

# Small Plant Institute

## *Daring Democracy Discussion Guide*

*Last revised 11.26.2019*

### Opening Note

#### Why We Had to Write This Book

##### Key Quotes

- “Despair is our greatest enemy in this moment. We wrote this book to meet it squarely, not with sappy bromides but with hard evidence.” (p. vii)

##### Discussion Questions

- The co-authors start by sharing their stories of political awakening. Have you had any moments like this in your life? How have your experiences formed your political involvement today?

### Part I | Rethinking the Crisis

#### Chapter 1: What it Will Take

##### Key Quotes

- “No, it is not a huge challenge that kills the spirit. What most defeats us is feeling useless--that we have nothing to say, nothing to contribute, that we don’t count. A sense of futility is what destroys us.” (p. 4)
- “Together the meeting of these three needs comprises, for us, the essence of human dignity. Thus, democracy, as it enables us to meet these needs, is the realization of human dignity.” (p. 6)

##### Discussion Questions

- On page 5, the authors lay out “Three Powerful Ideas” that can contribute to the success of democratic movements: the belief that *democracy is essential*, that *democracy is possible*, and that *there is a rewarding, even exhilarating role for each of us in making democracy real*. Can you think of some examples of these ideas in real life? Which of them might be the most challenging belief to take on?
- Do we need our society to feel united in order to make change happen? In what ways is our country politically divided? In what areas of life have you seen examples of surprising unity?

## Chapter 2: Bringing Down the Thought Barriers

### Key Quotes

- “As suggested in chapter 1, our ideas even shape what we can and cannot see. Applied to our national crisis today, we argue that if we don’t believe in an accountable, vital democracy engaging citizens, we won’t see it anywhere--neither the movement to create it nor the signs of its emergence.” (p. 13)
- “Markets are really handy. They have served human culture for eons. After all, trading our sweet potatoes for your clay bowls made a lot of sense. Markets, historian Karl Polanyi explained in his classic 1944 book *The Great Transformation*, were long embedded in webs of mutuality shaped by each culture’s traditions. But once the notion of an infallible market--one called “magic” by Ronald Reagan--took off, the long-held understanding of a market embedded in community was left in the dust.” (15)

### Discussion Questions

- Where do our mental frames shaping our perception of democracy come from? What are some examples of external messages we are given about democracy? How can schools and media outlets better support “accountable, vital democracy engaging citizens”?
- The concept of the “self reinforcing spiral of powerlessness,” described on pages 19-22, demonstrates why people today are prone to feeling disenchanted and distrustful of government and political institutions. In what areas of your life do you see this cycle being perpetuated? In what areas do you feel there is an opportunity to resist this “spiral of powerlessness”?

## Part II | Exposing the Roots

## Chapter 3: Manipulating the Mindset

### Key Quotes

- “As we take in the impact of the Anti-Democracy Movement, it is important to remind ourselves how profoundly the views of the Kochs, for example differ from those of most of us. More than seven in ten Americans polled support, for example, raising the minimum wage, expanding Social Security benefits, and regulating carbon dioxide emissions, while the Kochs are dead set against all three. Simply put, the central goal of the Anti-Democracy Movement is to overwhelm the views of a majority of Americans.” (p. 51)
- The mindset Powell embodied failed America because it leaves out something big. It ignores the need for transparent public decision-making that reflects and is ultimately accountable to the will and well-being of the people. In other words, it leaves out democracy. (p. 52)

### Discussion Questions

- The first half of this chapter describes the way Lewis Powell's memo for the US Chamber of Commerce was used to dramatically change the American economic system in favor of "free enterprise." What ripples from this do you see in our economic system today?
- The second half of this chapter lays out "Four Strategies of Highly Effective Billionaires"
  - Command the Narrative
  - Delegitimize Democracy's Norms and Institutions
  - Quietly Create a Parallel Political Operation Pushing the Anti-Democracy Messages with Hundreds of Front Groups, Community by Community.
  - Build Big Donors' Common Purpose and Coordinate Their Efforts to Achieve the Three Strategies Above

Why do you think these strategies are listed as "Highly Effective"? Do any of these resonate with your understanding of our political system?

### Chapter 4: Rigging the Rules

#### Key Quotes

- "We see poignant irony here, for notice the Court's emphasis is on a *public purpose* within First Amendment protections. That purpose is bringing about changes 'the people' desire via 'unfettered interchange' among 'diverse sources.' However, it is precisely the Court's stance allowing unlimited spending in campaign messaging that defeats this vital purpose. Citizens can't participate in, or even witness 'unfettered interchange; if those who can afford to dominate the media drown out the rest of us. Thus, within the court's own argument against limits, we believe, is a more profound argument *for* limits." (p. 61)
- "For us, understanding *why* our nation has been moving in a dangerous direction has been essential in deciding what is most needed in changing course. We want to contribute to removing big money's grip on our democracy and igniting citizens' engagement in everyday democracy. Thus, we hope that these sobering revelations don't smother our readers with hopelessness, but clarify and motivate." (p. 76)

#### Discussion Questions

- Page 55 has a list of five reasons "why big money in politics hurts us all." What are other impacts of the influence of big money in our political system that you've learned about? Are there specific policy areas where the harmful impacts are more visible?
- Pages 69-70 discuss felon disenfranchisement, especially with a justice system that disproportionately incarcerated black and Latino men, and pages 73-75 cover the role of politics in Flint's water crisis.. Why do you think the authors of this book chose to discuss where issues of democracy intersect with other social issues?

## Part III | Creating Solutions Together

### Chapter 5: Democracy's Calling

#### Key Quotes

- “For Donnelly, this experience is more proof that ‘We are a more perfect union, not a perfect one. We always have to be making it more perfect.’ Citizens must be prepared to create ‘deep power,’ Donnelly explains. “We’re literally talking about changing the way politics and economics intersect. If we are going to dismantle that... we have to go much deeper.” (p. 84)
- “... An ecological worldview helps. It reminds us that, since we’re all connected, we’re all implicated. Thus we play a role in the blows to our democracy, which may be an uncomfortable truth to take in. But assuming responsibility for our contributions also means acknowledging something very positive: *that we have real power.*” (p. 107)

#### Discussion Questions

- How do you understand this concept of “deep power”? How is it different than the forms of power expressed in free market forces influencing politics? What in your life feels like an expression of “deep power”?
- This chapter lists a number of suggested reforms to improve the democratic functions of the United States: clean elections funding, increased donor transparency, FEC reform, etc. Are there any suggestions that you disagree with and why? Would this be enough to make a significant difference? What suggestions would you add?

### Chapter 6: Meet the Democracy Movement

#### Key Quotes

- “We see the answer as a ‘movement of movements’ in which everyone working on democracy becomes generally familiar with the range of fronts in the anti-democracy assault--from big money in elections to our flawed redistricting process to attacks on the right to vote. With that awareness, the realization grows that concentrating on only one democracy reform at a time cannot work.” (p. 112)
- “In all, a movement of movements means democracy activists show up when needed, even when the issue is not explicitly about political reforms--from attending rallies against Trump’s anti-immigration orders to demonstrations against police brutality. Constitutionally protected human rights are foundational to democracy.” (p. 124)

#### Discussion Questions

- How do you interpret the idea of a “movement of movements” as presented here? What might be challenging about this type of approach to making change?
- Pages 121-122 present examples of advances in democracy reform. Is there one that particularly sticks out as especially compelling to you?

## **Chapter 7: Listen Up, America! North Carolina Has a Story to Tell**

### Key Quotes

- “And thus was born a movement--often called simply Moral Mondays Movement or the Forward Together Movement. For the rest of the year, each week citizens gathered in front of the State Capitol demanding redress, from reinstating democracy reforms and eliminating the voter ID requirements, to creating a living wage and ensuring adequate health care for all North Carolinians. And each week the crowds grew, eventually drawing thousands. By July of its first year, approximately nine hundred active defenders of democracy had been arrested in acts of civil disobedience.” (p. 133)
- “Moral Mondays’ ‘constant visibility’ forced the controversial ‘issues to stay in the headlines,’ Public Policy Polling, a Democratic polling firm, noted. ‘Its efforts ensured that voters in the state were educated about what was going on in Raleigh, and... they got mad. All those people who had before seen McCrory as a moderate, as a different kind of Republican, had those views quickly changed.’” (p. 136)

### Discussion Questions

- Was there anything in this chapter that surprised you?
- What are the main lessons we can learn from the Moral Monday Movement in North Carolina? Do you think this story could be replicable elsewhere? Why or why not?

## **Chapter 8: The Thrill of Democracy**

### Key Quotes

- “What drew us to write this book was a conversation--albeit a really long one--about these moments in our lives. What was it, in our own respective lives--in age, forty-nine years apart--that caused us to care so much about politics and, more specifically, democracy itself?” (p. 141)
- “Most of us live in geographic and cultural ‘bubbles,’ sorted out by income, race, and so much more. Discovering that we share core values, even with folks in vastly different worlds, fortified us. We gained confidence in the near universality of sensitivity to democratic values that we see as expressions of the very best of our humanity. And these experiences satisfy as well the most basic human hunger for connection.” (p. 143)

### Discussion Questions

- This chapter names three shifts to contribute to a sense of the “thrill of democracy”:
  - Civil courage, or the power of choosing to walk with fear,
  - The power of discovering deep connections with strangers sharing a higher value,
  - Realizing our power as democracy’s guardians--as holders of solutionsDo you find these frames to be helpful? Have you had experiences in your own life that mirror these shifts?

- Page 147 gives a couple of examples of “new narratives” of the world formed by social and political movements. Can you think of other examples? Have there been more recent, or even local movements that have helped shift your consciousness?

## **Chapter 9: Dare for Democracy**

### Key Quotes

- “The good news is that, because humans are such social beings, *courage is contagious*. As your friends and family see you take even one step, you might be surprised by who’s at your side.” (151)
- “In telling the story of democracy, we can consciously reclaim words that anti-democracy forces have twisted. ‘Freedom’ is one with special power in our culture, and it’s been actively narrowed to mean opposition to government: freedom from interference. But let’s work to reconceive freedom to include *positive*--freedom as opportunity in education and employment, for example, and in having a real voice in governance.” (157)

### Discussion Questions

- This question comes from page 152 which urges “So let’s keep asking, what are ways to keep increasing visibility and opportunities for engagement, drawing more and more Americans into the powerful, positive, and welcoming Democracy Movement?” This chapter offers some suggestions. Which seem most feasible? What suggestions would you add to this list?
- Take the call to action at the end of this book. Share with your neighbor an act you pledge to do for democracy.

**For more information or to invite one of the authors to speak, please contact [Small Planet Institute](mailto:info@smallplanet.org) at [info@smallplanet.org](mailto:info@smallplanet.org) or visit [www.smallplanet.org](http://www.smallplanet.org)**