

It's time we all take stock of the way we govern ourselves

BY JOHN J. GROSSENBACHER, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 08/09/20 06:00 PM EDT
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America is in deep trouble and changing our direction will require unprecedented collective action. We must do no less than change important aspects of how we live and work together, overhaul the societal systems of which we are a part. To do so requires finding new ways to participate in our self-government and to fulfill the responsibilities we have to one another as members of a free society. That demands we improve the methods we use to educate, inform, engage and empower ourselves.

The most difficult aspect of making this self-investment will be finding the time to do so. We should treat this citizens' work like jury duty — not by compelling participation, but by accepting it as a civic duty, a significant personal priority. We also could create a few new public holidays to allow people to step back a little from our economic system's drive for efficiency and competition and spend more time strengthening community and doing the work of citizenship. That's a new paradigm for a country that can't even bring itself to make Election Day a holiday.

Today, some in religious groups lament the [loss of membership](#) in their faith communities and attribute it to fewer people observing the sabbath, not devoting a day to spiritual and religious activity. Those no longer participating often say that the traditional practices [don't feel relevant](#). They want new ways to develop, understand and express their spirituality and faith. Perhaps our current methods for contributing to our communities and governing ourselves are analogous. Maybe the ways they provide for participation no longer have meaning and, consequently, aren't a priority for many. Voting, communicating with elected officials, volunteering time in a community service, contributing money, demonstrating in peaceful protest are among the methods Americans use to express community membership and citizenship. Maybe we need to modernize these engagement choices by creating a new opportunity, including a foundation for systemic change.

The [America in One Room](#) experiment, conducted last September, demonstrated a process we should try as soon as our battle against COVID-19 allows. The Stanford University effort informed and engaged 500 voters in small group discussions about major issues — immigration, health care, foreign policy, the environment, the economy. Significant effort went into preparation, particularly in selecting people who represented America’s diversity and ensuring non-partisanship in the framing of issues.

[The results](#) were that the participants learned as they deliberated tough, complicated problems in a civil, substantive way. They listened to each other respectfully, asked questions, shared experiences and got to know one another. As a result, some shifted their opinions on policies and issues: Extreme positions lost support among most of the participants on both sides of the political spectrum. They found more common ground.

America in One Room involved “citizen delegates” from across the country, for several days. Their travel, rooms and meals were paid for and each participant received an honorarium. The process was thoughtful and ideologically balanced.

An effort to build community, common agreement and citizenship across our country using this method is not “realistic” under current paradigms and priorities. Yet it is time we tried, recognizing that we must be open to big changes. Our public universities could take the lead, utilizing publicly funded endowments to create processes for citizen engagement derived from the America in One Room example. Community colleges, elementary schools, high schools and community centers could be the venues for gatherings. No honoraria, travel or other stipends would be provided; at least initially, participants would be local. Given the diversity of our public universities, a wide variety of approaches to problems might emerge.

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested America and amplified the [consequences of inequalities](#) that many evidently have accepted in our society. We have failed that test, with [more than 160,000](#) Americans dead from the virus and counting. Other societies appear to have fought the pandemic with far more competence and compassion. Significant income, [wealth](#), [education](#) and [health care](#) inequalities have been taking a toll on many Americans for years. Now the virus has amplified the consequences of these inequities, resulting in more death, sickness and economic hardship.

Our inability to work together and reform our societal systems of values, politics, economics and education sets us up for failure. Divisions have amplified the inequalities, particularly when it comes to opportunities. Our misuse of technology hasn’t helped; it influences the functioning of systems, abstracting reality, facilitating hyper-individualism, enabling demagogues and weakening a sense of shared responsibility. Too many Americans today are poorly informed, easily manipulated by misinformation, cynical and increasingly tribal. Those characteristics help sustain the political dysfunction that results in our failure to act collectively. We have stopped trying to perfect the partnership between people that made America.

Historian Jon Meacham observed, “The war between the ideal and real, between what’s right and what’s convenient, between the larger good and personal interest is the contest that unfolds in the soul of every American.” Our collective responses in that contest can be called the soul of our nation, demonstrations of what “We, the People” really value. In December 1776, revolutionary Thomas Paine famously wrote, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” He also said that “What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; it is dearness only that gives everything its value.”



How dear to us are simple competence and compassion in the way we govern ourselves? How much do we value our neighbor's equality of opportunity for human dignity and justice? Is the partnership between people that requires commitment to one another — that which we call citizenship — too ideal, inconvenient and insufficiently beneficial to renew it?

By action or inaction, we answer these questions. And in doing so, our souls are being tried — and consequently, so is America's.

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