Despite Abraham Lincoln's eloquent vision of a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” our government bears little resemblance to the people. At least not the people I know.

I come from a rural community where government lives just down the block. We suffer the consequences of disagreement,
yes, but face them across a table, not across a
cavernous partisan divide. “Reaching across the
aisle” still refers to grabbing the mayonnaise on the
second shelf at the grocery store.

My father served for several years on the county
board back in the ’70s and managed somehow to
make more friends than enemies. When he finally
lost an election, no one felt worse than his
opponent, who came to me to share his angst for
having defeated a man he respected.

How that mutual respect and collegiality, albeit
mixed with differing opinions, gets lost on the road
to Madison or a plane to Washington remains one of
the great tragedies of our republic.

We assume this tragedy, the utter chaos in our state
and national capitals, merely represents a
concentration of those local differing opinions.
“This is politics,” we say. This, we surmise, is a
reflection of irreparable divisions of the people.

Well, not necessarily.

According to the experimental project America in
One Room conducted by the Center for Deliberative
Democracy at Stanford University, people are able to
significantly reconcile their differences if given
unbiased facts and the time and setting to discuss
them together.

Tackling the most controversial topics, 500
participants from across the political spectrum
spent a long weekend discussing health care,
immigration, the economy, foreign policy and the
environment. The project found that “policies at the
far ends of the ideological scale generally losing
support among the partisans most apt to favor
them while policies closer to the middle gained backing from prior opponents."

Partisan politics, then, represent an aberration of human behavior, a systemic cul-de-sac that fails to reflect the willingness of the people to meet in the middle. "Deliberative" legislative bodies — and I use that term loosely — employ a toxic mix of power and single-mindedness exacerbated by money and perpetrated by gerrymandering. Whether well-meaning or mean-spirited, politicians get pulled into the vortex of governing by partisan consideration.

Within that partisan vortex, the middle gets lost. Ideology supplants ideas.

The illusion of government resides in the belief that it serves as the instrument of our ideological desires, ranging from medical care for all to the deregulation of business. The nobility of government lies in the tempering of ideology. James Madison said, "The real power lies in the majority of the community." He saw representative government as a check against "factions" which "united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adversed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."

While serving as a page in the state Legislature during the 1970s, I saw nobility occasionally win over illusion. I also saw Madison's "community" held hostage to the partisan factions that James Madison so feared. I witnessed the very best and worst of government, without deference to nobility or illusion, in a single day.

Yet after hard-fought battles, legislators and staff would gather at the Shamrock Bar just off the Capitol Square for a burger and beer, not unlike the collegiality experienced by my father. Is that possible today? Yes, if we explore the large uncharted region between ideas and ideology and resolve to make a visit. Spend a long weekend. Sit across a table rather than across an aisle and explore the middle — a place so dreaded by partisans it must hold promise.

Whether we gather "America in one room" or at the
corner bar, these are the conversations, both passionate and civil — and most important, nonpartisan — that will save America from its worst fears. And create a government that resembles the people.

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