

# Democrat & Chronicle

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## Essay: It's time to change the narrative, re-engage Americans in civic life

**Jillian Youngblood and Steven Kull** Guest essayists

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On January 6, we saw the culmination of years of polarization, misinformation, hatred, and distrust when violent protesters stormed the Capitol. As shocking as the events of that day were, they fit easily into a narrative many of us take as fact, one that says we are so hopelessly divided that rebuilding civic life is impossible.

What if we could counter that narrative? Through a rapidly growing program called the Citizen Panel Initiative, run by nonpartisan organizations Civic Genius and Voice of the People, communities across the country are doing just that.

At a Citizen Panel event, people – Republicans and Democrats – have a rare opportunity to engage in discussion about issues in a way they cannot on social media or even at most town halls. And they can do so with their Member of Congress. Leading up to the event residents of a Congressional district take a unique survey called a policymaking simulation in which they receive a briefing on a challenge we face as a country, learn about various legislative proposals to address it, and evaluate arguments for and against each proposal.

Then, several dozen people who went through the simulation gather to discuss the issue face-to-face (or, until we're all vaccinated, screen-to-screen) with their Member of Congress and with each other. The main takeaway, based on our experience to date: We're not nearly as polarized as we thought.

This isn't just a hopeful talking point; it's a reality grounded in data. In each Congressional district where we hold these events, the University of Maryland's Program for Public Consultation surveys a representative sample of residents. The results inevitably show how much common ground we have, whether it's on immigration, police reform, campaign finance reform, or beyond.

On Feb. 27, Congressman Joe Morelle will join a Citizen Panel event to discuss issues related to energy and environment, with a group of constituents. When a nationwide sample was surveyed on this topic, majorities of both Republicans and Democrats found quite a lot of common ground. This has the potential to lay the groundwork for a conversation grounded not in partisan fighting but in dialogue and deliberation.

Importantly, events like this do not push participants to find consensus or to leave their values and opinions at the door. Nonetheless we often find that when people get a chance to really think about the issues, much agreement already exists across the political spectrum.

At a time when only a quarter of Americans approve of the job Congress is doing and millions of Millennials are unconvinced that democracy is worth preserving, we desperately need conversations like this to re-engage Americans in civic life.

*Jillian Youngblood is executive director with Civic Genius. Steven Kull is founder and president of Voice of the People and serves as director of the Program for Public Consultation at University of Maryland.*