

DIVIDED WE FALL

HOW TO BUILD BRIDGES AND ENGAGE IN POLITICS IN 2021



Source: Highsteel.com

Tonight's Discussion

- The Problem: Polarization
- One Solution: Dialogue
- Another Solution: Allyship
- Be the Solution: Get Involved in 2021
- Q & A
- Resources

Political debate and diversity is good

- James Madison, the “father of the Constitution”, argued in the *Federalist Papers* that passionate debate over public good was proper and necessary. Later Madison introduced the first Ten Amendments to the Constitution which included as its first and foremost ideal, free speech and a free press.



Madison

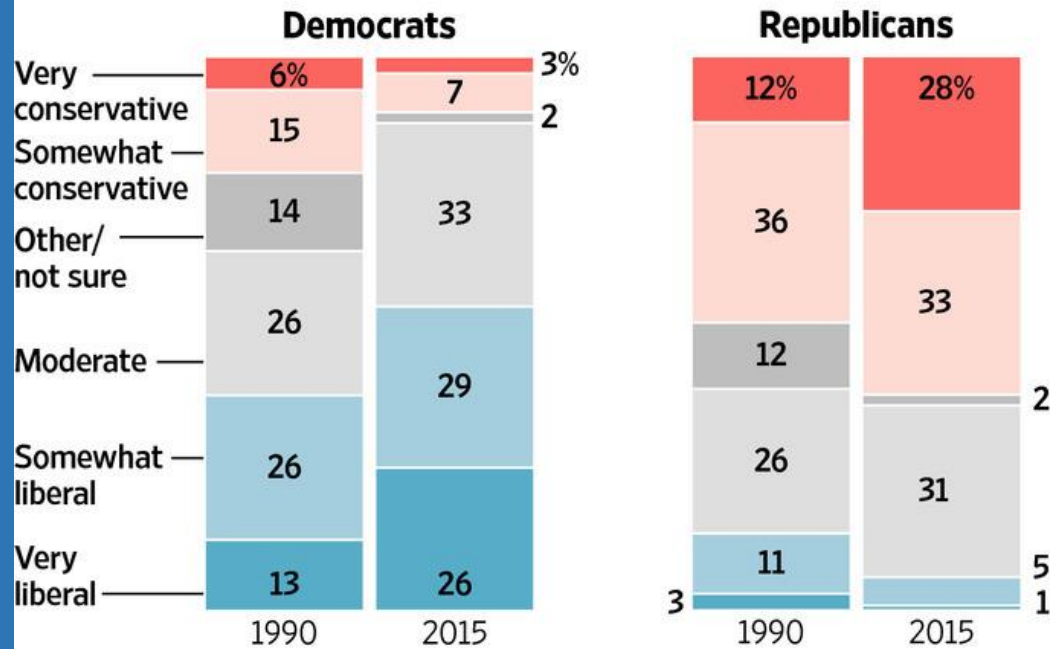


Source:
The Atlantic
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/james-madison-mob-rule/568351/>

He did not anticipate the rise of powerful political parties, the development of mass and social media, and toxic effect that money in politics would play.

Different Faces

A comparison of WSJ/NBC News polling in 1990 and 2015 shows some significant changes in Americans who call themselves Democrats and Republicans.



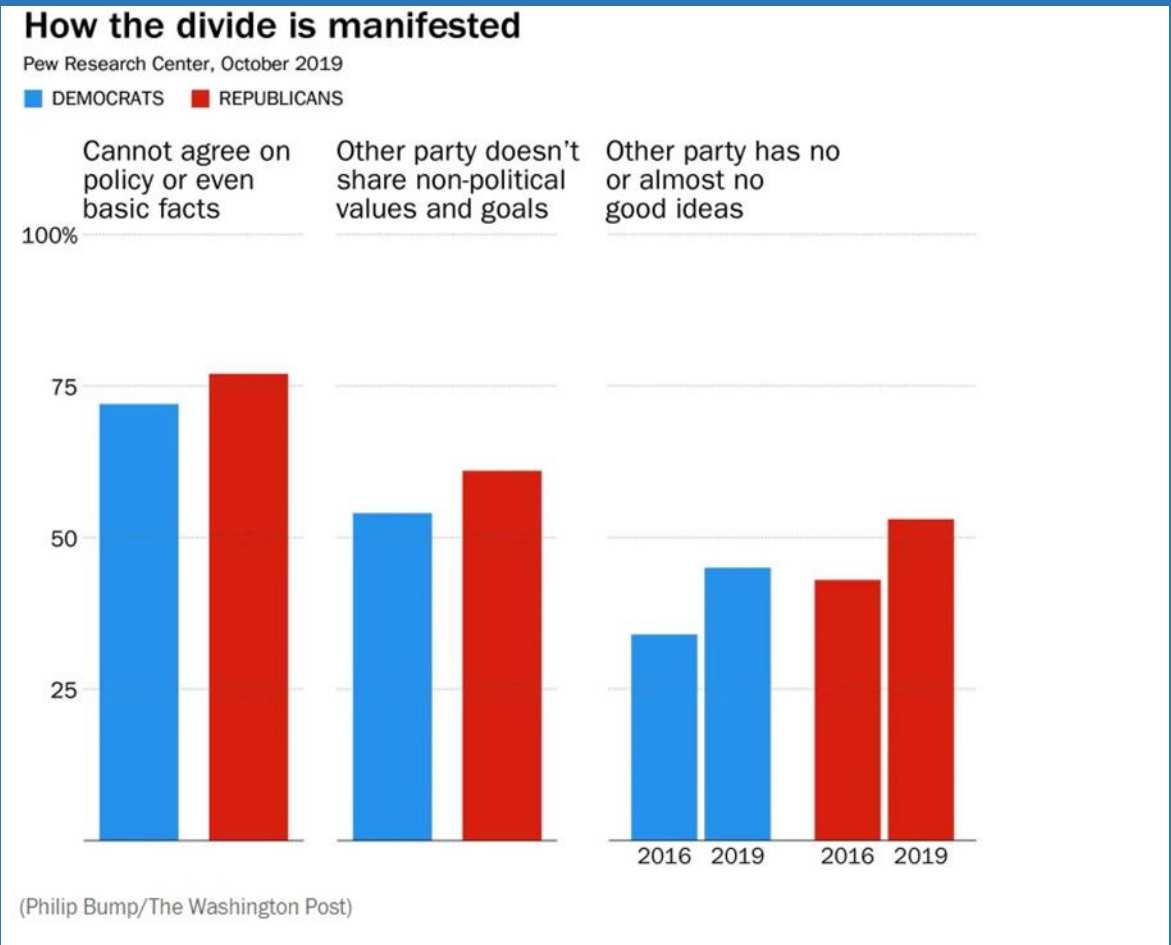
Over the last 30 years
both major parties
have grown more
ideological and less
moderate

Why do you think political parties have become more polarized?

- a) Nationalization of Congressional and down ballot races
- b) Influence of interest groups on US elections
- c) Changing demographic of political parties
- d) Rise of mass media that allows narrow-casting of issues, rather than broadcasting

POLARIZATION

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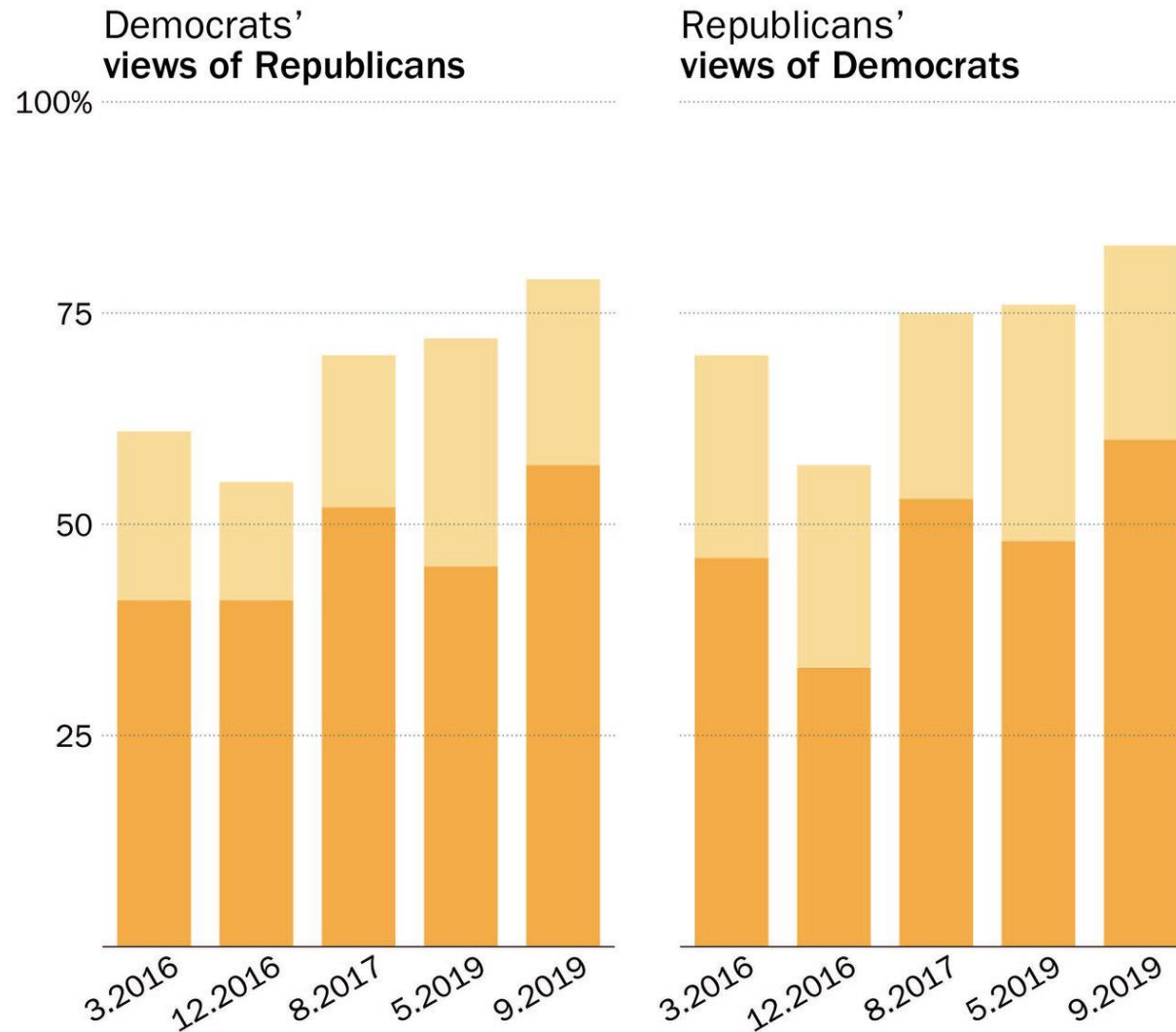


Partisan views turn colder

Pew Research Center, October 2019. Ratings of partisans on a “feeling thermometer.”

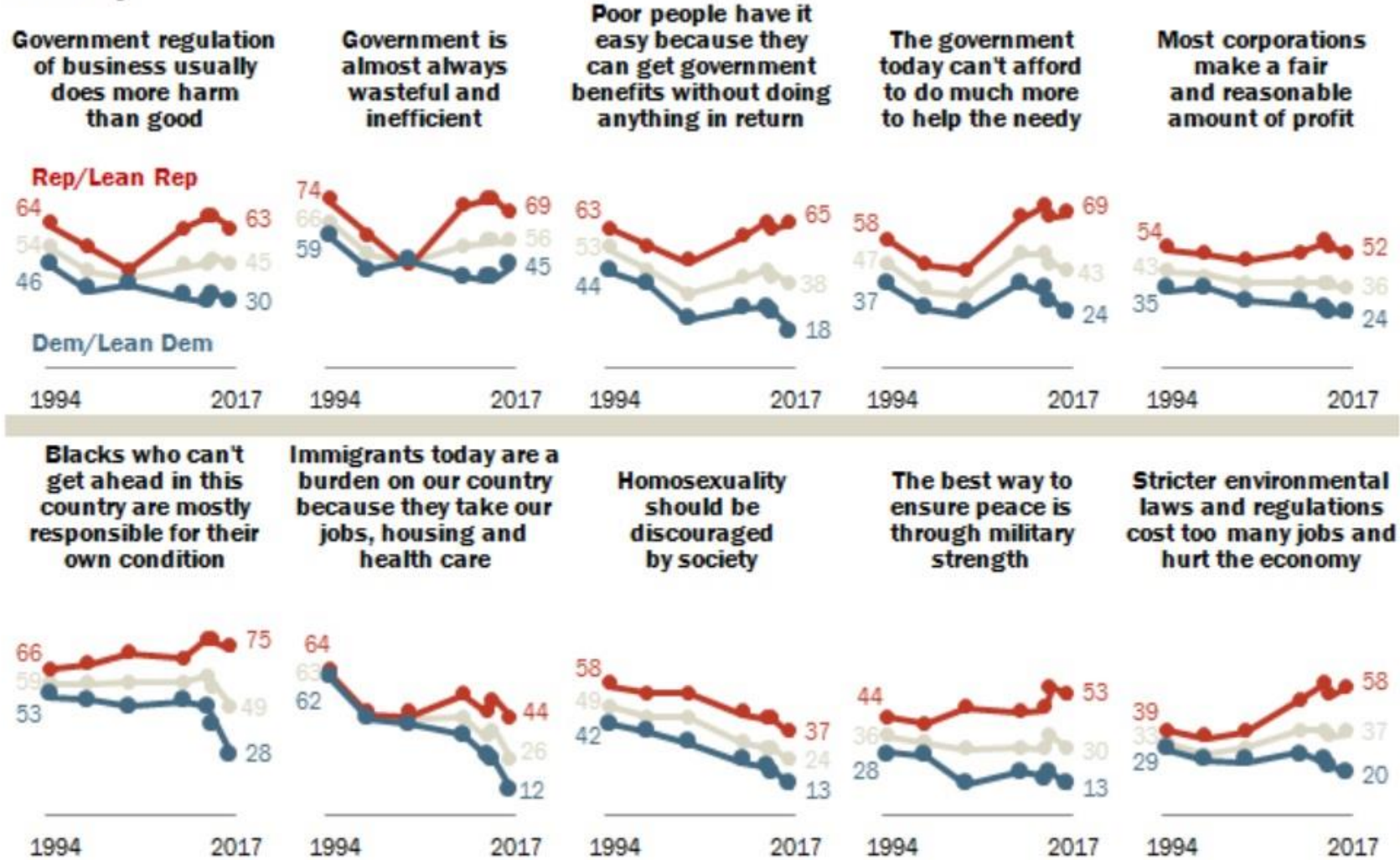
Source: Pew Research Center
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/>

VERY COLD SOMEWHAT COLD



Growing gaps between Republicans and Democrats across domains

% who say ...



Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

Progressives want



Source WAPO

A strong government that will dismantle corporations, regulate to combat global climate change, anti racist, rights of women and under-represented groups. Globalists/ Fair trade.

Trumpists want



Source WAPO

A strong leader who dismantles unions, deregulates to protect business and workers from costly government oversight, and legislation to hinder abortion, protect religious liberty, and limit immigration. Nationalists/Protective trade.

Razor thin divisions US



American Exceptionalism?

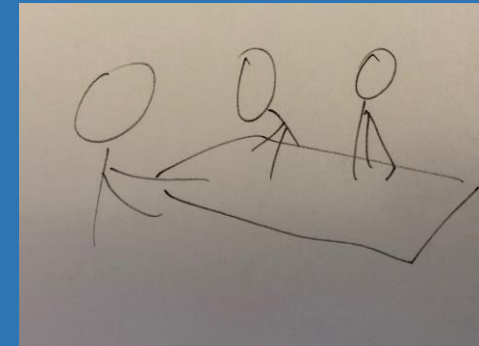
- People in US think differences are more than just politics and policies, both extremes claim that the debates are about core values and believe that if the adherents to different policies and politics get into power they will do “lasting harm” – ideas fueled by special interests, religious leaders, politicians, and the media.

US History

- In American history we have seen these intense debates before and they have led to the American Revolution and the Civil War! This occurs when we render our distaste for someone's ideas with dislike for the person holding them, when we elevate differences to existential threats which leads to fear and hatred.

One Solution: Dialogue

- Effective dialogue reduces stereotyping (us v them)
- Effective dialogue increases mutual understanding
- Different from debate and activism which are about changing ideas—this is about understanding, empathy, and reducing the hate
- Thereby reducing gridlock in politics, de-humanization in public opinion and social media, and mis-representation of the ideas of those with different policy agendas



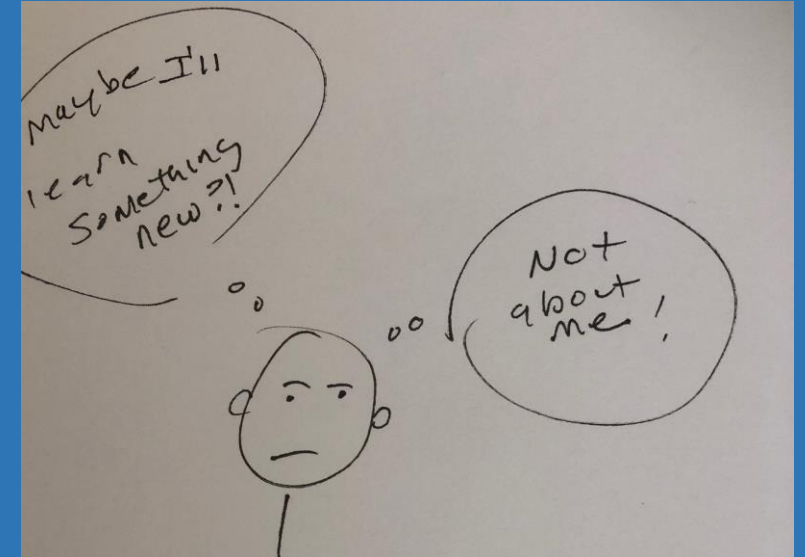
What is dialogue?

- Conversations with people who have different beliefs and perspectives in order to foster mutual understanding
- Structured conversations on agreed upon topics with those who have the same power dynamics
- Do not go into this trying to change someone's mind
- Be curious and respectful and bring humility to the table
- Seek common ground or common goals



Humility is important

- Humility is key to bridging political divide
- It allows you to let go of defensiveness
- Take in new information that challenges your political views
- Avoid fundamental attribution errors – or attributing actions to a fixed character trait rather than outside forces



Humility

- Believing is seeing – what we believe shapes what we see (sports, protests, etc.)
- Unless we are humble we are likely to look for differences not commonalities

Empathy is important



Source USA Today

- Why have you let others lead you to dehumanize those you disagree with?
- Is your Aunt with opinion X really the most awful human being?
- Empathy does not mean you agree with their ideas but you reject vitriol and premise your conversation on the fact that you are speaking to a person not a demon
- You may gain insight into why they believe as they do and allow you to seek out common ground

Listening is critical

- When talking to someone you disagree with do you:
- Tune them out?
- Label them?
- Think about your counter argument?
- If so you are NOT listening and thereby miss an opportunity to build a bridge



How to have a dialogue

- Don't ambush someone set up a discussion time in advance
- Indicate what it is you are going to talk about
- Find a location that is friendly to all involved
- Set rules for discussion beforehand – speak for yourselves only not for a group, no criticism allowed, no interruptions allowed expect to say can you speak up!

How to have dialogue

- Allow for long pauses and time for people to think
- Allow people to pass or pass for now if they are not ready to share



How to start (a sample)

- How have your life experiences contributed to your perspective on X?
- What lies at the heart of your conviction about X?
- How does this perspective reflect your core values?
- How do you imagine political or legislative decisions regarding this will affect you personally?

Sample cont.

- Some people are concerned that enacting laws to deal with X may lead to Y, what are your thoughts on this?
- Are there any words or phrases you have heard in debates about X that you experience as offensive or provocative? What makes them so?

Survey says...

- Of 1800 participants who did this through Braver Angels:
- 79% said they could better understand the experience, feelings, and history of others;
- 75% felt less anger towards people with differing opinion;

Solution II Allyship

Those who are in an unequal power dynamic, for example BIPOC and others who are marginalized may find dialogue unsatisfying

People who feel the existing system is discriminatory will find the emphasis on commonalities insulting and a means to paper over critical differences which lie at the heart of divisions

In this case seek allyship – not common ground but common goals

You will need to delve deeply into the history of the issue(s)

Allyship

- Allyship requires members of the dominant group to be aware and sensitive to their own privilege which blinds to the world view of others
- Members of the dominant group may find that their job is to listen, to seek understanding, and to reflect on their behaviors that may contribute to the unequal power dynamic

Allyship

- The outcome should be a determination to make changes that will provide greater equity in the community or organization and a deference to those who experience the inequities on a daily basis
- You will need a moderator and agreed upon topics
- You need to hold the event in a place agreed upon by all parties

Some questions you might ask

- I'm curious about the things _____ find most challenging day-to-day—things that I might not notice. Would you feel comfortable sharing some of what you encounter?
- If there was one thing you wish your _____ colleagues would do more of to improve the experience of _____, what would it be?

Some questions...

- If there was one thing we could stop doing every day, what would it be?
- If you were giving me advice on how to really show up as a colleague to make the organization fair and welcoming, what would you say?

Be the Solution in 2021 – Get Involved

- Unity and bridge building are the buzzwords of the day – someone, YOU, has to make it happen
- Local elections are on the docket this year:
- All county legislators
- Mayor, 5 city council seats, and 3 school board seats
- Towns and villages for supervisors, councils, justices, etc.
- Some elections in MARCH, primary is in JUNE, most elections in November



Be the Solution

- Key questions to ask yourself:
 1. What are my goals?
 2. Are these goals better served by supporting a party or serving a cause?
 3. How much time do I have to commit to this work?

Be the Solution: Political Party?

- Why work through a political party?
 1. They need you – if you are dedicated building bridges and finding common ground now is the time
 2. Political parties with recognized ballot status have an advantage in electoral politics



Monroe County

1. Democrats make up 42% of registered voters
Republicans make up 26% of registered voters
others/blanks make up 31% of registered voters
2. * 1 of 3 County Democrats live in the City of Rochester

Be the Solution: Participant in Government

- Attend Board Meetings – easier now due to COVID-19
- Bring Issues to the attention of legislators – a phone call is worth more than an email!
- There are citizens advisory boards that work with local governments – contact your town, village or city and find out which ones exist (if there are none see the first two bulleted points to create them)
- Look on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/CityofRochesterNY/> for opportunities



Be the Solution:

- Host or attend a community forum
- Join the League of Women Voters (you do not have to be a woman to join)
- Meet potential candidates /host a candidate night
- Run for office yourself! Contact the Monroe County Board of Elections.

Become an active participant in civic life

- If there is a cause you believe in join or volunteer at an existing organization
- RIT has a great resource:
- Create a new organization that focuses on an issue of your concern



Q & A

- If I cannot answer your question I will say “I don’t know” :)

Resources

- Braver Angels
- National Institute for Civil Discourse
- Make America Dinner Again
- Living Room Conversations
- https://www.bridgealliance.us/all_members
- <https://stanford.io/2x9ZgCU>
- <https://www.dividedwefalltv.org/>
- <https://www.dividedwefalltv.org/>