



Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century

Book Club Discussion Guide

Thank you for your interest in *Our Common Purpose*. The report was written with the goal of inspiring dialogue, and the questions below will help facilitate conversations about the practice of citizenship and the best strategies for reforming our political institutions and political culture. We hope our report inspires you to get engaged in the difficult, necessary work of repairing our democracy, whether in your local community or at the state or federal level. We are counting on all of you to help create the grassroots support that will reinvent American democracy for the twenty-first century.

What is your first political memory? What did it teach you about how democracy works?

We hear a lot today about what divides us. What *unites* Americans? What are some things—principles, ideas, values—that most Americans share?

During one of the Commission’s nearly 50 listening sessions (see Appendix B of *Our Common Purpose* for a full list of listening sessions), a participant stated that “citizenship is a collective responsibility.” What should we expect of ourselves and our neighbors as citizens? What responsibilities do we have to our country?

Fewer than one-third of millennials consider it essential to live in a democracy (pg. 2). Why do you think young people have lost faith in democracy? What is at stake if democracy weakens or falls apart?

The “virtuous cycle” idea argues that if we improve our civic culture (defined on pg. 3), more voters will get involved, which will lead to more responsive political institutions, which will lead to an even better civic culture, which will lead to more voter involvement, and then to more responsive institutions, and so on. What are the problems facing our civic culture? How would addressing these problems translate to better institutions?

Which strategy or recommendation do you think is the most important? Why?





Which recommendation do you think will be the easiest to implement? The hardest? Why? Which recommendation, if implemented, would have the biggest effect on American society?

The report does not explicitly focus on racial justice, but these recommendations would create a more inclusive and representative democracy that would be better able to deal with persistent inequities. Which of the 31 recommendations would do the most to address racial inequality?

What actions, large or small, can you take to help strengthen democracy in your local community, your state, or the nation?

Deep Dive Questions

Do you feel represented by the federal government? What about by your state and local governments? Do you feel differently about your representation at those three levels? Why/why not?

What interactions have you had with elected representatives? What were those interactions like?

What steps should we take to make it easier for representatives to interact with their constituents? Strategy 3 offers a few possible ideas, from accessible public meetings (Recommendation 3.1) to participatory budgeting projects (Recommendation 3.4). Which of the recommendations in Strategy 3 do you think would be most effective in your community? Why?

In the four presidential elections from 2000 to 2016, on average, 60% of eligible Americans voted. For midterm elections, turnout was closer to 40%. Why do you think voter turnout in the U.S. is so low compared to other countries?

Which recommendation would be most effective at increasing national voter turnout?

Do you have any ideas for increasing turnout that were not addressed in the report?

What do you think about the idea of universal voting (Recommendation 2.5)? Under this system, which is in place in 27 countries, citizens can be fined for failing to vote or failing to provide a valid excuse. Voters can select “none of the above” when they vote, but they need to participate in the election process. In this scenario, voting would be made much easier and more accessible. Should the United States adopt a system like this?





“One of the most striking findings of the Commission’s listening sessions was that, in this era of profound polarization, Americans are hungry for opportunities to assemble, deliberate, and converse with one another” (48). Think about your daily routine. How frequently do you encounter people from different backgrounds—racial, political, or otherwise? Where do those interactions take place or where have they taken place in the past?

What do you think would be the impact of increasing spaces that would give Americans the chance to get to know Americans from different backgrounds?

One listening session participant stated that “in the 2016 election, friendships were torn and ... never recovered as people found the political differences to be so insuperable that they could not be part of a community anymore. It’s like all we have left is politics. We don’t have any other form of civic community. All we have are our tribes” (51). Have you ever experienced a political disagreement that threatened your relationship with friends or family? How were you able to find common ground with people with whom you disagreed?

Are there longstanding divides in your own community, by neighborhood, race, or some other factor? How might your community overcome it?

Recommendation 6.2 calls for a Telling Our Nation’s Story initiative to engage communities across the country in open, inclusive conversations about the complex American story. The report recognizes the need to bring together the positive and negative aspects of U.S. history into a story that everyone can support. What troubling parts of U.S. history do you think Americans today do not know enough about? What are positive parts of that story that we take for granted?

Strategy 5 discusses social media’s harmful effects on democracy, from feeding political divisions to spreading false information and lowering the quality of public debate. What changes would you make to social media to reduce these negative effects?

A listening session participant described social media as having “wonderful applications, but it also contributes to the degradation of our civil discourse, because people will say things online that they would never say to someone face to face” (18). Do you agree with this statement? Do the negative elements of social media outweigh the benefits?

Where do you get information you trust about local and regional issues?

Has your community been impacted by the decline in local journalism? What do you think the impact of this decline has been, in your community and across the nation?

What do you think the idea of taxing social media companies to fund local journalism?

