

The

Town Hall

POLITICS, PRIMARIES, & POLARIZATION:

WHAT ABOUT THE OKLAHOMA PEOPLE?



THE 2024 TOWN HALL
FINDINGS REPORT & KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Tips on How to Successfully Talk with Your Legislator and Help the Oklahoma Academy Move Ideas Into Action

The stronger your relationship is with an elected official, the more they will respect and listen to you. Advocating is all about building relationships. As an Oklahoman, you hold a powerful position; you are a voting constituent who is aware and informed of the issues facing this great state. Here are some tips to help you successfully engage with your officeholders:

1. Identify Your Elected Official:

- Know who represents you at the local, state, and federal levels.
- Find their contact information, including office addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses.

2. Be Informed:

- Research the issues you want to discuss.
- Understand the legislator's position on those issues.
- Be aware of current legislation related to your concerns.

3. Personalize Your Message:

- Share personal stories or experiences that illustrate the impact of the issues you're addressing.
- Explain how specific policies or decisions affect you, your community, or your organization.

4. Be Clear and Concise:

- Keep your message focused on one or two key points.
- Clearly articulate your position and the action you want the legislator to take.

5. Schedule a Meeting:

- Call the lawmaker's office or use their scheduling system to request a meeting.
- Be flexible with your availability.

6. Prepare for the Meeting:

- Anticipate questions the legislator might ask and prepare thoughtful responses.
- Bring supporting materials, such as data, reports, or testimonials.

7. Be Respectful:

- Treat the official and their staff with respect, even if you disagree.
- Be polite and professional in your communication.

8. Stay on Topic:

- Stick to the issues you've planned to discuss.
- Avoid going off on tangents that might dilute your main message.

9. Know the Legislative Process:

- Understand how bills move through the legislative process.
- Be aware of key committees and decision-making stages.

10. Follow Up:

- Send a thank-you email after your meeting, expressing gratitude for their time and reiterating your main points.
- Keep the legislator updated on developments related to your issue.

Remember that building a relationship with your legislator is an ongoing process. Regular, respectful communication is key to ensuring that your concerns are heard and understood. Be sure to check The Oklahoma Academy website for the complete Library for information on all Town Hall Resource Documents, Issues Briefs and Full Reports.

History of The Oklahoma Academy

FOUNDED BY GOVERNOR HENRY BELLMON

Founded 1967 • Revitalization 1985 • Town Hall Process 2001



The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals was founded in 1967 by one of Oklahoma's greatest statesmen, Henry Louis Bellmon. As the first Republican Governor of Oklahoma, top officials, who were Democrats, surrounded Bellmon. In order to achieve a mark of success in office, Bellmon relied on factual information and rational decision making to work with both the state's lawmakers and the citizenry.

As a politician, Bellmon believed in doing what was in the best interest of the public even if it cost him the next election. Still, he knew the people were an important part of the equation for a successful state. Not only did he seek to engage them in the development of public policy, he understood the connection between a sound quality of life for the citizens and the promise of a prosperous state. Dedicated to fiscal responsibility, Bellmon increased government efficiency and invested in critical government services.



Henry Bellmon

Bellmon's humble upbringing in a farming family and his service in WWII cultivated an honest, thoughtful, nonconformist who valued education, collaboration, and integrity. His vision of The Oklahoma Academy was not unlike a farmer planting seeds in the spring in anticipation of a bountiful crop in the summer. To cultivate an informed, engaged citizenry, the people must first have an opportunity to study the issues and participate in the policy development process.

After his first term as governor, Bellmon knew there was a need for open, nonpartisan dialogue in the young state. He sought to create a public policy organization that was independent, nonpartisan, and inclusive. The purpose of which was to provide citizens the opportunity to participate in a truly democratic process designed to shape the future of Oklahoma. To this day, The Oklahoma Academy upholds Bellmon's vision and the organization's long-standing reputation as the state's premier citizen-based organization for nonpartisan public policy development.

From its inception in 1967, to its revitalization in 1985, to its adoption of the Town Hall process in 2001, The Oklahoma Academy has maintained its relevance in raising awareness and shaping public policy in Oklahoma. Despite its small staff and limited resources, The Oklahoma Academy generates and manages an impressive amount of public policy information, engages the citizens of Oklahoma in discussing and developing policy recommendations, and works ardently with the community leaders and policymakers to implement the resulting ideas through community and legislative action. To date, more than 112 pieces of legislation passed since the adoption of the Town Hall process in 2001.

In a time when politicians often hear only the keyboard warriors and dissenters, the work of The Oklahoma Academy is more important than ever. In this divisive political era, The Oklahoma Academy is dedicated to providing a safe, supportive forum where the art of listening, debating, and collaborating are not only valued but also protected. We've covered a wide range of topics, including education, small business development, government structure, crime, technology and the future, and the state's constitution. We've achieved many milestones and accomplishments, and thanks to citizens like you, we continue to grow in numbers, reach and influence.

It is our sincere hope that you will continue to support us in this endeavor to unite the public in working toward creating solutions for a stronger Oklahoma and its people.

Introductions

Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People? 2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



Greetings Oklahoma Academy Leaders,

I hope this message reaches you in good spirits. I want to extend my appreciation to all who participated in the 2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall, “Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People.” Your dedication and expertise were pivotal in elevating the quality of this event, making it an outstanding success.

The Town Hall provided an invaluable platform for meaningful dialogue among key stakeholders, policymakers, and experts. The insights shared during the panel discussions, along with the thoughtful questions and recommendations, brought depth to the conversations and illuminated critical issues affecting all communities in Oklahoma.

Our participants’ commitment to fostering civil discourse was instrumental in addressing the complex challenges facing our state. Their active engagement exemplified a shared dedication to developing innovative solutions and shaping public policies that benefit all Oklahomans.

As we move forward in 2025, I encourage you to remain actively involved in the initiatives and recommendations stemming from this year’s Town Hall. Your passion for promoting evidence-based, inclusive, and accountable policies aligns closely with The Oklahoma Academy’s mission. Your continued support will undoubtedly play a significant role in ensuring the success of future endeavors.

The insights and ideas generated during the Town Hall will guide our ongoing research and education efforts. The Academy is committed to transforming these discussions into actionable recommendations that benefit both people and policymakers, driving positive change for communities across our state.

In closing, I again extend my sincere appreciation to all Town Hall participants for their invaluable contributions. I encourage you to review the Findings Report carefully and consider supporting the Academy’s efforts moving these important ideas into action. Together, we can create a more unified and equitable approach to governance that resonates throughout Oklahoma.

Thank you for your continued commitment and collaboration.

Darryl Schmidt,
2025 Oklahoma Academy Board Chair
Chief Executive Officer, BancFirst



Darryl Schmidt

About the Town Hall

The Oklahoma Academy defines leadership as the ability to get people moving in a single direction. One of the most effective ways of achieving that goal is utilizing a process like the Town Hall. The Town Hall incorporates all the elements of a successful consensus-driven process by emphasizing collaboration, cooperation, egalitarianism, inclusivity, and participation. Each must be in place to arrive at the destination improving the overall business climate and quality of life for Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Academy’s Town Hall process is successful in implementing recommendations unlike any other because strong group relationships have been developed through the process that results in greater trust amongst the attendees. By “leading” a diverse group of Oklahomans through the Town Hall process, the Oklahoma Academy delivers a unique and valuable service that stands out from the rest.

Priority Recommendations

Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People? 2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Priority Recommendations



Amid Oklahoma’s dynamic political climate, The Oklahoma Academy has chosen to host the pivotal 2024 Town Hall conference under the theme: “Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What about the Oklahoma People?” This intentional focus highlights the organization’s dedication to addressing all issues with civility through open dialogue and mutual respect. By concentrating on the policy challenges surrounding politics, primaries, and polarization, the Academy seeks to explore the complexities of these issues and their impact on the people of our state.

The decision to convene this Town Hall reflects a steadfast commitment to fostering meaningful local engagement, building bridges between diverse stakeholders, and ensuring that the voices of all Oklahomans impacted by the current political climate are heard and valued. Through this initiative, The Oklahoma Academy reaffirms its mission to encourage evidence-based policy discussions that prioritize inclusivity and accountability.

The resulting Town Hall Report and Recommendations are intended to serve as a powerful catalyst for informed decision-making. By offering actionable insights and advocating for sustainable, community-driven solutions, this report aspires to not only address the needs of Oklahoma’s communities but also contribute to the broader discourse on public policy. In doing so, it seeks to inspire a more cohesive and equitable approach to governance that resonates across all levels of society.

The comprehensive Report, drafted from the unified consensus of all Town Hall participants within their panel groups, provides valuable insight into their attitudes and perspectives. The detailed findings, which span pages 15 through 37 of this document, served as the foundation for constructing the key Recommendations and Town Hall findings report. These recommendations not only illuminate the intricate challenges within Oklahoma’s political landscape but also advocate for impactful changes that can benefit residents and advance the broader conversation on policy reform.

After the Town Hall, participants received the compiled list of recommendations they had developed and were tasked with prioritizing them. Each participant identified their top three recommendations for The Oklahoma Academy to emphasize in 2025, ranking them by first, second, and third priority. While all consensus recommendations are documented in the full report, the primary focus for 2025 will center on the top priority recommendations selected by the participants.

The Priority and Key Consensus Recommendations present innovative strategies for Oklahoma to tackle the challenges of politics, primaries, and polarization while enhancing conditions across the state, as outlined below and on the following pages:

Consensus Town Hall Key Recommendations

*Recommendation= Proposal as to the best course of action
(Page numbers refer to where the recommendation is found within the full report.)*

Top Priority Recommendation

- Oklahoma is one of only 12 states with closed primaries. 38 states have some form of an open primary in which Independents are allowed to vote. The Town Hall supports reducing the influence of political parties in Oklahoma’s primary elections by adopting open primaries. Closed primaries often lead to the nomination of the most partisan candidates for the general election. To address this, the Town Hall strongly recommends that Oklahoma transition to an open, unified election system with the following features:
 1. All candidates regardless of party affiliation appear on a unified ballot for all eligible voters.
 2. Party affiliation will be listed for each candidate on the ballot.

First and foremost, an open, unified ballot empowers all voters. Under our current system, access to certain primaries is restricted by party affiliation, leaving a significant portion of Oklahomans without a voice in the critical early stages of the electoral process. This means nearly half of our state’s registered voters are effectively excluded from shaping the choices they’ll see in the general election. By moving to a unified ballot, every voter—Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, or Independent — has the right to weigh in on all candidates, not just those in their own party. This change ensures that elections are a true reflection of the will of all Oklahomans. [Pages 24, 26, and 37](#)

Priority Recommendations

Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People?
2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Priority Recommendations**



Second Priority Recommendation

- The initiative petition process allows Oklahoma voters to propose laws or constitutional amendments without relying solely on the state legislature. This ensures that citizens have a direct voice in shaping policies that affect their lives. Oklahoma has used the initiative process to address important issues like tax reform, education funding, and criminal justice reform. The process allows for grassroots innovation, encouraging new ideas and reforms to be considered at the state level, sometimes addressing needs more quickly than traditional legislative processes. The Town Hall strongly recommends specific reforms to the initiative petition process to make it more accessible to Oklahoma Citizens. These changes must include:
 1. Increasing signature collection to 180 days and reducing the challenge period to 10 days.
 2. Allowing for dynamic signature validation during the signature collection process.
 3. Upon ballot approval, all initiatives must be scheduled for the next November election.
 4. Reforming the data points for validation of signatures and creating a more user-friendly signature form.
 5. Improving readability of ballot title language by requiring a specific grade-level appropriate language.
 6. Using the same voter identification validation rules for initiative petition validation and election day validation.

Oklahoma's first initiative, introduced in 1908, was Initiative 1, State Question 5, which failed at the ballot box. Between 1908 and 2022, 93 initiatives appeared on the statewide ballot, with 43 passing and 50 failing, resulting in an approval rate of 46.24%. More recently, from 2000 to 2022, 10 initiatives were presented, with an equal split of five passing and five failing. [Page 34](#)

Third Priority Recommendation

- The Town Hall strongly recommends the elimination of straight-ticket voting, also called straight-party voting, in Oklahoma. Currently, only six states, including Oklahoma, still permit this practice. Several states have abolished straight-party voting on their ballots over the past decade: Utah in 2020, Pennsylvania in 2019, Iowa in 2017, Texas in 2017, Indiana in 2016, and West Virginia in 2015. Ending straight-ticket voting could provide meaningful improvements to Oklahoma's democratic process. Abolishing this voting practice should suggest that voters are more likely to carefully review and make informed decisions about other critical aspects of the ballot, such as state questions, judicial retention elections, and local races. These sections are often overlooked in favor of top-ticket partisan races, leading to an incomplete representation of voter preferences on crucial issues and positions. By requiring voters to select candidates individually, Oklahoma can encourage a more informed decision-making approach to voting, fostering greater awareness and participation in all aspects of the election process. [Page 37](#)



One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say.” — **Bryant H. McGill**

Key Recommendations

Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People? 2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Consensus Recommendations**



- The Town Hall believes the prevalence of dark money in Oklahoma elections is a top problem. Regulating dark money remains challenging in any situation, however, the Town Hall recommends enhancing transparency to be the top priority. It's important to note that the Supreme Court's ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* determined that independent expenditures by corporations and unions are protected under the First Amendments and not subject to restriction by the government. By prioritizing transparency, Oklahoma can empower voters, and foster trust in the electoral system. This approach respects the legal framework established by *Citizens United* while addressing the democratic need for openness and accountability. [Pages 20 & 35](#)
- The Oklahoma Ethics Commission plays a crucial role in ensuring integrity, transparency, and accountability in the state's government and political processes. The Town Hall believes the Ethics Commission must be funded adequately to carry out their enforcement mission. Therefore, the Town Hall recommends the Legislature allocate increased recurring funding to the Ethics Commission. This should be accomplished with an assessment of a percentage of dark money to be directed to the Ethics Commission enforcement activities. By ensuring ethical behavior and transparency, the Ethics Commission helps build trust between the public and their government, which is essential for a healthy democracy. [Page 35](#)
- Teaching students about elections, voting processes, and the role of government at an early age ensures they have a foundational understanding of how democracy works. Research has shown that many Americans lack basic knowledge about how their government operates, leading to disengagement or disillusionment. For this reason, the Town Hall strongly recommends embedding age-appropriate election information into the K-12 curriculum. Civic engagement must be revisited throughout educational journey of Oklahoma students. This is not just about preparing future voters, it's about cultivating informed, empowered, and engaged citizens who will sustain and strengthen Oklahoma's democracy. By making this commitment, Oklahoma can lead by example in ensuring a robust, participatory civic culture for generations to come. [Page 24](#)
- Approximately one-third of young adults reported no intention to vote or participate civically in the 2024 elections, and 61% stated they did not align with either major political party, according to national polling of Americans aged 18–24. In Oklahoma, only 20% of registered voters in this age group participated in the 2022 general election. To address this, the Town Hall strongly recommends the establishment of a commission composed entirely of young people age 18–24, focused on boosting voter engagement. The commission's objectives would include enhancing voter education, improving access to information, and addressing issues of representation while emphasizing the importance of youth participation. The commission would dissolve one year after its initial planning and strategies are finalized. [Page 24](#)
- Political polarization remains a significant factor in the U.S. political landscape. The Town Hall unanimously recommends the importance of being open to diverse, reasonable political perspectives. It calls for a cultural shift away from viewing political discussions as taboo. Honest and respectful conversations can uncover shared values, fostering unity rather than division. Achieving this requires active listening, patience, curiosity, and mutual respect. However, when hateful language and divisive slogans dominate, they undermine thoughtful dialogue. The Town Hall recommends empowering organizations that promote civil discourse to take a more prominent role in creating spaces for constructive dialogue, respectful debate, and reasoned disagreement. Political polarization undermines the unity needed to address pressing challenges. Promoting openness, respect, and civil discourse is a powerful step toward building a culture of mutual understanding and cooperation. By creating spaces for thoughtful dialogue, society can move beyond division toward a more cohesive and productive future. [Page 28](#)

Key Recommendations

Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People? 2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Consensus Recommendations**



- The Town Hall recommends to improve for students better knowledge of the importance of being civics aware and civics minded, students should get to meet elected officials first-hand, and have opportunities to volunteer as opposed to simply being taught a civics curriculum. Youth need to have positive team-building experiences around civic projects, so that they can have a better understanding and awareness of the importance of civics, being respectful, and being civil in expressing themselves, especially on sometimes divisive issues. The Town Hall recommends increased funding toward civics education, so teachers have the proper resources to instruct students on civic engagement and to provide real-world opportunities to interact with government and elected officials. [Page 31](#)
- Access to reliable local news is an essential component of civic life. It plays a vital role in fostering informed communities, encouraging civic engagement, and supporting democratic governance. The U.S. has lost about a third of its newspapers since 2005, many of them in rural areas. The Town Hall expresses deep concern over the sharp decline of traditional local media, including newspapers, which once played a vital role in communities and served as generally reliable information sources. Therefore, the Town Hall recommends the legislature revisit and modernize the definition of “newspaper” in state statute to strengthen the local newsrooms and expand revenue sources, while ensuring a printed presence is retained at least 12 times in a calendar year. [Page 36](#)
- Promoting meaningful media literacy is not just a strategy to address the negative effects of social media, it is an investment in a well-informed, resilient, and engaged society. The Town Hall believes that social media often disseminates low-quality and inaccurate political information, contributing negatively to the political climate. To address this, the Town Hall recommends promoting meaningful media literacy to help society, beyond just youth, navigate the challenges posed by social media and other unreliable sources. Proposed strategies include:
 - Launching a statewide campaign to raise awareness about the spread of false information on social media and teaching critical thinking skills to differentiate between true and false content.
 - Advocating for non-partisan civic education that incorporates media literacy, starting as early as elementary school. This education should also include guidance on maintaining a healthy relationship with the digital environment and social media.

By empowering all citizens to critically engage with information, this recommendation can help mitigate the harmful influence of misinformation and create a healthier political environment. [Page 36-37](#)



Civility is not about dousing strongly held views. It’s about making sure that people are willing to respect other perspectives.”

— **Jim Leach**

Research and Planning Committee

Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People?

2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Team



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The Oklahoma Academy wishes to also acknowledge the members of the Town Hall Research and Planning Committee for their assistance in developing the resource document. The committee was also responsible for identifying speakers and sponsors invested in the 2024 Town Hall.

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2024

TOWN HALL

PARTICIPANTS

Town Hall Participant Profile

Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People?
2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



GENDER

	<u>TOWN HALL</u>	<u>STATE</u>
Female	56.9%	50.3%
Male	43.1%	49.7%

ETHNICITY

African American	5.3%	7.9%
Asian American	2.15%	2.6%
Caucasian	75%	72.9%
Latin American	2.1%	12.9%
Native American	15%	9.5%

VOTER REGISTRATION as of Nov.

Republicans	53%	52.33%
Democrats	31%	26.98%
Independents	15%	19.72%
Libertarians	1%	.95%

REGION

NC region	6.4%
NE region	15.1%
NW region	1.07%
OKC region	37.6%
SC region	11.8%
SE region	10.7%
SW region	3.2%
Tulsa region	13.9%

AGE GROUPS

18-20	4.3%
21-24	3.2%
25-34	6.4%
35-44	17.2%
45-54	32.2%
55-59	10.7%
60-64	11.8%
65-plus	13.9%

JOB SECTOR

Education	12.9%
Government	24.7%
Lobbyists	2.15%
Nonprofit	25.8%
Private	25.8%
College Students	8.6%



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Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People? 2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



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Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People? 2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



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TOWN HALL FINAL REPORT



Final Report

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INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by significant political transformations and challenges, the people of Oklahoma have a unique opportunity to unite and engage in meaningful dialogue about our evolving political landscape. The Oklahoma Academy Town Hall recognizes that understanding the complexities of our political system is essential for fostering a vibrant democracy. By addressing critical issues surrounding politics, primaries, and polarization through the lens of “What about the Oklahoma People?”, we can cultivate a space where every voice is valued and heard. The Town Hall’s collaborative approach not only empowers citizens to express their perspectives but also inspires optimism and curiosity about the future of our state.

Together, the Town Hall Participants harnessed the power of open and respectful dialogue to tackle challenging barriers head-on, transforming difficult conversations into actionable solutions that promise to foster a more inclusive and informed community. This collaborative effort exemplifies our belief that when Oklahomans unite their collective insights, they can spark meaningful change that resonates across the state. The report we present is not just a collection of ideas; it’s a blueprint for a future where understanding and respect are at the forefront, paving the way for a cohesive Oklahoma that truly works for everyone. The following report are consensus findings and recommendations of these vital discussions that show how informed dialogue creates the path toward a stronger Oklahoma for all.

**Notations in blue were included following the fact-checking process conducted after the Town Hall. They are designed to offer supplementary information and serve as an educational resource.*

REPORT

POLITICS, PRIMARIES, AND POLARIZATION: *What About the Oklahoma People?*

The 2024 Town Hall, entitled Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the People, began Sunday night, with opening remarks from the Town Hall Chairman, Howard Barnett, followed by brief remarks from the Research Committee Chair, Craig Knutson.

Chairman Barnett then introduced former congressman Mickey Edwards from Oklahoma’s 5th District. Edwards, who is a Visiting Professor at Princeton’s School of Public and International Affairs, began by stating that partisanship and polarization are “not our natural world” and that a small minority in congress are hiding behind party labels to create this environment. He also noted that in only four states of the 50 can all voters select from all candidates running for office, a situation he laments. He focused on the reforming of the system and better education for the electorate as two ways of improving the political landscape.

Chairman Barnett then introduced Keith Gaddie, Ph.D., Professor of Political Science at Texas Christian University and former professor at the University of Oklahoma for over 25 years. His comments began with a discussion of there being two Oklahomas: Urban-Rural and Young-Old. He cited a statistic that only 10 counties in Oklahoma are growing, with 67 “stagnant or in decline.” His assessment is that cities are working and are driven by nonpartisan election systems (lack of party labels). He decried the socialization of politics and said that “populism” is not an inherently evil term; unfortunately, it is often a contest between what you do to people as opposed to what to do for people.

Dr. Gaddie then introduced a panel to discuss the History of Politics in Oklahoma. Panelists included Cal Hobson, former President Pro Tempore of the Oklahoma State Senate, G.T. Bynum, Mayor of Tulsa, Jim Dunlap, former State Representative and Senator, and Rodger Randle, former State Representative, President Pro Tempore of the Oklahoma State Senate, and Mayor of Tulsa. Dr. Gaddie had a wide range of questions for the panel but much of the general discussion revolved around the “degradation of civil comportment” and the reduction in the quantity of local journalists and news sources. Panelists lamented the ideological adventures so prevalent now and the lack of focus on “solving problems.” All seemed concerned with the explosion of social

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media, with biased reporting (less reliable), leading to a potential erosion of democracy. The influence of dark money was also cited by a number of the panelists as being a contributor to the polarization.

When asked by Dr. Gaddie what might be the best fix to this problem, nearly all cited Open Primaries. Several audience members presented questions to the panel including: who is more dangerous, a voter educated on social media or a nonvoter, and where do we get nonpartisan, factual information when social media platforms dominate the political scenes? Both panelists and members from the audience voiced their opinions on those and other questions.

Keith then invited the second set of panelists to the dais, the Then and Now. Panelists included Ben Chandler, former member of Congress from Kentucky, John Sullivan, former member of Congress from Oklahoma, Kendra Horn, former member of Congress from Oklahoma, and Mickey Edwards. Most decried the same environment described in the previous panel and reiterated some of the same issues: Dark Money, federally gerrymandered districts, and the need for Open Primaries. All agreed that we are rewarding/incentivizing partisan behavior by allowing the extremes to use social media platforms to “poison” the conversation. There was a question from the audience and a lengthy discussion from the panel on the bipartisan border security bill by Senator Lankford that was tabled. As one panelist remarked, it’s hard to be a moderate because you get attacked from both party extremes. Another panelist mentioned the need for more “work horses” and fewer “show horses.” Finally, a panelist bemoaned the bad combination of “ignorance and certainty” in so much of the national discussion.

Day 1, Question 1

Following the very informative and engaging Sunday night discussion, Town Hall attendees were asked to discuss the biggest barriers to voter participation in Oklahoma, with potential remedies. There are no shortages of barriers to poor voter turnout, but there was consensus among the majority of panels as to the largest contributors to this problem. Three of the most prominent reasons included: **(1)** the lack of information about polling locations, candidates and issues on the ballot; **(2)** most voters don’t believe their votes count (apathy); and **(3)** the lack of civics education in schools and elsewhere.

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There were many other barriers that were discussed but were not mentioned in all panels. Several panels talked about the timing and number of elections and voter fatigue caused by polarization and attack ads, absentee ballots (notarization requirement; burdensome number of steps), transportation and the lack of accessibility to polling locations (especially those with disabilities or the poor), lack of weekend voting/paid time off, distrust and disenchantment with government officials, noncompetitive elections, and the lack of representation in candidates and elected officials. One panel noted that among the tribes there may be a wariness about participation in a political system that has historically been perceived as broken, ineffective, and dismissive of tribal concerns (and opinions of tribal members). This panel expressed that the discord of Oklahoma politics causes a sense of resignation or even apathy among tribal citizens and their attitudes toward Oklahoma politics and civic engagement.

There was also a plethora of solutions to address those barriers. Virtually every panel focused on the importance of improving education, in particular civics education, starting as early as possible. Specific solutions called for more government and history classes emphasizing this civics component. One panel mentioned that the curriculum should include teaching students how to register to vote, how to critically evaluate sources of information to determine truthfulness, and general education about government systems. Another called for the creation of non-partisan education documents on how to vote and about details on both candidates and issues.

Other solutions mentioned but not meeting a consensus threshold were: starting early voting even earlier (e.g., one month); mailing ballots to all voters; increasing face-to-face interactions between voters and candidates; automatically registering all citizens by age 18; creating consistent locations for voting precincts, encouraging more parents to have their children accompany them to vote; as well as the concept of PSA campaigns including educational pamphlets were proposed; and embolden high schools to encourage students of voting age (seniors) to get registered and where they can vote. Overall, there is no lack of the barriers we face nor the potential solutions to remedy those barriers according to Town Hall attendees. The former won't be reduced without action on the latter.

Day 1, Question 2

Panelists considered the historical rural-urban divide in the state of Oklahoma. Drawing on Rodger Randle's essay in the resource document, noting that it took over 50 years of state history to pass before a city-based politician was elected Governor. Panelists specifically grappled with the question: How has the rural-urban division shaped Oklahoma's policy debates, and what strategies could bridge the gap between these communities?

The panels were in agreement that there is a divide in Oklahoma politics and lawmaking, exacerbated by the divergent interests and needs of Oklahomans depending partly on the geography of their location. There is a perception that the cities are successful and thriving, while rural areas are left behind; however, multiple panels expressed that different regions of the state have differing definitions of success. There is also a perception that the urban-rural split within the legislature sometimes becomes even more apparent than the partisan divide, especially as the fastest-growing areas of the state are urban or exurban as opposed to rural. This has led, even, to the establishment of a "rural caucus" within the legislature to push for rural interests, further highlighting the division. One panel suggested that the steady representational decline of rural areas has given rural voters an incentive to elect more extreme personalities to office in order to feel heard. Another major difference is that rural areas are largely dominated by one political party, while urban areas in Oklahoma tend to have more competitive partisanship – a phenomenon that may tend to make rural areas elect more conservative lawmakers and cities to elect more centrist lawmakers. Another urban-rural difference is the major civic and economic role the tribes play in the rural areas of the state.

An additional facet of the divide mentioned by two panels was the concept of school vouchers and public funding being diverted to private schools, which largely only exist in urban areas. Additionally, school bonds and other rural infrastructure bonds are difficult to pass, causing consternation about infrastructure relating to rural schools and roads, and a possible follow-on effect of population decrease.

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Two panels noted that a problem rural areas face is that of municipal revenue for small towns, which is in very short supply due to over-reliance on the sales tax. Our municipal tax structure does not provide proper revenue for, among other needs, infrastructure maintenance and growth, which contributes to the shrinking of rural towns. To remedy this issue, the structure of our municipal funding, which primarily relies on sales tax and ancillary funding such as patrol citations, must be reformed. One panel asserted that the limited revenue in rural municipalities leads to a heavy reliance on overburdened and underfunded nonprofits for many local needs. Nonprofits in rural areas struggle to address local poverty and homelessness, and while these endemic issues also affect cities, there is a perception that raising money in rural areas is a greater challenge.

One panel honed in on a possible urban-rural divide relating to state questions that appear on the ballot during elections. Urban areas are seen as easier locations to gain a large number of signatures for initiative petitions, but signatures are typically collected in the majority, if not all, 77 counties. Let it be noted that the entire state votes on State Questions regardless of where signatures are collected and requires a majority vote to pass.

Multiple panels agreed that communication and dialogue between urban and rural interests will be of key importance, if the divide is to be resolved. One panel suggested that local leaders, regardless of urban or rural, should invite state legislators to their communities to educate them about their unique issues. Another panel mentioned that rural areas, particularly those towards the far edges of the state, consume news media from markets outside the OKC/TULSA areas, causing them to possibly be less informed on Oklahoma civic news developments and issues, further highlighting the need for improved interregional communication within the state. One panel made a recommendation to create a commission with representation from all communities in order to facilitate education in urban areas about rural needs, and vice versa, and to encourage a manner of thinking of Oklahoma as a united entity as opposed to an assembly of regional silos.

In terms of a legislative response to the urban-rural divide, there were a multiplicity of ideas: One panel recommended that the State Senate and State House consider actions that can reform the nature of campaign donations, since the public may perceive that legislators seem to vote based on the influence of campaign funding as opposed to local interests, and campaign financiers may have interests that diverge from local needs and desires. Another panel stated that it would be helpful to have more polling locations in rural Oklahoma due to the longer commute needed to vote. Another panel noted that access to state services via online platforms is made more difficult in rural areas due to lower quality of internet access, and suggested that more emphasis be placed on such access to services in rural areas. One panel asserted that the legislature might benefit from impact studies on how legislation will impact urban and rural areas differently. Additionally, the panel encourages the state legislature to foster improved urban and rural understanding by holding interim studies, field studies, and committee meetings in a variety of rural settings away from the State Capitol.

Multiple panels agreed that while urban and rural issues may have divergence, part of any solution to heal the rift is to encourage legislators and candidates not to enflame these tensions for the sake of political gain, and to encourage greater cooperation among lawmakers rather than strict regional allegiance. Another idea that found traction in two panels was the concept of urban-rural exchange programs or learning programs involving students or other citizens, so that better inter-regional understanding can be achieved. Lawmaking requires knowledgeable policy makers from both urban and rural communities to be at the table, and requires dialogue about common needs as opposed to legislators merely “protecting their turf.”

Day 1, Question 3

The attendees next addressed the questions of whether: **(1)** All voters should be able to vote for any candidate in every taxpayer-funded election; and **(2)** all candidates should have to earn the majority support to win. The consensus among all panels was a “Yes” to both statements, although one panel suggested these statements be more “fully researched before implementing.”

Several mentioned that the current primary system is a barrier to many moderate candidates, especially in areas controlled by one party. It also causes some voters to change party registration just to vote. One panel felt that the growing segment of Inde-

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pendent voters have been completely locked out of elections. One panel expressed a strong view that it feels to voters that participating in a primary is a privilege rather than a right under the current closed primary system, and that moving to make it more accessible through an open primary, without partisan gatekeeping, is important. Moving to an open primary system should improve voter engagement, result in an increased number of candidates, reduce polarization, and possibly lead to the elimination of straight line/party voting.

While straight party voting was mentioned in nearly all panels, three of the panels called for the “elimination” of this voting practice. At the final plenary session, it was the consensus of the Town Hall that straight party voting be eliminated. This determination was made due to the issue of straight party voting not capturing votes on state questions or judicial retention ballots if the voter doesn’t specifically vote on those questions. Other discussions included the consideration of a “blanket party system,” which is a type of primary where all candidates are listed on the same ballot. Voters are allowed to choose one candidate per office regardless of the candidate’s party affiliation. The top vote-getters from each party that is participating in the primary then advance to the general election. Blanket primaries differ from traditional primaries, which only allow voters to vote for candidates in one political party. A majority of one panel supported same-day voter registration as well as automatic, opt-in registration. One panel agreed that voters should know who is funding all campaigns (dark money concern). Finally, one panel discussed the removal of party labels from all ballots, although it did not generate a consensus support for the concept.

Following much discussion, the Town Hall strongly recommended implementing a uniform, two-week voting period to decrease confusion and travel barriers for voters. One panel recommended nonpartisan elections for county offices and a more accessible process for voting and voter registration. One panel emphasized that it can be important to have an election day with exclusively nonpartisan contents such as school board elections, bond issues, and municipal elections, separate from politically charged primary elections, in order to encourage participation in elections that is not necessarily partisan. Finally, one panel had three specific recommendations, one of which has already been mentioned (elimination of straight party voting: Shorten the campaign season, e.g., to two months and endorsement of the Louisiana-model of open general election (all candidates with 50%+1 win, but if this does not occur, there is a runoff for the top two vote-getters).

Day 1, Question 4

Next, participants grappled with diagnosing the primary concerns in Oklahoma’s political climate, when challenged to identify the top two issues they believe are the biggest problems. The prompt included the following: **(1)** Closed primaries; **(2)** Partisanship/polarization; **(3)** Dark money/nontransparency of funding; **(4)** Initiative petition process **(5)** One party domination; and **(6)** Social media. Panels were specifically asked: what are the underlying causes of these problems in Oklahoma politics, and what steps (policy and otherwise) need to be taken to minimize or eliminate the problem over time?

The prevalence of dark money in Oklahoma elections was named as a top problem by three different panels. Dark money refers to spending meant to influence political outcomes where the source of the money is not disclosed. One panel stated that dark money enables funding to come from out of state in order to “drag candidates through the dirt” without transparency as to the origin of the political funding for such advertising. Dark money is seen as a mechanism to achieve negative campaign ads that create political discord that leads to a cycle of hate and acrimony in politics. One panel asserted that the reason for the entrenchment of dark money is that those who are currently elected tend to benefit from its use, and therefore may be resistant to changing regulations on it. One panel asserted that dark money is used as a tool by individuals and organizations outside of Oklahoma in order to advance national agendas. Proposed remedies to dark money’s prevalence in Oklahoma elections were varied and ranged from caps on dark money spending and donations within the state, enhanced transparency regulations so that voters can identify the sources of political influence in campaign related advertising, and the establishment of a publicly funded election system. Most panels agreed that enhanced transparency should be the major priority, and acknowledged that regulation of dark money is difficult in any scenario. One panel advocated for the creation of a non-partisan website that links specifically to the websites of candidates and provides summary information on can-

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didate issue positions, in order to have an unbiased source of information as an alternative to dark money funded disinformation campaigns. A similar proposal was to build on successful summaries conducted by nonprofit groups to assist voters with understanding the stakes and issues of elections and ballot initiatives or state questions. For example, the Choctaw Nation sends out voter informational pamphlets that are useful for those who have questions. Another panel suggested that the state’s “guardian” system could be used to track dark money sources if the right set of regulations were enacted. *(NOTE: The Guardian System is a database used to track campaign finance reports and the registration of lobbyists. The system is set to expire in February 2025.)*

Some panels linked dark money directly to other prevailing concerns in the Oklahoma political system, specifically partisanship, polarization, and misinformation. One panel mentioned that disinformation or misinformation, sometimes exacerbated by the negative ads that come from dark money, helps lead to a politically polarized citizenry where many cannot discuss ideas with an opposing political side. Another panel asserted that some political actors benefit from political polarization and intentionally foment it through their dark money contributions.

The other most frequently mentioned top problem in Oklahoma politics was social media, which was mentioned as a priority by three panels alongside a corollary concern with misinformation and polarization that is driven in part by social media. Many agreed that a large number of social media users can be susceptible to erroneous claims, and that consumption of political information on social media creates an information bubble that conditions citizens to other ideas. One panel said that social media is a breeding ground for misplaced trust and false legitimacy, as well as an easy way to attack others and spread misinformation. While social media can be a great political communication tool, it is also often glib, divisive, focused on federal as opposed to state issues. Multiple panels recommended that media literacy include social media literacy so that students can be taught how to identify false claims, be skeptical of sweeping assertions, and practice critical thinking. One panel specifically mentioned the importance of encouraging citizens to express their policy views on a human level through normal socialization as opposed to social media. Another panel speculated that social media is made more toxic due to algorithms that distribute partisan information to those who have interacted with similar posts in the past, causing an ideological silo to result. Social media was linked by multiple panels to enhanced partisanship, information bubbles, demonization of the other side, and creating a culture of sniping that inhibits progress and churns out misinformation.

Closed primaries were listed as a top-two concern by two panels, and were mentioned as a more ancillary concern by the other panels. Closed primaries were linked to partisanship and dark money, since the closed primary political environment is ripe for more targeted partisan messaging. One panel noted that closed primaries may tend to contribute to voter apathy and overall lower engagement by the electorate.

Multiple panels mentioned, although this did not rank as a top problem, the concept of citizen/voter apathy and disengagement from the political and policymaking process. One panel stated that in areas of one-party domination, many who have differing opinions feel that engagement does not work, and that compromise is thereby hindered. Another panel insisted that a major issue facing the Oklahoma political system is the lack of a nonpartisan redistricting or district-drawing system, and that one should be developed. A panel also asserted that a renewed sense of camaraderie is needed in order to overcome political divisiveness, which leads to disengagement. A possible solution was incentivizing positivity instead of incivility at the highest levels of government. Another panel asserted that perhaps too much of the assignment of blame for problems in Oklahoma politics is assigned to politicians, and not enough is assigned to the electorate which is itself polarized and unengaged.

One panel mentioned that as a result of polarization, dark money, and other factors that contribute to a decline in political virtue, some individuals who would make good candidates have chosen not to run – and this itself is a problem worthy of a response. Good candidates may not want to open themselves to harmful rhetoric or expose their family to vitriol.

One panel mentioned an ancillary concern with weaponization of the Open Records Act, which can be used to soak up the time of state employees and/or to obtain information only useful to make sensationalized news stories.

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Day 1, Luncheon Plenary Session

Following the conclusion of the first session of questions for the Town Hall, the participants moved to the ballroom for lunch and to listen to a conversation on primaries and voter engagement. The conversational panel was comprised of David Holt, Mayor of Oklahoma City and first Native American Mayor of Oklahoma City; John Opdycke, Founder and President of Open Primaries; Pat McFerron, founding Partner of CMA Strategies; Mike Mazzei, former State Senator; Chris Powell, Chair of the Oklahoma Libertarian Party; and Andy Lester, Partner, Spencer Fane.

This group of leaders were asked: What impact do closed vs. open primaries have on the diversity of candidates and voter turnout in elections? Are there specific benefits or challenges to each system in this state?

The discussion highlighted a critical debate on primary elections' nature and their effects on both candidate diversity and voter engagement. Advocates of open primaries, where all voters can participate regardless of party affiliation, argue that these systems can broaden candidate diversity and attract a wider base, potentially boosting turnout. Supporters believe that open primaries may encourage candidates who reflect a broader range of voter perspectives, thereby reducing extremism and enhancing competitiveness in elections. One proposed solution was a jungle primary model, where all candidates for an office appear on the same ballot in the general election, and the candidate with a majority vote (50% of total votes plus one) wins. If no candidate wins a majority in the primary, the top two candidates proceed to a run-off election.

However, those in favor of Oklahoma's current semi-closed or closed primary system argue that it ensures that party loyalists—those who are actively invested in a party's values and policies—select their candidates. This group contended that allowing unaffiliated or cross-party voters to influence party nominations could dilute the party's identity and lead to candidates who don't fully represent its base.

The discussion also touched on concerns about voter apathy, with panelists citing situations where local elections (like those for state representative or county sheriff) are effectively decided in the primary stage of opposing parties. This can leave some

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voters feeling disenfranchised if they can't participate due to party restrictions, potentially fueling apathy and limiting engagement. The debate highlighted the balance between inclusivity and party integrity, and how different primary structures may affect democratic participation in Oklahoma.

Day 1, Question 5

Following a luncheon discussion addressing primaries and voter engagement, the attendees reconvened to address the obstacles that younger and first-time voters face when participating in Oklahoma's primaries. About a third of young adults don't intend to vote or participate civically in the 2024 elections, and 61% said they don't align with either major political party, national polling of Americans age 18-24 found.

As to obstacles or barriers that might be causing youth to not engage civically and electorally, the attendees shared a wide range of reasons why this situation has occurred. Several panels identified the lack of fully understanding the electoral process. Even if registrations increase, getting the word out as to where and when to vote is a missing step. Part of that problem stems from how to communicate that message. One panel suggested greater use of cell phones to provide messaging updates, since most youth use their cell phones for a variety of activities (a specific recommendation of one panel). Other barriers cited were the lack of family engagement and encouragement, the lack of nonpartisan sources of information (bias prevention), their inability to relate to most elected official generationally ("they don't see themselves represented in the elected officials"), and several mentioned that young voters don't feel they are taken seriously by politician and elected officials. When looking at the youth experience in election cycles, Gen-Z has never experienced a civil election cycle, which has fostered disengagement in voting and in politics.

But, as one panel wrote, "These barriers can be reduced." Several panels again recommended the automatic voter registration system. In fact, one mentioned preregistration should be implemented at 16 (driver's license issuance). *(NOTE: There are 20 states plus Washington, D.C. that allow preregistration beginning at 16 years old. Most states that allow preregistration will add applicants to voter lists under a pending status, which is then updated to active when the voter turns 18.)* Several panels suggested the use of adult mentors and current policy makers to better engage with young voters. Improved and enhanced K-12 civics education was again cited as a longer-term strategy to encourage young voter registrations. Adding polling places at some high schools and college campuses would encourage increased voting, especially for those challenged with poor transportation options.

There were a number of panels that discussed a variety of outreach efforts to improve participation. Campaigns to get out the vote have been effective in the past, and several panels mentioned the efforts of Taylor Swift, MTV, and the NFL. Also utilizing the efforts/programs of the Future Farmers of America, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and nonprofits like iCivics could be most impactful.

Finally, there were specific recommendations made by each panel, and the Town Hall as a whole, some could be considered overlapping but worthy of citation here:

- The adoption of an automatic voter registration system for American citizens living in Oklahoma when they turn 18, similar to how registration for selective services works. This would also include an opt-out option for those who choose not to register to vote;
- Lowering the preregistration age to 16 or 17 *(NOTE: Currently, persons who are at least 17½ years old may pre-register to vote in Oklahoma if they meet all eligibility requirements. Applicants who pre-register cannot vote until they turn 18 years old and the application has been approved by the applicant's County Election Board Secretary. Applicants will be mailed a Voter ID card upon approval of their registration.)*;
- Allow same-day voter registration;

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- Developing listening sessions to give change-makers the opportunity to hear from underrepresented voters' and solutions;
- The Town Hall strongly recommends embedding age-appropriate election information into the K-12 curriculum, so that civic engagement is revisited throughout their educational journey (OSDE responsible);
- The Town Hall strongly recommends the creation of a commission made up entirely of young people (18–24-year-old) aimed at increasing voter engagement. Their goals are to increase voter engagement, increase voter education and access to information, and combat the issues of representation and their importance of their participation. The commission would sunset 1 year after initial planning and strategies have been defined;
- Automatically send out mail-in ballots;
- Create a system to move to mobile voting;
- Voting precincts on colleges and universities; and
- Encouraging all students to pursue paging or internship opportunities, regardless of their major or club involvement.

Day 1, Question 6

Oklahoma has modified, closed primaries. In order to participate in a political party's primary election, you must be a registered voter of that political party – unless the party opens its primaries to unaffiliated voters, known as Independents. There are three recognized parties in Oklahoma: Republican, Democrat, and Libertarian. Panelists were asked if they agree with the role the political parties play in Oklahoma's primary elections, and whether their influence should be adjusted to ensure broader voter representation.

Three of the five panels asserted that the overall role political parties play in the Oklahoma primary elections can and should be reduced by having open primaries, and the remaining two panels had mixed opinions. Multiple panels asserted that party control of primaries tends to increase partisanship to tie voter identity to a party. Two panels argued that if open primaries cannot be accomplished, they support a rule requiring the parties to pay for their own primary elections if they want control over who is on the ballot and who may vote. A panelist said, "primaries should be for the people, not the political parties." One panel added that opening the primaries is in the interest of increasing voter participation. Two panels despaired that in much of Oklahoma, there are voters who simply cannot participate in any primaries because they are not in the party of the local majority, or they are an independent.

Multiple panels despaired that closed primaries tend to result in the nomination of the most extreme partisans for the general election. Multiple panels did discuss the possibility of individuals gaming open primaries to sabotage other parties or other malicious acts, but most dismissed this as unlikely. One panel noted the importance of redistricting being influenced by the parties, and recommended the formation of an independent commission which would be responsible for non-partisan statewide redistricting efforts. The purpose of this is to eliminate the negative impacts of gerrymandering which has led to only 10% of our legislative seats being competitive. A potential model to look at is the model adopted by the state of Michigan.

Two panels noted that the parties do play some positive roles in the primary process. Candidates who are affiliated with a major party have easier ballot access, and the party can give an identity and political platform to the candidates, as well as a fundraising base to get out their message.

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Day 1, Question 7

The final question of day one dealt with the impact of closed or semi-closed primary systems on voter engagement in our state. They were also asked to address how the current primary system influences the types of candidates that run for office. Finally, would an open primary system offer a better solution and, if yes, what type would you prefer?

There was unanimity that the negatives outweigh the positives in our current primary system. Each panel addressed this question differently, but their rationale resulted in the same conclusion. One panel stated that it creates lower voter turnout due to their inability to vote. Another panel stated that most voters don't feel represented by either party, especially those registered as independent, also known as an unaffiliated voter. Other panels mentioned that voters feel their voices are not being heard, and that the current system "is a product of the party and not a product of the people." This situation leads to party switching and unnecessary apathy among the electorate. Others were concerned that the current closed primary system leads to candidates that don't work for their communities, and it robs citizens of the opportunity to interact with their representatives/senators. One panel felt the current system has replaced problem solvers with ideological advocates. Finally, one panel stated that an "open primary system encouraged policy-driven representatives rather than politics-driven representatives."

As to how the current primary system impacts the quality of the candidate running, the consensus of the panels is that such a system "hinders us from getting the best candidates." Several of the panels cited financial reasons for attracting quality candidates. One panel felt that money was often "the first barrier for candidates;" another panel cited the need for better pay for Legislators. "Unless you are a person of means, or a lawyer or similar flexible role, most people simply cannot run because of the financial hardship put on their family." Another panel felt that the lack of centrists is a direct result of a closed primary system.

There was consensus among all panels that some form of an open primary system would be much better for improving voter engagement than our current system. One panel concluded that the move to that system would lead to greater collaboration and civility. But several fear that such a move would be contested by those in power, because it would create competition for

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any incumbents. One opined that the philosophy of the seat is crucial: am I here to get re-elected or do the right things?

However, after thorough civil discussion and consensus, the Town Hall strongly recommended that the State of Oklahoma move to an open, unified election system that consists of the following: **(1)** all candidates regardless of party affiliation appear on a unified ballot for all eligible voters; **(2)** party affiliation will be listed for each candidate on the ballot.

Finally, one panel concluded their day's discussion with two specific recommendations:

- An impact study on how to best use a comprehensive electronic system to engage participation in the voting process to include voter registration, initiative petition, and voting.
- Moving the first round of elections to July or August, from June in order to shorten the election timeline/calendar. *(NOTE: The federal MOVE Act and 26 O.S. § 14-118 both require absentee ballots to be transmitted to military and overseas voters no later than 45 days prior to the date of the election. In order to ensure compliance with this law, there should be at least 70-75 days between the end of the candidate filing period and the Primary, and between the Primary and Runoff Primary, and between the Runoff Primary and the General Election. This is to ensure there is sufficient time to handle contests, get the prior election certified, and prepare and test ballots for the next election.)*

Day 1, Dinner Plenary Session

The Town Hall met for dinner Monday night for A Conversation Addressing the Effects of Polarization, moderated by Rev. Gary Peluso-Verdend, Ph.D, President Emeritus at Phillips Theological Seminary. The presenters on the discussion panel included Hon. Chris Bengé, former Speaker of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, Secretary of State of Oklahoma, and Secretary of Native American Affairs; Hon. Roger Thompson, former State Senate Appropriations and Budget Chair; Hon. Joe Dorman, former State Representative; Jeremy Gruber, J.D., Senior Vice President, Open Primaries; Seth McKee, Ph.D., Department of Political Science, Oklahoma State University.

Moderator Dr. Peluso-Verdend mentioned that civil discourse is not about niceness, it is about having quality conversations and even arguments to make progress on what your community wants to be about; he opined that perhaps these skills are not in abundance in the body politic presently. Dr. Peluso-Verdend mentioned that they were to explore the causes of growing political divide, the effect of it on communities, and the role of the media.

What factors have contributed the most to the political divide? Speaker Bengé was the first to share his perspective, stating that the “culture war” in American politics reaches further back than the 1998 Clinton impeachment, and has experienced the acceleration effects of social media since then. He added “we know too much about each other now” and the tendency to let everyone know what we think about the multiplicity of issues does not tend to change minds, but instead tends to entrench divisive positions.

Thompson added that the 2016 election was transformational in that we “stopped talking about policy” and started “talking about people,” and he added that some have avoided putting up political signs in their yards from fear of retribution – an indicator he sees as emblematic of a major shift in thinking about American politics. Thompson said his preference is for discussions that focus on policy, but that conversations have drifted toward hostility instead. Thompson proposed a philosophy that disagreement, in a civil manner, leads to democracy, while an attempt to “destroy” the opposition leads to apathy. He mentioned that he has developed a friendship with Dorman, who is of a different party, and they “share a lot of good common ground” despite their policy preference differences. He concluded that we should “stand for Oklahoma instead of standing for a party.”

Dorman then chimed in, intimating that politics is cyclical with prior periods of anti-immigrant sentiment, autocracy, and

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fierce political conflict. He agrees that social media is a major contributor toward divisiveness. His prescription is that the electorate should become skeptical of candidates who “think you should fight with the other side” instead of seeking conversations and compromise.

Gruber added that “we have elevated the partisans who have always existed in American culture to positions they have never had before” and that “we are all suffering under that weight.” He advocated for more competitive elections saying “70% of races were unopposed” in a recent Oklahoma legislative election cycle. He cited research showing that “independents are the largest and fastest growing group of voters in the country.”

Professor McKee stated that “conservative Democrats” and “liberal Republicans” are “dead” as cohorts of American voters as a result of our electoral system and political culture of polarization. Dorman added that “echo chambers” such as Fox News or MSNBC and similar outlets have fed partisan grievance of those who “don’t want their worldview questioned.”

Thompson spoke briefly about the Harris vs. Trump vs. Kennedy election, and the concept that polarization has resulted in the independent candidate essentially being pressured to end up endorsing a major party candidate. Gruber added that if you are an independent in some states, including Oklahoma, you have less opportunity to even be a poll worker or election board member, because of policies that prefer partisans. Dr. McKee said that only 44% of Americans are “strong partisans” and that this reached a high point in 2020, indicating that by far most Americans are not tightly identified with a party, despite common perceptions and the indications from elected officials. He also mentioned that one of the greatest divisions in America right now is the “diploma divide” where those with a college degree tend to vote Democratic and those without a degree tend to vote Republican. Gruber rebutted, saying that the lack of choice tends to color the outcome of such surveys and obscures voter dissatisfaction with their options.

Dorman added that polarization has resulted, in part, in a reduction of individuals being civically engaged or wanting to be in civic organizations. Professor McKee added that Oklahoma turnout was the lowest among all 50 states in the 2020 election, indicating voter frustration and apathy.

In proposing solutions, Bengé stated that he thinks we need a restoration of the “real public square” - not online, but in person, requiring social interaction with our fellow citizens. A prerequisite, according to him, is “intentionality” and the desire to bring your “best neutral self” to the table, and a desire to talk about issues without always beginning with a desire to change minds.

Prompted by the moderator to discuss the media’s role, the panel discussed the importance of nuanced conversations instead of divisive ones. Thompson, who owns a newspaper, stated that “we read to what we want to hear” and that media choice belongs to citizens – who need to challenge their own thoughts and seek diverse news.

During the dinner panel Q&A comments from the audience members were made that brought to light voices and communities were not represented in the make up of the expert panel. These communities emphasized the relevance of participation issues among the marginalized and underrepresented populations which then prompted discussion in a number of individual panels.

Day 2, Question 1

According to a recent Gallup poll, political polarization remains an enormously important part of the U.S. political landscape. The Gallup analysis confirmed the fact that individuals’ political identity is highly correlated with their views of social and policy issues, resulting in substantial differences in how issues are viewed across political segments. Also, according to research by University of Virginia economists, people are more likely to sell their homes and move out of a neighborhood if new neighbors move in whose political views are opposite of their own. Panelists grappled with what individuals can do on a

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personal level to engage more effectively with those who hold opposing political views. How can we foster greater empathy and understanding across political lines without compromising deeply held values?

The Town Hall panels were unanimous that individuals must be open minded to other reasonable political views. We need to move beyond the idea that discussion of politics is taboo. Honest conversations can lead to a discovery of common ground that brings us closer together rather than driving us apart: but it takes active listening, patience, curiosity, and respect. When we allow hateful language and divisive slogans to permeate the political landscape, we poison the well against thoughtful dialogue. All panels were in agreement that organizations that foster civil discourse must be empowered to play a larger role in providing forums for reasoned dialogue, disagreement, and respectful debate. Two panels specifically mentioned “curiosity” about others as critical to developing cross-political understanding: Individuals should be intentional about asking questions to understand another’s viewpoint rather than listening only to respond. It takes two to have a conversation, and we need to be careful that our dialogue does not turn into a lecture. Some panels mentioned that decency toward others does not necessarily mean accommodating harmful views, but that de-escalation is more important than demonization. In fact, someone expressing themselves in a crass manner may not always truly believe what they say, and may be affected by polarization in their life. Maybe shifting the conversation to “what has happened to you?” instead of “what is wrong with you” will lead to more empathetic conversations. An attempt to find common ground may not always result in success, but it does send a signal of honorable intentions and empathy, and this goes a long way to build relationships. Oklahoma is known for the “Oklahoma Standard” where we treat others with concern and dignity, and we can do a better job of applying this to policy discussions.

Multiple panels acknowledged that divisiveness and tension has ratcheted up in recent years, perhaps reaching a peak in the present election season with anecdotes about stolen yard signs, intimidation, and individuals feeling uncomfortable even having conversations with family members. Some people feel prejudged because of their political identity. This is exacerbated by a lack of emphasis on facts, and a sense that crude ideas such as racism and sexism are beginning once again to be expressed openly.

One panel mentioned research by Robert Putnam about social isolation. Panelists were concerned there are no longer places to interact with others with diverse viewpoints. There is a perception that if individuals congregate at all, it’s with other like-minded individuals. This in turn increases political polarization. Panelists were also concerned that individuals come to political conversations already “armed” for conflict or fearful they’ll have to defend themselves. Another panel mentioned that part of the reason that citizens are so fractious in their political conversations is due to only consuming news and information they are predisposed to agree with, and that it is crucial to read news from sources that may challenge our usual opinions. A panel quoted Xavier Amador: “The strength is not in your argument, but in your relationship with the people.” Other panels echoed this sentiment, mentioning that even elected legislators often find their relationships with other lawmakers to be highly powerful in building consensus on tough legislative issues.

In terms of practical solutions, two panels were emphatic that local government and civic clubs are key to fostering a sense of empathy and understanding with our fellow citizens through respectful, controlled dialogue. Local government is accessible, largely nonpartisan in terms of the issues debated, and a place to find common ground if you seek it out. One panel mentioned that the City of Tulsa has hosted dinners with the express purpose of encouraging dialogue and understanding. Municipalities often encourage consensus building and provide opportunities for input to the citizens directly, instead of only their elected representatives. Local Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis Clubs, Lions Clubs, and other civic entities such as chambers of commerce are great at being inclusive of individuals of all political stripes, ideologies, and persuasions without being an environment of hate and discord. These organizations benefit from setting an expectation of decency and hold their members to that standard through social expectations in addition to their actual rules. Multiple panels expressed that we must stop being “keyboard warriors” who post insulting, abusive, or highly critical language without having a face-to-face conversation, and that even if we are passionate about our views, our stridency makes us look foolish to others. One panel even mentioned a rubric for improving civility in discourse, called “Better Conversations” and suggested it may be of use to organizations that facilitate civic dialogue.

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Two panels identified that change must start from the top, and if our elected officials behave in a manner unbecoming of a citizen, then the electorate will follow their lead, and if they behave in a respectful manner, the tone may change nationwide. One of these panels suggested that since healing divisive rhetoric starts at the top, the state legislature may benefit from emphasis on respectful conduct during the new-member boot-camp at the beginning of each legislative session. Other panels echoed this sentiment, stating that representatives can never have enough reminders that they should try to represent all of their constituency and not just the individuals who voted for them.

Day 2, Question 2

The panelists were then asked to address the impacts of sharp partisan divides at the local level. One of the articles in the Town Hall Background Resource Document, page 119, highlights one of the major changes taking place in America: the clustering of politically like-minded people and the polarizing impact it has on local governance. Oklahoma and its communities are not immune to this problem.

The panels were asked to identify strategies that might foster more constructive discussion between differing viewpoints at the local level. The list of ideas and suggestions is creatively long without much consensus. Most of the panels suggested utilizing the services of local organizations like civic organizations, such as Rotary Clubs, chambers of commerce, and local career technology centers to assist in local community dialogue strategies. Three of the panels mentioned engaging The Oklahoma Academy in conducting local listening sessions similar to the Town Hall process. Other statewide organizations cited include the Oklahoma Municipal League, Leadership Oklahoma, OK Policy Institute, the Sovereignty Symposium, and the Oklahoma Center for Non-profits as having models for public discourse. One of the panels also encouraged looking at how tribal nations successfully build consensus at the community level.

Each panel identified different educational and consensus building efforts or strategies. The forum formats included focus groups, round tables, talking circles, community walks, listening sessions, citizens' assemblies, and utilizing the streaming of legislative sessions as ways to better inform and educate citizens. While the various ways to conduct forums are critical, how they are conducted is also very important.

Several panels talked about creating "open, neutral, safe spaces," forums that were free to the public, and making sure that "diverse groups" are invited and welcomed. Maximizing inclusivity at the local level seemed to be universally suggested. Another panel stated that "compromise can't be viewed as a negative thing anymore." Another suggested the use of trained moderators/facilitators in community forums. "We can't control the crowd, but we can control the civility of the debate and the rules applicable to the debate." Making sure the discussions were safe to all attending was a critical element for several panels.

One panel expressed concern for those who can't participate: how do we engage the group of citizens who do not come to these events and may not be represented at these events? We must acknowledge that some citizens find inclusion to be elusive, because it is easier for professionals to be involved compared to blue collar citizens and others. Any solution to increased participation must reckon with the barriers these citizens face. They suggested that we ensure "access" is truly open to all; mentorship and volunteer opportunities are promoted and increased; marches and fun runs might be another set of opportunities to improve engagement; and celebration events focused on local accomplishments. Encouraging as much face-to-face dialogue as possible is the key.

There were several specific recommendations made. Two dealt with The Oklahoma Academy; one quite robust in nature and the other utilizing the listening session process. The robust recommendation called for either the Academy to lead or identify/create a new organization that could facilitate open dialogue in a strategic visioning process, engaging a wide range of local groups and leadership organizations, at the municipal level. Other recommendations included: utilizing the Better Conversation Model; and rethinking education and how we prepare young people to be adults and active/informed voters. As one panel stated, "We are trying to get 6th graders to pick their career paths instead of growing to be well-rounded and educated."

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Day 2, Question 3

When asked, “How have Americans become so polarized?”, Oklahoma State University politics professor Seth McKee stated, voters get cues from politicians, and political views have become more nationalized. He went on to blame a lack of leadership and accountability for allowing Americans to move further apart, saying, polarization is a “massive danger” to the nation (page 111 of the Background Resource Document). Participants were asked: what policies could be introduced to incentivize bipartisan cooperation in legislative bodies? How might leaders across the political spectrum work together to address the growing divide among their constituencies? Can civics education – either in school or otherwise – be effective?

In regard to bipartisan cooperation in legislative bodies, each panel recognized a need for such cooperation, but ideas for fostering bipartisan work in the legislature were mixed. Among the widely varying ideas mentioned among the panels include (1) general reinforcement of the importance of bipartisanship in legislative new-member orientation, (2) encouraging majority-party legislators to permit some efficacy and successful legislation by the minority party, (3) seating legislators in a manner that makes them sit next to members of the other party on the House and Senate floor, (4) permitting recall elections, (5) mandatory legislator attendance at a leadership academy, (6) holding the legislature to the same Open Records regulations as other government entities, (7) Lengthening or elimination of term limits or implementation of a “gap period” between years of service in lieu of term limits, (8) utilizing political science students as fact-checkers, (9) the implementation of an independent redistricting review board, and (10) requiring legislators to include public testimony during legislative session because Oklahoma is the only state that does not allow public testimony.

In regard to addressing the divide within the constituencies of leaders across the political spectrum, most of the panels identified the importance of intentionally working together with other leaders of other parties to set an example of showing bipartisan friendship despite their political affiliation. This example can and should include working across the aisle with the other party, and working to have this approach emulated by supporters, constituents, and young leaders. Legislators need to stop attacking other legislators for having co-sponsors of legislation from the other party. Additionally, even intra-party conflicts should be approached

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in a constructive manner instead of with harsh language. Multiple panels mentioned that nonpartisan redistricting can help ratchet down political tensions by encouraging more moderate political positions in districts that are not drawn to benefit a party. One panel mentioned that Oklahoma City serves as a good model for encouraging voter-buy-in for projects due to their methods of inclusive strategic planning, and productive use of ballot questions to gain citizen input. An idea mentioned in one panel was to inclusively develop a statewide strategic plan through community meetings in a decentralized manner so that all regions of the state can feel fully included.

Two panels mentioned the concept of a statewide version of Oklahoma City’s MAPS program as a policy that could be popular, bipartisan, and bring people together. One panel described this as a way to invest in our communities in a way that can make a direct improvement in people’s lives, and something that could come from the grassroots with the support of tribes, local business, and charitable foundations.

In regard to promoting and advancing civics education, the panels were unanimous that this should be a priority. Multiple panels advocated that students should get to meet elected officials first-hand, and have opportunities to volunteer as opposed to simply being taught a curriculum. Youth need to have positive team-building experiences around civic projects, so that they can be socialized to be respectful and civil on sometimes divisive issues. Multiple panels advocated for increased funding toward civics education, so teachers have the proper resources to instruct students on civic engagement and to provide real-world opportunities to interact with government and elected officials. One panel specifically cited Maryland as a model for successful civic education that Oklahoma could emulate. *(NOTE: Maryland codifies civics courses and content in social studies standards from pre-K to 12th grade. The state also mandates that specific civics courses and project requirements be completed before students are eligible to receive their high school diploma. Public school students in Maryland must take at least one year of civics or government courses; complete 75 hours of community service; and achieve a passing score on the Maryland High School Assessment in American Government.)*

One panel specifically recommended that Oklahoma undertake a full review of curriculum, testing requirements, teacher qualifications, and other factors regarding civics courses to foster a more robust educational program around this topic. The panel recommended that civics courses should be placed at an appropriate time to maximize the course’s effectiveness for students, such as senior year of high school. Additionally, they specified that civics should not be just an individual class, but instead should be embedded in the curriculum from K-12 in order to be emphasized throughout a student’s educational journey. The panel further recommended adopting a “civics seal program,” which incentivizes students to get involved in civics (whether through educational coursework or community engagement) with the prospect of gaining a credential to add to their resume/college applications.

Day 2, Question 4

The panels next addressed the impacts of polarization at a statewide level, looking at how the major sectors of our over \$250 billion economy have been impacted by political polarization. It’s been well documented that polarization undermines economic growth at the international and national levels. Investment capital tends to shy away from opportunities (states) that are politically volatile (uncertainty), fearing a low or no return on capital. While anecdotal in nature (no specific studies have been generated for Oklahoma), the panels cited a number of instances where dollars, especially federal dollars, have failed to reach the state, or have been delayed, especially in the areas of the education and healthcare.

Most panels agreed that the impacts of extreme polarization have resulted in negative economic outcomes, whether it was the delay in accepting billions of dollars in Medicaid dollars (before a statewide initiative petition passed to secure those funds) or the failure to receive federal dollars for summer feeding programs for Oklahoma children the past two years. Nearly every panel cited negative impacts to the areas of education and healthcare due to political polarization (Oklahoma ranks in the bottom ten of all 50 states in these two areas).

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Several panels also mentioned that political polarization has resulted in reduced business investment, our ability to timely secure federal infrastructure dollars, and most recently the removal or discouragement of DEI programs, impacting our image nationally. Overall, panelists agree that polarization and its effects are detrimental to the growth of our economy, the health of our citizens, and the effectiveness of our education. Put more bluntly, one panel stated: “Being the laughingstock of the country because a department head or state official is grandstanding is embarrassing.”

Despite some of the damaging rhetoric, several panels cited the positive impact tribal nations are having, helping to offset some of the negative outcomes, and encouraged more partnerships with tribal nations. Tribes “have stepped up to the plate” and are “still doing their part to show support across the state” despite frequent attacks that have threatened hindering cooperative relationships from developing.

There were a number of recommendations made by the panels, some not directly related to this question, that tried to address some of the negative impacts of polarization on our state.

- The need for the initiative petition process to be maintained as a way for citizens to directly affect some of the laws that are passed in the state without having to wait for the legislature to act;
- Restructure the Oklahoma State Department of Education system to mirror the local school board process, allowing citizens to elect the board, and the board being responsible for hiring the superintendent;
- Super majority (75%) required to lower taxes, same as raising taxes;
- Creation of apps or social media pages so that voters can learn more about policy issues and be more engaged in the political process;
- The ballot measure process (IP) should be reformed to be more accessible to citizens, while at the same time, there should be a focus on protecting the process from being further eroded. “The people should control when questions go to the people.”;
- Amend the constitution to establish a requirement of three-quarter vote by the legislature in order for the legislature to use the Emergency Clause exception, in place of the 2/3 vote currently required;
- Fund a study (research and analysis) showing the impact that polarized policies (DEI, Education, Healthcare, etc.) are having on businesses and money flowing into the state (OK Policy Institute);
- Use colleges and universities, such as the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University, to research the reality and impact polarization is having on healthcare in the state;
- Ensure that state positions are nonpartisan (Superintendent of Public Instruction and Attorney General);
- Keep the Judicial Nominating Commission (JNC) system;
- Redistricting and limiting dark money, independent expenditure;
- Develop a system for citizen-led recall petition system; and
- Support for the Louisiana style election system.

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Day 2, Luncheon Plenary Session

The second-day lunch panel centered on the role of the people in Oklahoma’s political landscape, moderated by Andy Moore, Founder and CEO of Let’s Fix This. The panel featured insights from Lee Anne Bruce Boone, Director of the Oklahoma Ethics Commission; Andy Fugate, State Representative; Clifton Adcock, Investigative Reporter for The Frontier; and Amber England, Founder and CEO of Strategy 77.

Each member on the panel was asked a question tailored to their expertise, addressing key topics such as ensuring transparency and accountability in Oklahoma’s electoral process while encouraging civic participation, examining voter engagement trends and information access—particularly in rural and underserved communities, grassroots efforts shaping the state’s political landscape and strategies for effective citizen engagement, and balancing election integrity with increasing voter accessibility. Each panelist shared their perspectives, emphasizing that these issues ultimately center on the people of Oklahoma.

In a final question, panelists were asked how Oklahoma’s electoral system might better represent the state’s diverse viewpoints and foster constructive political dialogue amidst increasing polarization. Responses ranged from proposals to reform the primary system to the powerful reminder that it starts with ourselves.

Day 2, Question 5

After the lunch, panelists turned to the analysis of Oklahoma’s initiative petition process. The Oklahoma Legislature passed two bills during the last session that have made changes to Oklahoma’s initiative and referendum process. The first bill extends the challenge period for a state question proposal from 10 days to 90 days. The second bill changes the existing law requiring signatures on initiative petitions to come with at least three out of five data points to now require four out of the five data points

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that can be matched to the signer's voter registration card for the signature to count. Those points include legal first name, legal last name, zip code, house number, and numerical month and day of birth. The second bill also allowed the secretary of state to charge a filing fee of up to \$750 (page 177 of the Background Resource Document). Participants were asked how these changes will affect Oklahomans. Specifically: What are some challenges facing Oklahomans with these changes to the initiative process, and how might these affect the ability of citizens to propose new laws? Should there be changes made to make it more accessible for ordinary Oklahomans? In what ways could the transparency of the ballot initiative process be improved to ensure voters are fully informed about the issues they are voting on?

All five panels made note of the need for simplifying the method of collecting signatures for initiative petitions; however, the specific ideas to simplify the process were somewhat varied.

The Town Hall strongly recommends specific reforms to the initiative petition process to make it more accessible to Oklahoma Citizens. These changes include: **(1)** increasing signature collection to 180 days and reducing the challenge period to 10 days; **(2)** allowing for dynamic signature validation during the signature collection process; **(3)** upon ballot approval all initiatives must be scheduled for the next November election **(4)** reforming the data points for validation of signatures and creating a more user-friendly signature form; **(5)** improving readability of ballot title language by requiring a specific grade-level appropriate language; **(6)** using the same voter identification validation rules for initiative petition validation and election day validation.

Three panels recommended the use of an electronic voter identification number or other electronic system that could be used to bring the system into the modern era, with online digital signatures or their equivalent. One panel stated their preference was that there should be "dynamic signature validation" whereby validation begins while signatures are still being collected and will continue through the end of the initiative petition process.

Most of the panels were in agreement that the data points needed for signature collection are a hardship on signature-gatherers, and argued for more leniency. For example, one panel noted that the signature boxes are too small and can be confusing, and potentially a barrier to those with certain disabilities. One panel explicitly called for reducing the number of valid data points to three from the current four, and another panel said that "substantial similarity" on the signature should be adequate instead of insistence on perfect transcription of the legal name. Another panel added that signatures should be presumed valid, and the burden of proof of invalidity should remain on the state. Multiple panels noted the hardship faced by those who have name changes due to marriage or divorce, and the divergence between legal name, name used on tax-document, and the name used in the voter registration can cause confusion. One panel explicitly called for extending the signature collection period to 180 days and reducing the challenge period back to ten days.

Illustrating part of the challenge citizens face when advocating for an initiative petition, one panel mentioned that of the last 500 state questions, only 13 of them were proposed by the people and passed by the people. This panel also mentioned the cost to organizers of initiative petitions: ranging from \$2.8 to \$4 million dollars to gain ballot access for the initiative, a price tag described as "cost prohibitive."

Four panels identified that the complexity of initiative petition language, as well as the state question language on the ballot is often dense and hard to understand for most voters. Two of these panels suggested that a better effort must be made to write proposition summaries in layperson terms, and three panels specified that the writing should be at either the fourth, fifth or sixth grade reading level. Another panel argued that it may be helpful to establish a program whereby law students at the state's three law schools could assist the filers of initiative petition drafts with their petition language. Another panel said that due to the complexity of ballot propositions, it would be helpful for a nonpartisan voter guide to be disseminated by the Election Board. Echoing this somewhat, another panel advocated for a cellular app that can be used to track the progress of a petition.

Two panels also pointed out that the governor has the latitude to place an initiative on the ballot at his/her discretion, instead of the proposition going to the immediate next ballot, and proposed that this be remedied.

Finally, multiple panels mentioned transparency as vital in the initiative petition process. The panels mentioned that citizens are confused about the requirements for valid signatures, and that delays and lack of transparency in the signature verification process are problematic. One panel advocated for an administrative review of the rules regarding initiative petitions. One example that was support-

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ed by a panel would include: the legislature should obtain the people’s approval before modifying the law governing initiative petitions.

Day 2, Question 6

Panels were then asked to address how current campaign finance laws in Oklahoma influence elections, if any campaign finance reforms are necessary, the roles political action committees (PACs) play, and how greater transparency about who is giving, and how much, might benefit the voter and improve trustworthiness in the overall system.

At the outset, it’s important to note that the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Citizens United* determined that independent expenditures by corporations and unions are protected under the First Amendments and not subject to restriction by the government. Several panels mentioned the ruling as a limitation to their desire to cap donations at certain levels. Most panels felt that the amount of money being spent on political campaigns has created a growing skepticism in the integrity of our election system, raising serious concerns among the panels.

Most of the panels mentioned that, if donation limitation could not be placed due this ruling, that stricter transparency and disclosure regulations need to be in place. One panel suggested that we might want to review other states who have utilized their own laws to bring greater transparency to this topic. Another panel was concerned about transparency related to Independent Expenditures (IE). Most panels were also concerned about the amount of dollars flowing into the campaigns; to quote *The Notorious B.I.G.*, “Mo Money Mo Problems,” is how one panel described the situation. Nearly all panels were most concerned about the amount of dark money in our political systems. Dark money refers to spending to influence elections, public policy, and political discourse, where the source of the money is not disclosed to the public.

The concern most panels had is that “unlimited funding increases can create disparities between candidates” (incumbent vs. new), especially given the escalating costs of running a campaign. The hope would be to find a way to “level the playing field,” if legally possible. And, unlike dark money, the panels were much less concerned about PACs: “PACs are not inherently bad,” and “PACs have positive attributes,” is how two of the panels described them. The one caveat: if Super PACs accept dark money . . . but the general tone was not one of concerns for PACs. Overall, all panels felt existing campaign laws must be enforced. As one panel stated: “We can’t stop crime, but we can limit the opportunities to commit crimes.” (NOTE: “*Dark Money Groups*” may not contribute directly to a candidate but they may contribute unlimited amounts to a Super PAC supporting a candidate.)

There were a number of recommendations that had consensus within a panel but not among all panels. The following were submitted:

- If a dark money ad campaign was used to benefit a candidate, then that candidate’s name and approval should have to appear at the bottom of the screen (TV);
- The Governor’s Task Force recommendations are not supported amongst one panel;
- Several panels felt like the Ethics Commission needed more money to adequately carry out their enforcement mission, and recommended the Legislature allocate increased recurring funding to the Ethics Commission. This should be accomplished with an assessment of a percentage of dark money to be directed to the Ethics Commission enforcement activities. (NOTE: *The Ethics Commission has outlined its response regarding funding derived from dark money contributions and associated compliance fees, including fines, fees, and settlements. For 2024, a 10% retention formula is deemed ideal but may be unrealistic if annual contributions remain around \$2 million. A 5% formula is considered more practical, aligning with what foundations and non-profits typically retain for fund management. However, the irregularity of annual contributions from dark money complicates the Commission’s ability to maintain consistent funding levels. This unpredictability hampers efforts to attract and retain the necessary staff and resources for fulfilling its mission. Currently, the Commission is required to transfer excess funds back to the State’s General Fund when specific accounts exceed set limits, and settlements must also be deposited there. A proposed change would allow the Ethics Commission to retain all funds collected, including fines, fees, and settlements, to establish a sustainable funding model. Based on past data, this approach could provide the predictable annual income needed to support full-time employees dedicated to dark money enforcement. Without such changes, the Commission risks being unprepared to address large, unexpected funding surges, limiting its ability to respond effectively to the growing influence of dark money.*)

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- Transform and make the Ethics Commission’s website more robust re: donations, improve the FAQ page, require all state-wide officials to attend ethics training and campaign finances, a promulgate a rule requiring 501(c)(4)s to disclose campaign contributions of \$5,000 or more;
- Utilize the Federal Election Campaign Act definition of “coordination.” in the context of 501(c)(4) campaign contributions, which is “made in cooperation, consultation, or concert with or at the request or suggestion of a candidate, a candidate’s authorized committee or their agents, or a political party or its agents.”
- Require as much transparency into dark money as possible. Require PACs, 501(c)(4)s and independent expenditures to state if they are an in or out of state organization;
- Laws around public disclosure should apply both to TV and online;
- Have a public database which discloses who funded the ad, what the content of the ad was, the donor source, the number of people, and the group targeted by the ad, as well as the amount spent; and
- If donating to dark money groups, the donation can’t be used as an ordinary business expense.

Day 2, Question 7

For the final matter discussed at the Town Hall, participants considered the media’s role in Oklahoma politics. The media environment is dynamic and continues to develop in novel, sometimes unanticipated, ways that have serious consequences for democratic governance and politics. Political anger and cynicism are rising in the United States and in many democracies worldwide, and both are associated with exposure to political attacks on social media, a new University of Michigan study shows (page 208 of the Background Resource Document). Specifically, the panels addressed the following inquiries: How can media, both local and social, better facilitate civil discourse among Oklahomans with differing political views? Should social media platforms be reformed to promote healthy political discourse and decrease the spread of polarizing content? What roles do educational institutions and community groups in Oklahoma play in promoting civil discourse, and how can they be better supported in this effort?

Most of the panels discussed their despair that traditional local media, including newspapers, are in a steep decline. They played a positive role in communities and were generally reliable sources. The panels recommended for the legislature to revisit and modernize the definition of “newspaper” in state statute to strengthen the local newsrooms and expand revenue sources, while ensuring that we retain a printed presence at least 12 times in a calendar year. *(NOTE: Definition of a Legal Newspaper; Title 25, Okla. Statute 106 (Effective November 1, 1983), No legal notice, advertisement, or publication of any kind required or provided for by the laws of this state to be published in a newspaper shall have force or effect unless published in a legal newspaper of the county. A legal newspaper of the county is any newspaper which, during a period of one hundred four (104) consecutive weeks immediately prior to the first publication of such notice, advertisement or publication: (1) has maintained a paid general subscription circulation in the county; and (2) has been admitted to the United States mails as paid second-class mail matter; and (3) has been continuously and uninterruptedly published in the county.)*

It was observed that some local papers have changed management many times in recent years or transitioned from daily papers to weekly papers. Some are surviving only due to the revenue of advertising and legal notices. The decline in traditional local media results in the lack of local scrutiny and enables the spreading of half-truths that are difficult to correct. The loss of traditional local media, along with its record of reliability and accuracy, has coincided with the rise of social media, which all five panels see as highly problematic. Multiple panels noted that social media algorithms create a digital environment that rewards the posting of inflammatory content because it receives more comments, likes, and shares, and this in-turn, leads to the consumption of more inflammatory content by more people.

All panels were unanimous that social media is a method of purveying low-value and low-accuracy political information, and that its effect on the political climate has been a net-negative. One panel emphasized that social media is damaging to the youth population, causing mental health challenges, or addiction. Another panel, expanding on this concept, added that cell phones should be prohibited in classrooms, families should more adequately monitor their child’s phone use, and families need more thoughtful conversations about the content consumed by younger generations.

Final Report

Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What About the Oklahoma People? 2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Final Report**



Four of the five panels explicitly advocated for more meaningful information/media literacy in order to help society - not just the youth - overcome the problems that social media and other forms of unreliable media pose. In this vein, one panel proposed a statewide campaign to spread awareness about the prevalence of false information on social media platforms and to teach the critical thinking skills necessary to identify what is true and what is false. Another panel, in a similar manner, advocated for non-partisan civic education that includes media literacy, to be promulgated as early as elementary school, and this education would also include how to have a healthy relationship with the digital environment and social media. It was believed in one panel, however, that those who fall prey to misinformation are often older citizens, not younger.

In terms of regulating social media, for which there was an appetite among most panels, multiple panels determined that this would likely be a federal issue, beyond state control. However, some panels did note that certain minimal state regulations may be possible, such as mandating transparency about the use and deployment of algorithms, and transparency about who is paying for an advertisement on social media. One panel even proposed specific wording for political media tags, including social media advertising: “This is a paid ad funded by [insert name here]; voters are encouraged to research the issues and candidate and decide for themselves.”

Some panels mentioned that there are highly reliable information sources that are not necessarily “media” in the traditional sense. For example, the League of Women Voters is a civic organization that provides credible information about elections and hosts high quality presidential debates. It was speculated that community centers and educational institutions could learn from the example set by organizations like this, to promote reliable information and civil discourse. Additionally, one panel mentioned that publicly funded media, such as the Oklahoma Educational Television Authority (OETA), may deserve more resources with the decline in the circulation and advertising revenue of traditional newspapers.

Finally, several panels did identify some redeeming facets of social media. It is an excellent way to livestream political events, town halls, public meetings, and candidate forums. It provides real-time accessibility to public forums in a way traditional media does not, and allows for public comment and commentary in a way traditional media does not. It offers a space for engagement by those who would not engage in person. In this sense, social media can be used to help engage citizens and increase civil discourse. One panel encouraged local governments to harness these positive characteristics of social media.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Town Hall discussions highlighted the pressing need for Oklahomans to address the challenges posed by political polarization, closed primaries, and the complexities of our electoral system. Through the insightful contributions of participants, it has become clear that fostering open dialogue and collaboration across political divides is essential for nurturing a vibrant democracy. The emphasis on reforming voter participation, increasing civic education, and promoting transparency in campaign financing reflects a collective desire for a political landscape that truly represents the people.

There was broad consensus from all panels that voters should be able to vote for any candidate in every taxpayer funded election to ensure candidates have earned broad support to win. Actions speak louder than words. The Town Hall strongly recommended the elimination of straight party voting and the adoption of a unified election system. In order to decrease polarization and to increase voter engagement, modernizing the Oklahoma primary system has the ability to have a generational, positive impact on Oklahoma’s future.

As we move forward, it is crucial to embrace the recommended actions, such as implementing open primaries, enhancing civics education, and improving accessibility to the initiative petition process. By prioritizing these strategies, we can cultivate an inclusive environment where every voice is valued, and meaningful civic engagement is encouraged. Together, let us take the necessary steps to build a stronger, more cohesive Oklahoma—one where cooperation, understanding, and respect serve as the foundation for our political discourse. The path toward progress lies in our commitment to listening to one another, empowering our communities, and actively participating in the political process, paving the way for a brighter future for all Oklahomans. Ultimately, each one of us bears an obligation to implement these changes for a more prosperous, healthy, and secure Oklahoma. Moving these ideas into action will take a continued effort and collaboration, and with your help we will ensure Oklahoma is the best state in which to work, play and live.

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2003 – Oklahoma Resources: Energy and Water

Town Hall Co-Chairs: John Feaver, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma; Howard Barnett, TSF Capital LLC; and Larry Nichols, Devon Energy Corp.

2004 – Oklahoma's Environment: Pursuing A Responsible Balance

Town Hall Chair: William R. McKamey, AEP Public Service Company of Oklahoma

2005 – Drugs: Legal, Illegal... Otherwise

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2006 – Strategies for Oklahoma's Future

Town Hall Co-Chairs: John Feaver, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma; and Larry Rice, Tulsa University

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2010 November – MUNI.OK.GOV- Addressing Municipal Governance

Town Hall Chair: Tom McKeon, Tulsa Community College

2011 – Developing the Oklahoma Economy

Town Hall Chair: Susan Winchester, The Winchester Group

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2013 – Moving Oklahoma: Improving Our Transportation Infrastructure

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2014 – We Can Do Better: Improving the Health of the Oklahoma People

Town Hall Co-Chairs: Kay Goebel, PhD, Psychologist; Gerry Clancy, MD, OU-Tulsa; and Steve Prescott, MD, Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation

2015 – Oklahoma Priorities: The Government & Taxes We Want

Town Hall Co-Chairs: Howard Barnett, OSU- Tulsa; and Dan Boren, Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce

2017 – Oklahoma Votes: Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement

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2018 – Aligning Oklahoma's Tax Code to Our 21st Century Economy

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