpoint since it required broadcasters to air all sides of a public issue. The Supreme Court upheld the rule in 1969 and renewed that support in 1984 but, at that time, the justices said only that the rule could be applied, not that it must be.

This option says that the original rule should be reinstated. There is no legal obstacle to doing so. As recently as 2018, members of Congress discussed bringing back the Fairness Doctrine, and some spoke in support of it, though no legislation emerged.

### **Take Steps Against False Advertising**

Political ads have long played fast and loose with facts about candidates. In the 2018 elections, many of these ads descended into outright lies. One attack ad tried to link a candidate to terrorism, one accused an opponent of being a lobbyist while he was serving in Congress, and another edited a TV station’s “fact check” to make it appear it had reached the opposite conclusion.

The situation is even worse on social media, which are

not subject to the same rules as broadcast stations. It has often been impossible for people to know who created an ad. We know now that some ads on the internet were spread by Russians trying to disrupt US elections.

It is intolerable that voters can be lied to in advertising without recourse, according to this option. We should compel both traditional media and social media to ensure that ads are accurate. One way to do this is by making the media liable for damages when ads are proven to be false.

### **Protect Freedom of Speech on Campuses**

Too many college campuses have become places where uncomfortable or unpopular ideas are forbidden, according to this option. Professors are expected to provide “trigger warnings” for anything that might offend someone, and once-trivial remarks are viewed as aggressive.

“Current college students are often ambivalent, or even hostile, to the idea of free speech on campus,” wrote Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the law school at University of California-Berkeley, in the online magazine *Vox*. “At Berkeley and elsewhere, it is now often students and faculty working to ban speakers with controversial views, while campus officials are steadfastly protecting freedom of expression.”

While students often mean well—they want to protect minorities and others from hurtful speech—the effect is potentially disastrous. A vibrant democracy relies on free expression, especially of disagreeable ideas, and limiting the expression of those ideas only deepens the divides among Americans.

Young people should fully learn about the responsibilities that come with their vital role in democracy.



## Trade-Offs and Downsides

- These changes would give media and internet companies enormous power to curtail angry, outrageous speech. But sometimes anger and outrage are justified and even vital to our democracy. Do we really want to muzzle people in the name of “civility”?
- This allows internet giants like Google and Facebook to decide what is “outrageous.” Should we give this power to private, corporate entities whose top priority is their own bottom line?
- Restoring free speech to campuses sounds sensible, but students can’t learn and thrive in an atmosphere where they feel undermined and threatened by harmful rhetoric.



### Questions for deliberation . . .

- 1 Curtailing free speech harms our democracy. But doesn't abusive, dishonest political rhetoric do the same thing when it drives people away from politics? What's the right balance here?
- 2 The “outrage industry” continues because it's popular—it boosts TV ratings and increases clicks online. Is there any practical way to encourage users to behave more responsibly?
- 3 People with all kinds of political views engage in name-calling and abusive behavior. Do we object only when it's someone with whom we disagree?

# Option 2: Make Fairer Rules for Politics and Follow Them



THE CURRENT POLITICAL SYSTEM is not working for us because it is tilted toward those with money and influence who use the rules for their own benefit, this option says. The most urgent national problems are not being addressed because it is to the advantage of special interests not to do so. There are more forces driving political officials to the extremes than to the middle.

Too many of our election laws have been written to benefit the most powerful interests. Rules for voting are often cumbersome and create obstacles for voters. The boundaries of many districts are drawn for political advantage rather than for fair and competitive elections.

*Some 1,000 lobbyists, business owners, and politicians wait in Trenton, New Jersey, to board a Washington, DC-bound train in February 2017. The state Chamber of Commerce's 80th annual trip was nicknamed the "Walk to Washington" because riders generally pace the train's corridors schmoozing and handing out business cards.*



"Our political system has evolved to a point where those most likely to forge consensus are being winnowed out," wrote Charles E. Cook Jr. in the *National Journal*. "The most ideological and intransigent politicians tend to come from safe states and districts, and tend to be the least predisposed to work out a compromise."

Officeholders with different views on how we should best move forward need to work together on solutions. But a number of forces at work in our political system today are making that difficult.

First, the flood of money into campaigns and lobbying gives too much power to special interests. Candidates in the 2016 elections for president and Congress spent a combined \$6.5 billion dollars, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics. The group also calculated that 11,551 lobbyists in Washington spent a total of \$3.4 billion in 2017 alone.

That money buys them access most Americans do not have. During debate over the sweeping tax bill of 2017, for instance, legislators working most closely with the bill had a golden opportunity to raise money for their reelection campaigns, and they made the most of it.

"Fundraisers held by members of the conference committee during the tax reform debate were hot tickets for tax lobbyists, who eagerly forked over a few hundred—or a few thousand—dollars for face time with lawmakers who controlled the fate of valued loopholes," the *New York Times* reported.

Another factor standing in the way of working out differences is that candidates play to their "bases" rather than appealing to a broader range of people. Satisfying the

base—that core of most loyal, most passionate voters—raises more money and works best for the primaries, thus producing more extreme candidates.

The people "want change, and they keep putting outsiders in to bring about the change," said Ohio Governor John Kasich. "Then the change doesn't come . . . because we're putting people in that don't understand compromise."

Both major political parties redraw election districts to their advantage, which means more partisanship in Washington. Elected officials leave office and join multimillion dollar lobbying firms, giving their clients access and power not available to ordinary people.

According to this option, it is time to reduce the power of money in politics, correct the flaws in our system that reward such extreme partisanship, and restore the tradition of compromise that has long served this nation well.

**A Primary Drawback of This Option:** *This may do too much to limit the ability of Americans to fight for their principles and give too much power to those who don't seem to care enough to vote and participate. This option focuses on compromise and changing the rules, but doesn't our system need more fundamental changes?*





making voting more difficult. Most officials nationwide long ago settled on basic processes that screen out potential fraud, and there is no need for additional laws, regulations, or restrictions.

### **Draw Fairer and More Competitive Election Districts**

In most states, elected officials draw the election districts. But too often, they draw district lines to help their own party and hurt the other party, sometimes drastically. “Gerrymandering,” as it has been called since 1812, usually aims to keep incumbents safe. To do so, politicians create districts based not on geography or population, but on where certain groups of voters live. The result is that districts bear no relationship to the real world and amplify the most partisan voices by grouping such voters together. This causes candidates to run on ever more extreme positions, as they try to please their party’s base.

Every state should turn over its redistricting to a non-partisan commission that can create fair, common-sense districts, according to this option. People would then be more likely to have real choices, and lawmakers with mixed electorates would be more motivated to act in a bipartisan way.

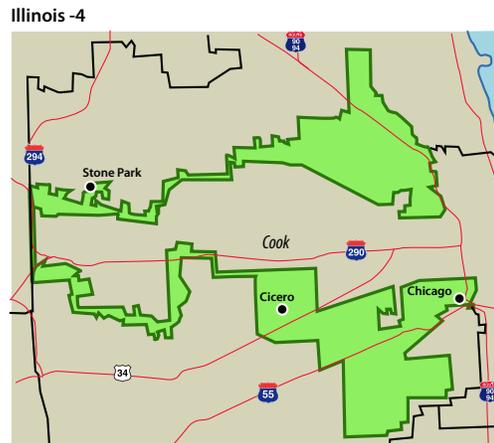
In Pennsylvania, in 2018, the state Supreme Court was ultimately compelled to take on the redistricting itself after a successful lawsuit by the League of Women Voters. Voters in other states also have filed lawsuits and created ballot initiatives to create fair redistricting processes, but according to this option, there is still a long way to go.

### **Limit Campaign Spending**

Spending on political campaigns has skyrocketed in recent decades, especially money spent by political action committees and so-called “super PACs” that spend money on behalf of candidates without giving any directly to them. Spending in the 2018 congressional campaign was estimated at more than \$5 billion, the most ever spent, and five of the House races became the most expensive individual contests to date, at more than \$30 million each.

### **One of the Top Ten Most Gerrymandered Congressional Districts in the United States**

This congressional district was designed to incorporate the two large Hispanic neighborhoods in the Chicago area. It is connected on the left by the unoccupied berm of Interstate 294.



Source: PJ Media

This means officeholders now spend ever-larger amounts of time simply raising money for the next election, creating serious questions in many people’s minds about the corrupting influence of all that cash.

Much of this campaign spending was unleashed by a single Supreme Court decision in 2010 called Citizens United, which said that legal limits on giving by corporations and other entities violated the First Amendment. This option holds that, in order to restore those limits, we should consider an amendment to the Constitution.

“Today, most lobbyists are engaged in a system of bribery but it’s the *legal* kind, the kind that runs rampant in the corridors of Washington,” said Jimmy Williams, a former lobbyist, in an article in *Vox*.

This option holds that we should do everything possible to reduce the influence of money on legislators, including considering the use of public money to finance campaigns, shortening the duration of political campaigns, and sharply reducing the amounts that can be donated and spent on them.



## Trade-Offs and Downsides

- This makes voting more like a choice than the civic duty it is. Voter requirements protect us against voter fraud and manipulation.
- Strong, uncompromising stands on issues like slavery and civil rights have pushed this country forward. This option glorifies a wheeling-and-dealing approach.
- In some legislative districts, minority groups would lose power.
- This would limit the ability of all kinds of groups and donors to participate, including those fighting for causes and candidates we ourselves support.



## Questions for deliberation . . .

- 1 Are the requirements for voting really so burdensome? Isn't it reasonable to expect people to identify themselves and invest a little effort in order to vote?
- 2 Some of the nation's worst decisions were the result of compromise, notably the acceptance of slavery by the Founding Fathers. Would more compromise help our country, or would it move us further away from doing what's right?
- 3 Some people think we should publicly finance political campaigns. What sacrifices, such as higher taxes, would each of us be willing to make if it would reduce the influence of big money on politics?

# Option 3: Take Control and Make Decisions Closer to Home



EVEN AS PEOPLE HAVE LOST THEIR TRUST IN THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT, they continue to hold high opinions of their state and local governments. There are good reasons for that—local government is more responsive and less partisan and generally has to maintain a balanced budget.

The problem, according to this option, is that our most important decisions are being made too far away from home, and when the national debate is embroiled in political infighting, pressing national issues remain unresolved. We have placed too much power in the hands of a remote national government, which often doesn't understand local conditions and imposes requirements and standards that frequently make no sense for local communities.

A study by the Pew Research Center in 2018 found that 67 percent of Americans had a “very” or “mostly favorable” view of their local government, compared to just 35 percent with a favorable view of the federal government.

“The issue here is not the irrelevance or intrinsic evil of government itself, but rather addressing society’s primary challenges,” wrote Joel Kotkin and Ryan Streater in “Localism in America,” a report for the American Enterprise Institute. “Are they best addressed from the top or by a shift of responsibility to local governing agencies, neighborhoods, and families?”

“Instead of always or only seeking to fix municipal issues through national policy, localism suggests that communities can and should find solutions to their own particular problems, within their own particular contexts,” wrote Gracy Olmstead in the *New York Times*. “The best walkability solutions for Washington, D.C., may not work in my town. Urban revitalization efforts in Detroit will need to look different from those efforts employed in rural Iowa.”

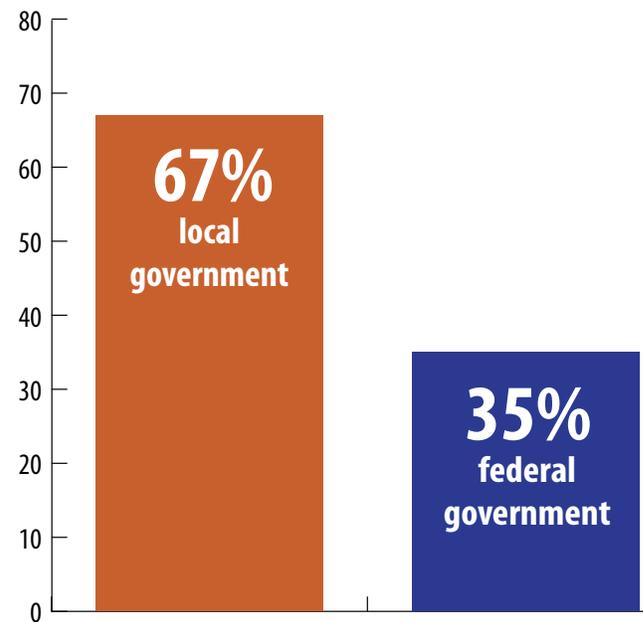
Many of these issues, including energy, transportation, infrastructure, and immigration, can be addressed at least in part by states, counties, and cities. Communities across the nation, frustrated by inaction in Washington, already are moving to deal with problems they are familiar with at the ground level. It is more effective and efficient to drive across town or walk across the street to talk with someone about a problem than trying to reach someone in Washington, DC.

In Wyoming, for example, the state has made it possible for vendors at farmers markets to sell local products directly to shoppers without requiring the permitting and inspection procedures imposed on most food sales. Montgomery County, MD, St. Paul, MN, and a host of other cities and counties have raised their minimum wages rather than waiting for the federal government to do it.

At the local level, cities and counties can work directly with neighborhood organizations and nonprofits to address issues in a nonpartisan way. The Central Indiana Corporate Partnership, for instance, does not allow elected officials to

## Government Seen Working Better Locally Than Nationally

Percentage of Americans with very or mostly favorable opinion



Source: Pew Research Center, 2018

join and takes no public dollars; yet its efforts have helped attract numerous companies to the area, helped workers learn skills to connect with new employers, and raised the regional standard of living.

It’s time to put decision-making back in the hands of people who live and work closely together, share goals and values, and can act quickly.

### A Primary Drawback of This Option:

This will result in different protections and standards across the country and produce a patchwork of rules on major national challenges such as infrastructure, environmental protection, and immigration. We are one country. Don’t we need a united approach to urgent problems rather than a piecemeal one?



## What We Should Do

### Let Local Communities Set Their Own Rules

The problems that towns and cities face on issues like the environment, education, and transportation, to name a few, look very different in Montana from the way they look in Connecticut. Yet for the most part we have one-size-fits-all regulations that frequently impose unnecessary requirements.

For instance, many small farmers and ranchers in the “farm to table” movement want to use nearby, locally inspected slaughterhouses, but the law requires anyone selling to the public to use federally inspected processing facilities, typically farther away and more expensive, *McClatchy News* reported. A bill to exempt small meat producers stalled in committee in the 2018 Congress.

This option holds that we should allow counties and towns more leeway in setting such standards. People in each region know how to deal with their problems better than bureaucrats in Washington, DC, do.

According to this option, Congress should restore much more power to local and state governments, and local officials should not be shy about expanding their authority as much as possible.

### Give Funds to States without Restrictions

In 2017, the federal government gave states about \$350 billion for Medicaid and \$72 billion for education—to name just two programs—but that money comes with significant restrictions. There are federal limits on who gets Medicaid money and how money can be spent on schools.

Those limitations should be eliminated entirely, according to this option. Each state knows what its needs are and how best to meet them. As long as the dollars are being spent on the general purpose for which they were intended, state legislators should set the limits that work best for each state.

This has been done in the past with what are called “block grants.” This option would restore and expand that idea to give state and local governments more authority to act.

### Rely More on Community Groups

After Hurricane Michael struck the Gulf Coast in 2018, the regional food bank, Feeding the Gulf Coast, provided 1.3 million meals to people affected by the storm. The nonprofit routinely distributes 19 million meals every year, and it is only one of more than 200 locally funded and largely volunteer-staffed food banks nationwide.

*The Charlotte Hornets attend a food drive to provide relief to victims of Hurricane Florence in September 2018 in Charlotte, North Carolina, at Second Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina.*





Governments should turn more often to such community groups to address problems, according to this option. Through the efforts of individuals, businesses, and nonprofits, these groups can better harness community resources, according to this option.

Food banks, for instance, have a ripple effect on their communities that extends beyond alleviating hunger, a 2018 study by Western Washington University found. The study estimated that local food banks contributed at least \$1.3 million to the area economy and helped reduce unemployment as well.

### **Give Back Control of Schools**

Most K-12 school funding comes from local property taxes. According to this option, the people supporting the schools should have the most say in what goes on there.

Local school boards ought to provide most of the direction for K-12 education, which is critically important to the future well-being and prosperity of every community, yet

these boards labor under far too much federal control. A prime example is the role the federal government played in imposing standardized testing on school systems nationwide, an emphasis many local and national educators now feel was a mistake.

“Parents, students and public education advocates have been telling policymakers for years about the many problems with excessive high-stakes standardized testing,” wrote Valerie Strauss in the *Washington Post*.

School districts in New Hampshire and other states are opting out of some of those requirements, replacing them with individual student assessments prepared by teachers. According to this option, that is exactly where such decisions should be made.

This might mean more relaxed standards in some areas and more stringent ones in others. But it also would be far easier for anyone with criticisms or suggestions to reach school board members and administrators who can actually do something about it.

*High school senior Emily Tashea (right) joins a protest at the state capitol in Denver, in 2015, to speak out against the then-current standardized testing in Colorado. As another senior said, the needs and abilities of students would be better served if the tests were written by teachers and professionals that have experience with students and their educational needs.*



©Craig F. Walker/The Denver Post/Getty Images



## Trade-Offs and Downsides

- We won't make progress on the environment, energy, or transportation with a patchwork of rules that allow each state to go its own way.
- Essential needs such as food, shelter, a good education, and health care should be available to all, no matter where they live.
- Vulnerable Americans could suffer if they live in communities that do not have the resources or willingness to take on these problems.
- Federal grants help schools with low-income students, and some communities may have to raise property taxes to close the gap.



## Questions for deliberation . . .

- 1 This option assumes that local decisions will be better decisions. But what will happen to people living in communities where local governments are biased or inept or corrupt?
- 2 What will happen to our country in 20 or 30 years if citizens focus mainly on local problems and issues? Isn't this approach like giving up on our national government?
- 3 This option would shift more problem-solving responsibility to local communities. What role do each of us play in our neighborhoods and cities to make that work?

# Closing Reflections

ACTING ON THE IDEAS AND PROPOSALS PRESENTED HERE would bring about changes that affect all of us across the political spectrum. It is important to think carefully about what matters most to us and what kinds of decisions and actions will enable us to move forward on the urgent problems facing our nation.

Before ending your forum, take some time to revisit some of the central questions this issue guide raises:

- Should we require more accurate, respectful discussion in the media and online, or would that stifle free speech?
- Should we reform politics and government to encourage compromise, or would that mean giving up on the changes we really need and want?
- Should local communities set policies in areas like health care and the environment, or would that risk the progress we've made and make further progress nearly impossible?
- Should we crack down on money in politics, or would people just find new ways to evade the rules?

Some important questions to consider: Where do we agree? Where do we need to talk more? From whom else should we hear? What more do we need to know? How do the ideas and options in this guide affect what we do as individuals, as members of our communities, and as citizens and residents in the United States as a whole?



# Summary

## Option 1:

### Reduce dangerous, toxic talk.

**The problem is that the way we talk is poisoning public life. The “outrage industry” rewards people for saying and doing the most extreme things.** Public figures vie for attention on TV and online. Fringe groups feel empowered to spread their hate and conspiracy theories. The lines between news, opinion, and entertainment are erased. We don’t know whom to believe anymore. And if people say the “wrong thing,” they are attacked because they were not “politically correct.” News networks and social media must do much more to control hate speech. We need to stop rewarding outrage and bring back common sense.

#### A Primary Drawback

*This gives media and internet decision-makers enormous power to determine what people can say about each other or about public issues. Who gets to decide what’s “outrageous” and what’s not?*

#### POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Facebook and other social media platforms and internet service providers should kick out users who use slurs or profanity or threaten physical violence.

Require all television networks to provide opposing views on controversial issues.

Make websites and television stations liable for allowing ads that make unproven or false charges about political candidates.

Protect freedom of speech on college campuses by protecting professors, students, and speakers who espouse unpopular or “politically incorrect” views.

What else?

#### DRAWBACKS

Internet companies could become the “language police,” threatening people’s right to express themselves freely.

This reduces complex debates to “pro” and “con” voices and means that important voices may never be heard.

This would unleash a flood of lawsuits from every frustrated politician.

Students can’t learn and thrive in a disrespectful atmosphere where they feel threatened and undermined.

The trade-off?

# Summary

## Option 2:

### Make fairer rules for politics and follow them.

The problem is that wealthy, powerful special interests game the political system, making it impossible to find compromise. Candidates play to their bases rather than trying to reach a broader range of people. The flood of money into campaigns and lobbying gives too much power to special interests. The major political parties redraw election districts to their advantage, which means more partisanship in Washington, DC. Elected officials leave Congress and join multimillion dollar lobbying firms, giving their clients access and power not available to ordinary people. It's time to reduce the power of money in politics, correct the flaws in our system that reward such extreme partisanship, and restore the tradition of compromise that has served this nation well in the past.

#### A Primary Drawback

*This may do too much to limit the ability of Americans to fight for their principles and give too much power to those who don't seem to care enough to vote and participate. This option focuses on compromise and changing the rules, but doesn't our system need more fundamental changes?*

#### POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Remove the burdensome registration and scheduling barriers that make voting difficult for so many Americans. Too many people are being shut out.

Revise the 1965 Voting Rights Act to forbid new laws or requirements that could make it harder for minorities or poor people to vote.

Create nonpartisan commissions to draw election districts based on population patterns so politicians don't design them to favor their own party.

Strictly limit how much outside groups and individuals can contribute to candidates and PACs, even by Constitutional amendment if necessary.

What else?

#### DRAWBACKS

This makes voting more like a choice than the duty it is. These requirements protect us against voter fraud and manipulation.

Limiting requirements like showing a photo ID could leave the voting system vulnerable to manipulation or fraud.

In some legislative districts, minority groups would lose power.

This would limit the ability of all kinds of groups and donors to participate, including those fighting for causes and candidates we ourselves support.

The trade-off?

# Summary

## Option 3:

**Take control and make decisions closer to home.**

**The problem is that our most important decisions are being made too far away from home.** And when the national government is embroiled in political infighting, problems go unsolved. It's time to put decision-making back in the hands of people who live and work closely together, share goals and values, and can act quickly. Communities across the nation, frustrated by inaction in Washington, already are moving to address problems they're familiar with at the ground level.

### A Primary Drawback

*This will result in different protections and standards across the country and produce a patchwork of rules on major national challenges such as infrastructure, environmental protection, and immigration. We are one country. Don't we need a united approach to urgent problems rather than a piecemeal one?*

### POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Dramatically reduce cumbersome federal regulations on the environment, energy, and transportation. Local residents have a much better understanding of what their communities need.

Give states money without restrictions for major federal programs such as Medicaid and education so states can adapt them to fit their own needs.

Local governments should rely much more on community groups, organizations, and churches to address issues like crime, health, and welfare.

Return full control and funding of K-12 public education to local communities and the states so residents can determine what's best for their own children.

What else?

### DRAWBACKS

We will never get improvements in the environment, energy, and transportation with individual states going every which way.

Basics such as food, shelter, high-quality education, and essential health care should be available to all Americans, no matter where they live. This would turn these decisions over to local politicians.

Vulnerable Americans could suffer in communities that do not have the resources or willingness to take on these problems.

Federal grants help schools with low-income students, and some communities may have to raise property taxes to close the gap.

The trade-off?

## The National Issues Forums

The National Issues Forums (NIF) is a network of organizations that bring together citizens around the nation to talk about pressing social and political issues of the day. Thousands of community organizations, including schools, libraries, churches, civic groups, and others, have held forums designed to give people a public voice in the affairs of their communities and their nation.

Forum participants engage in deliberation, which is simply weighing options for action against things held commonly valuable. This calls upon them to listen respectfully to others, sort out their views in terms of what they most value, consider courses of action and their disadvantages, and seek to identify actionable areas of common ground.

Issue guides like this one are designed to frame and support these conversations. They present varying perspectives on the issue at hand, suggest actions to address identified problems, and note the trade-offs of taking those actions to remind participants that all solutions have costs as well as benefits.

In this way, forum participants move from holding individual opinions to making collective choices as members of a community—the kinds of choices from which public policy may be forged or public action may be taken at community as well as national levels.

## Forum Questionnaire

If you participated in this forum, please fill out a questionnaire, which is included in this issue guide or can be accessed online at [www.nifi.org/questionnaires](http://www.nifi.org/questionnaires). If you are filling out the enclosed questionnaire, please return the completed form to your moderator or to the National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

If you moderated this forum, please fill out a Moderator Response sheet, which is online at [www.nifi.org/questionnaires](http://www.nifi.org/questionnaires).

### **Other Topics and Ordering Information**

Recent topics in this series include the opioid epidemic, immigration, safety and justice, economic security, energy, and end-of-life issues.

For more information, please visit [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).

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*A House Divided: What Would We Have to Give Up to Get the Political System We Want?*

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ISBN: 978-1-946206-42-8

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