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Weekend Roundup: When I Believe It, I'll See It

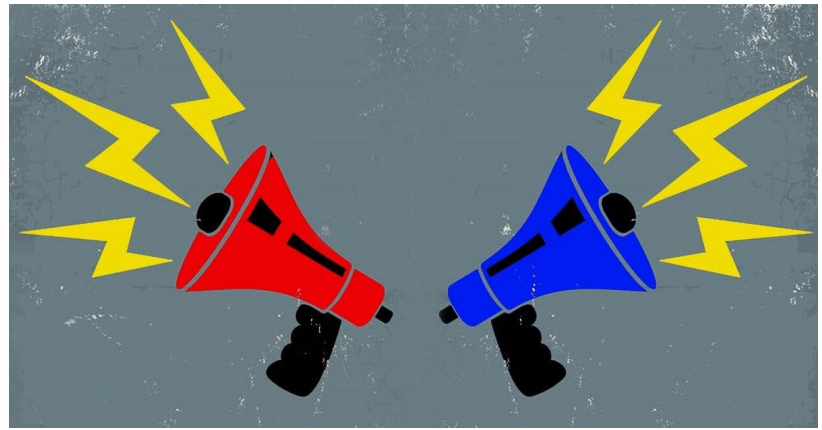
Absent impartial practices and institutions outside the ballot box, democracy can't work.

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The current impeachment drama in the United States, not unlike the Brexit chaos in the United Kingdom, reveals the depths of decay into which the institutions of the world's leading democracies have fallen. Instead of even remotely reasoned debate, what we are witnessing is a battle of partisan ploy and counter-ploy that only deepens polarization. The timeworn adage of sane discourse that in the end bowed to evidence-based facts — “when I see it I'll believe it” — has been turned on its head. Now, ideological interpretation precedes facts. “When I believe it I'll see it” has become the new norm.



All out partisanship destroys the possibility of democracy.

This state of affairs is deeper than a political or even constitutional crisis. It is an epistemic crisis — that is, about the very validity of knowledge and how it is established.

“Belief in the corruptibility of all institutions leads to a dead end of universal distrust,” the political scientist [Francis Fukuyama](#) has said. “American democracy, all democracy, will not survive a lack of belief in the impartiality of institutions; instead, partisan political combat will come to pervade every aspect of life.” And so it has.

The overarching challenge for democracies, therefore, is not just about changing teams in the next election or terms in the next referendum. It is about mending the breach of distrust between the institutions of self-government and the public through reestablishing the trusted impartiality of institutions that enable the reasoned competition of plural ideas and interests. Deep democracy is less about elections than about these practices that take place outside the ballot box.

As the political philosopher Philip Pettit put it at a recent Berggruen Institute conference: “The need for participants in public discussion to accept the constraint of invoking only reasons accepted as relevant on all sides (that is, not your self-interest alone) is a special case of the general need for people in a democracy to abide by the rules that allow them to compete with one another for victory. Indeed, this constraint may be the rule that is most fundamental to the possibility of democracy. If and only if it is accepted can there be a hope of people finding a common framework under which to pursue their competitive, political ends in a peaceful way.”

One way to start down the path of restoring the constraint of common reason to democratic politics is by establishing platforms for citizens themselves to deliberate the issues in islands of good faith and will insulated from the hothouse of electoral politics where partisans seek advantage by any means necessary as they vie for power.

Recently, just such an exercise took place outside Dallas, Texas in a project called [America in One Room](#) that was organized by the Stanford political scientists [Jim Fishkin and Larry Diamond](#) along with the farsighted network of young social entrepreneurs, [Helena](#), and the University of Chicago research institution [NORC](#).

“As the presidential primaries approach and a new impeachment crisis looms, America seems to be careening toward a doubling down of our partisan polarization,” Fishkin and Diamond write. “But are our divisions really so entrenched and unbridgeable? What if we had civil and evidence-based dialogue across our great divides of party, ideology and identity?” they ask.

As they describe it, a scientific sample of 523 registered voters from around the country gathered over a weekend in September where “diverse small group discussions facilitated by moderators featured experts and presidential candidates from both parties who answered questions from participants” on issues ranging from immigration to the Iran nuclear deal abandoned by President Trump.

“The participants were guided by a 55-page handbook,” they note, “prepared by policy experts from both parties, offering arguments for and against each proposal. The participants had been surveyed on the policy proposals in advance, and they took the same opinion survey again upon completing the four days of deliberation.”

The conclusion: “The most polarizing proposals, whether from the left or the right, generally lost support, and a number of more centrist proposals moved to the foreground. Crucially, proposals further to the right typically lost support from Republicans and proposals further to the left typically lost support from Democrats.”

Perhaps as important, as one citizen participant noted, sitting down face to face with those of opposing opinions, and arriving at a consensual agreement on the facts, prompted each to see the point of view of others as reasonable disagreement and not as enemies in the other camp. In short, the constraint of common reasons Pettit talks about.

While this exercise pointed out a path back to faith in the possibility impartial practices and institutions, it was just a small ripple of reasoned discourse in the vast sea of a passionately divided body politic in the grip of an electoral cycle. The next step must be for this kind of approach to be constitutionally integrated into the institutions of governance as a citizen-dominated counterbalance to the partisan capture of representative government.

There are hopeful examples elsewhere. Beginning in 2016, the Irish Parliament [commissioned](#) a “citizens’ assembly,” presided over by a former high court justice, to reach a consensus beyond party positions on the highly emotional issue of abortion in advance of a referendum. The high-profile and official sanction of this deliberation guided a public vote that removed a clause in the constitution outlawing abortion.

[George Papandreou](#), the former prime minister of Greece, has recently gone the whole distance and proposed a fourth branch of government. “This new deliberative branch,” he writes, “in which all citizens — the ‘demos’ — could participate, would sit alongside the executive, legislative and judicial branches.”

The hope is that we are about to reach the low point from which the possibility of democracy can once

again spring. But that possibility will depend, above all, on citizens themselves revitalizing the practices and institutions of self-government outside the ballot box.

In The WorldPost this week, [Stephen Marche](#) sees a striking corollary between Shakespeare's "Coriolanus" and Donald Trump, both of whom confuse allegiance to their own ambition with patriotism.