Defending Democracy at All Levels

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Thank you for inviting me to be part of your program today. It is indeed an honor to be with you and my longstanding dear friend and colleague Anne Smith.

Yesterday another friend and colleague, Jim Spore, was on one of your panels. When Anne and Martha Rollins were trying to secure Jim for the panel, they asked if I would encourage his participation. As you can imagine, getting speakers for a Saturday afternoon in the spring can be a challenge.

When I reached out to Jim, he wrote back that he was happy to participate. He said that when he was City Manager, “several times in my experience they [members of the League] were the only rational and thoughtful voices in the debate.”

Rational and thoughtful voices are largely missing in public dialogue today and that absence poses a threat to our democracy.

The role of the League is more important than ever, and, it is harder than ever.

While the League is devoutly non-partisan, almost anything anyone or any organization does in public policy is perceived by someone else as partisan. Labeling ideas as partisan has become a convenient way to avoid serious policy debate, missing numerous opportunities for agreement and consensus.

Defending Democracy
There is an urgency to defend democracy at all levels because democracy is under attack on multiple levels. The most dramatic attack is by the Russians, as detailed in the Mueller Report. Less obvious, democracy is under attack from within by intentional and unintentional actions by well-meaning people. Our labeling of views as “partisan” and unwillingness to engage with differing views are examples of our complicity in undermining democracy.

This presentation is premised on the proposition that democracy cannot exist without an ability for people to talk with people different from themselves. Diversity of ideas and the willingness
and ability of people to engage in constructive dialogue to arrive at the best public policy
decisions is foundational to a thriving democracy.

The goals of this presentation are...

1. To understand how cognitive biases contribute to political
   polarization;
2. To examine how others, especially the Russians, exploit
   our cognitive weaknesses;
3. To consider some tools to facilitate conversation; and
4. To offer some thoughts on areas of conversation relevant
   to the mission and policies of the League.

First, we will look briefly at political polarization to lay the foundation for the issue at hand.
There seems to be almost limitless data about polarized politics. Here are three examples, one
from Gallop research and two from Pew. As we can see views on different policy issues differ
significantly between Democrats and Republicans.

The Gallop report identifies issues that people think should be addressed by the President or
Congress.
- Republicans think that immigration is the most important issue; Democrats, not so
  much.
- Democrats think that leadership in government is the top priority; Republicans
  think less so, but it is their number two priority.
- Race Relations and Racism is the number four priority for Democrats and number five
  priority for Republicans.

The survey data from Pew relates to climate change and asks if people think that
governmental efforts to address climate change is hurting or helping (a) the
environment and (b) the economy.

The gaps between Republican and Democratic views are significant.
Another survey from Pew asks about three “hot button” issues:
- Equality between blacks and whites,
- Immigration, and
- Equality for women.

Again, the differences between Republicans and Democrats are significant.

People recognize the polarization – we talk about it all the time – and people believe that it will get worse.

Again, the premise of this presentation is that it will get worse if we cannot talk about issues and search for understanding, if not actual common ground.

A common barrier to conversation is the discomfort people feel when engaged. And, as a people, we do not like stressful conversations. Here in the South, we are especially skilled at avoiding issues and engaging in masterful passive-aggressive behavior, and not just in our political lives.

Now, let’s explore how our brains have conspired to make us polarized, how others have exploited our cognitive weaknesses, and what we can do about it.
How Our Brains Work: Critical Thinking & Cognitive Bias

Critical thinking is a field of psychology that I discovered only in recent years and have been struck by how the concepts therein provide answers to many human dysfunctions and our exercise of poor judgment.

A goal of research in this field is to make us aware of how our brains work so that errors in thinking do not become errors of judgment. We want to be able to recognize what our brains are doing and stop them before we do something we might regret. We want to be aware of what our brains are doing and, with intentionality, employ reasoning and objectivity even when our brains do not.

The conflict within our brain has been explored by Daniel Kahneman (2011) in his book Thinking, Fast and Slow. One of the skills he identifies for controlling our brains is to simply slow down – something our brains do not like.

Kahneman describes our brains as operating in either System 1 or System 2 Thinking.

System 1 Thinking is essential for day to day functioning. It is automatic, making assessments and decisions with little effort, driven by experiences and associations. Consciously think of the myriad of decisions that must be made to get out of bed and arrive at work:

- To get out of bed
- To brush our teeth
- To eat breakfast
- What to eat
- What to wear
- To put on our seatbelts in the car
- Which direction to get to work
Almost all of these decisions are made without thinking. Our brains have been programmed over time to make these decisions quickly based on patterns and routines.

How many of you have clear preferences for a particular brand of toothpaste, bath soap, shampoo, coffee, breakfast foods, colors and styles of clothing?

How many of you have strong preferences related to tattoos or body piercings?

Preferences may be beneficial, inconsequential, or quite harmful.

System 1 Thinking is sometimes referred to as intuition. Our capacity to sense danger, is an example – the so-called gut feeling.

System 1 thinking is, as stated, essential to daily functioning; it helps keep us safe.

System 1 Thinking, however, can also result in error and may even be dangerous.

Consider the smart phone, which has become ubiquitous. There will soon be a time when no one will remember not owning one. For now, many people can remember pre-smart phone times. Think about how the smart phone has conditioned our brains to do things that we did not do in the pre-smart phone era. Almost everyone receives text messages and knows the tone or vibration that announces a new one. Without thinking, most people reflexively look at the screen to see the message. People’s brains are as programmed to look at the phone as Pavlov’s dogs were to respond to the bell announcing food. Our morsel is merely a message saying that we are connected to someone else.

What happens if we are driving and our brain gets the text signal? We automatically respond the same way we always do. The consequence of the System 1 response, however, could be the death or serious injury of ourselves and others.

Each day in the United States, approximately 9 people are killed and more than 1,000 injured in crashes that are reported to involve a distracted driver. At 55 mph, sending or reading a text takes your eyes off the road for about 5 seconds, long enough to cover a football field.ii

System 1 thinking in this instance can kill us.

Many people are keenly aware of this danger and have intervened to prevent System 1 thinking, such as turning the phone off or putting it out of reach when driving. Making an
intervention requires more than automatic thinking. It requires exploration of options to solve the problem. This is System 2 Thinking.

System 1 Thinking is based on learning patterns. If the contents of the kitchen drawers get moved, the automatic patterns of preparing a meal, become disrupted as we try to find the spatula we like or a pot holder. If a grocery store changes the aisles, we are in a state of disruption until our brain learns the new pattern.

Consider the 9-dot puzzle\(^{\text{iii}}\) that is frequently used to explore creativity and the ability “to think outside the box.” The puzzle is to connect all of the dots with four straight lines without lifting the pencil. This exercise requires System 2 thinking.

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When most of us see the puzzle, we realize that we do not immediately know the answer. When a clue is given to “think outside the box” our brains work even harder.

Yet even in System 2 thinking, the patterns embedded in our System 1 brains disrupt our ability to see alternatives. Our brains see the dots on the perimeter as a box, making it difficult to draw a line past that imaginary box. Our brains see a familiar pattern and stick with it.

Understanding Types of Cognitive Bias

At the core of what we are discussing is cognitive bias. It is an important concept to understand because it is fundamental to everything we do. We are unavoidably biased across a wide range of areas. It is the way our brains think.

Not only do these biases apply to product preferences, automatic behavior, and accustomed patterns, our biases also apply to people and politics.

Let’s look at a people example. One of the most used exercises involves a fictional bank teller, Linda, developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky.\(^{\text{iv}}\)
Linda is thirty-one years old, single, outspoken and very bright. She majored in philosophy. As a student, she was deeply concerned with issues of discrimination and social justice, and also participated in anti-nuclear demonstrations.

Which alternative is more probable?
1. Linda is a bank teller.
2. Linda is a bank teller and is active in the feminist movement.

Most people choose number 2, because it seems plausible. It is easier to see Linda as active in the feminist movement than as just a bank teller. The answer to the question of probability, has to be number 1. Answer two is contained in its entirety in answer one. Any answer that adds more conditions to answer one, reduces the probability that it will be correct.

In workshops, people love to argue the result because their brains are so convinced that Linda is more than a bank teller. And, certainly she is. She may even be in the feminist movement, or she may have forsaken it completely. If, however, she is a bank teller – as is contained in both statements, it will always be more probable that she is a bank teller without any narrowing variables. Some feel compelled to argue because our brains also like to be right and they like to prove that they are right, as we will discuss further momentarily.

The System 1 cognitive fallacy revealed by the Linda exercise is known as “representativeness.” The second description fits who we intuitively think Linda will be. Representativeness is closely related to implicit bias and stereotypes.

Kahneman writes:

“The most representative outcomes combine with the personality description to produce the most coherent stories. The most coherent stories are not necessarily the most probable, but they are plausible, and the notions of coherence, plausibility, and probability are easily confused by the unwary.”

Most of us are unwary most of the time.

Let’s first look further at how we draw conclusions about people based on how closely they align with our expectations based on System 1 thinking rather than objective factual knowledge.

The following collage illustrates how our brains can create different stories based on how people are dressed.
The collage was created by Bayeté Ross Smith, a photographer and multi-media artist. The collage is from a project entitled “Our Kind of People,” which examines how “clothing, race/ethnicity, gender and skin tone affect our ideas about identity, value, and character.” The lighting and facial expressions are the same. Only the clothes are changed – and they are from the subjects’ own wardrobes.

Examine each individual photo. Imagine it in isolation. Seen alone, what stories do our brains create about the person. Whatever that story is, it will likely be inspired by our own unconscious cultural biases developed by our brains based on the cumulative impact of various stimuli: what we’ve seen, read, heard, experienced. These biases are referred to as “implicit biases.”

The premise of critical thinking is that we can learn to be self-aware when the brain is employing System 1 implicit biases. We can catch ourselves and shift our brains into System 2 intentional thinking and stop ourselves from saying or doing things that demonstrate bias.

Most of us are not intentionally hateful people. We do not intentionally want to hurt people. We do not want to discriminate or belittle or objectify other people any more than we want to be on the receiving end of such behavior.

System 1 thinking draws conclusions about situations, opinions, and people literally in the blink of an eye, as explored by Malcolm Gladwell in his popular book, Blink. One of the compelling stories in Blink is about Abbie Conant and her struggles as a professional musician. Women were routinely excluded from symphony orchestras until blind auditions were used. Men making decisions about talented musical artists, like Ms. Conant, usually were stunned when they chose a woman as the most talented person in a blind audition because their brains were convinced from hundreds of years of discrimination and rationalization that women could not play musical instruments, especially horns, as good as men.

I first met my wife when I was going through a blindly scored testing process that she was leading. On one of the exercises she was extremely impressed by my organization and thoroughness, so much so that she was convinced that the work had to have been done by a woman.

Our biases, while sometimes funny or benign, often they are not.
When the biases permeate society, they become collective biases. They result in discriminatory actions by institutions and across institutions. In the study of racial bias, the former is institutional racism and the latter is structural racism.

The same concepts apply to biases related to gender, sexual identity, sexual orientation, disabilities, religion, culture, and more traits. Any trait that does not fit the societal “norm” can be a basis for bias and discrimination. The “norm” becomes the basis for “accepted” stereotyping and can lead to people imposing artificial limitations on themselves. The challenges faced by Abbie Conant are not limited to women who play music professionally. The cultural norms imposed on boys and girls can limit opportunities that boys and girls see for their futures.

There is a hierarchy of harm that is caused by these biases. When our biases result in hurt feelings, they are called microaggressions.

When we consistently think negatively about someone because of some characteristic, including political opinion, we are expressing prejudice.

When prejudice is so strong that we actually deny others their rights, we discriminate.

And, when prejudice and discrimination fill one’s heart with hate, there is the threat of violence. We saw collective prejudicial violence most dramatically in retaliation against African-Americans equality during the Jim Crow era and during the civil rights era. Recently we have seen violence by individuals in the attacks on synagogues in LA (4/27/19) and in Pittsburgh (10/27/18), the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston (6/17/15), and in Christchurch, New Zealand where a mosque was attacked (3/15/19).

Violence rooted in bias is also committed by nations, what is sometimes referred to as ethnic cleansing. It was at the root of Nazi Germany and the U.S. violence against Native Americans.
Today we officially abhor and condemn violence and discrimination. Violence, fortunately, is relatively rare compared to our past. Discrimination, prejudice and microaggressions occur daily, sometimes by people like you and me who hold values in opposition to such behavior.

We do so because our brains are influenced unconsciously by a number of factors that can lead to poor judgment and harmful behaviors to which we are oblivious.

Where do these biases originate? They are derived from who we are individually and the cumulative experiences of our lives.

Reflect for a moment on what makes you, you. How do you identify yourself? How did you grow up? Where have you lived? Who are your family members? With whom have you associated in school, socially, at work?

All of these experiences create for each of us a unique lens through which we see the world. Within our brains, these experiences formulate the various preferences and associations that drive our System 1 thinking and its cognitive biases.

Exploiting Cognitive Bias for Political and Financial Gain

People who are driven by motives other than objectivity, rationality, and equity understand how brains work and devote their lives to exploiting our cognitive weaknesses for financial and political gain.

They exploit the range of cognitive flaws in addition to representativeness and confirmation bias. They know that we react to stimuli that stir our emotions. We get bombarded with similar messages because our brain uses what it can easily recall. Issues are carefully framed to appeal to our biases. And those who seek to manipulate us know that we do not like change.

Our brains unwittingly collude with people devoted to manipulating and undermining our democracy.

How many times has a face come on the television and, without hesitation, you knew immediately whether you would like or not like what they would say? You can’t help yourself.
Researchers use data analytics and other technologies to enlist our brains’ prejudices. In product marketing, these efforts may be less about getting us to choose Pepsi or Coke as much as they are about getting us to remain loyal to our existing preference.

The analytics are much more sophisticated today because we have shared so much information about our preferences. Marketers know what our brains will like. They can push us toward products that align with these preferences. This is how Amazon knows what we want to buy even before we do.

Political analytics do the same thing. Researchers are trying to sell us ideas and candidates. And, we are just as susceptible.

When it comes to policy and political ideas, we do not start with a blank page. As noted above, embedded within us are values, attitudes, associations, and biases that are the cumulative result of our life experiences. We cannot stop ourselves from this System 1 thinking when it comes to politics any more than we can stop System 1 thinking in any other area.

However, just like putting the cell phone in a place that we cannot reach in the car, we can take control of our brains and apply critical thinking to policy and political information that is fed to us and which seeks to manipulate us.

A major mental constraint to critical thinking, however, is our over confidence in the correctness of our existing positions. Our brains are pre-programmed to look for evidence that confirms their preconceived notions.

This is the cognitive fallacy known as confirmation bias, which I’ve already mentioned a couple of times.

Fox News and MSNBC exist to satisfy the need for conservative and liberal brains to be continuously affirmed in the correctness of their respective positions.

The internet makes this effort even easier and more suspect. A “confirmation” can be found through an internet search for whatever one’s brain thinks is right. Google the phrase, “the earth really is flat.”

In the political arena, political and policy operatives do exactly what Amazon does. They mine our online data to proactively send us policy and political messages to which we are susceptible. We get a rush when we see something on Twitter or Facebook from someone we do not know, expressing exactly what we feel. We “Like” it or “Share” it because it is so perfect.
We may not know who originated the Tweet, but they sure know us. They know we are biased toward engaging with and about things we already like.

We can combat our susceptibility by employing more System 2 thinking in processing what we see in our emails and newsfeeds and in challenging our own motives and assumptions.

How others exploit our cognitive biases:
Russian meddling in the 2016 election

Knowing how our brains work, the Russians systematically infiltrated political discourse in the U.S. to sow discontent and fuel divisive and polarizing rhetoric. And, we fell right into the trap, as documented in the heavily redacted report by Robert Mueller.

A Russian organization called the Internet Research Agency, LLC (IRA), became involved in U.S. politics in 2014. Using social media accounts, their operatives were able to reach millions of Americans:

- Facebook
  - 470 accounts
  - 80,000 posts between January 2015 and November 2017.
  - 29 million people received news feeds directly from IRA accounts.
  - 126 million people were reached through Face Book shares and likes
- Twitter: 3,815 accounts reaching an estimated 1.4 million people
- Instagram: 170 accounts; 120,000 pieces of content

The social media accounts initially created by IRA pretended to be personal accounts of people in the U.S. Later they created fake grass roots organizations so that their reach appeared greater and, thereby, generate more support for their disruptive postings. Most of the accounts were right wing or false Republican accounts designed to appeal to polarizing views of the right. IRA also created accounts on the left, including accounts aimed at people sympathetic with Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ community, and religions.

Examples of fake Face Book accounts include the following:

“Being Patriotic” – 200,000 followers
“Secured Borders” – 130,000 followers
“United Muslims of America – 300,000 followers
“Don’t Shoot Us” – 250,000 followers
Fake Twitter accounts included:

@jen_abrams (Virginia Trump supporter), 70,000 followers
@Pamela_Moore (Texas Trump supporter), 70,000 followers
@America_1st (anti-immigration), 24,000 followers

Inflammatory, derisive, polarizing material posted to these account stimulated reactions among social media users and attracted the attention of news organizations, always eager for controversy.

Here are some examples reported in the New York Times:

Through fake personas, IRA also purchased ads on social media and initiated pro-Trump rallies. The first rally organized by IRA was a “confederate rally” in November 2015. Rallies were organized in New York, Florida, and Pennsylvania.
Kaepernick & NFL Protests of Police Shootings

An interesting example how the Russians exploited our emotions is the case of Colin Kaepernick.

As reported in the Wall Street Journal and Sports Illustrated, Russian Twitter trolls fueled our emotions about the Kaepernick and NFL protests as attacks on patriotism from the end of 2014 through the middle of 2018.

Like the election interference, these accounts were also directed by Internet Research Agency.

On September 22, 2017, the President gave a speech where he called protesting NFL players SOBs but without the subtlety of the acronym.

The next day, 24 accounts simultaneously tweeted: “VIDEO: Trump SHREDS NFL Anthem Protesters!”

Thousands of tweets criticizing the NFL protests followed:

- 12,000 tweets came from 491 IRA accounts
- 87% of the tweets featured a conservative-leaning message
- Others, however, had a liberal message

The Russians did not care about the content of the protests – pro or con – they cared deeply about the controversy and sought to further divide and polarize Americans on the issue. And, we were willing to accommodate.

How did we lose control of conversation in our country? Through uncritical, System 1 thinking.
System 2 Conversation

How do we recover? We begin by employing System 2 thinking to engage in meaningful conversation. But this will not be easy. And the biggest problem may not be Trump supporters, but liberal democrats.

Earlier, we found that 53% of us find talking politics with people with whom we disagree as stressful or frustrating.

Among Democrats, the number is 57%, while Republicans overall are evenly split.

Among liberal Democrats, the number is 63%, compared with 53% of conservative Republicans—a 10-point difference.

Obviously, whether one is stressed or interested in talking with someone on the other side, it will depend on to whom one is talking.

To what extent we actually experience stress or simply expect and fear the stress is not revealed in the Pew survey. My concern is that the mere fear of stress will keep us from engaging, especially among those of us who are naturally conflict averse.

How many times have any of us made a conscious decision before a social event or family event not to discuss politics?

Of course! We don’t want to ruin the event.

If, however, we cannot have civil discourse about policies that matter with our friends and families, how can we hope for broader understanding?
Talking policy and politics only among like-minded people – “within our tribe’ – as the media likes to say, is not an effective strategy to defend democracy. Our form of government from the beginning was designed for ideas to compete with each other and to secure robust debate through freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

If we do engage, will we always find common ground? No.

Pew found that only about one-third of people said that they discovered more in common than they expected when they talked with people with whom they disagree politically.

Nonetheless, imagine if one-third of the people could find common ground, wouldn’t that be helpful?

As we imagine more thoughtfully engaged discussion, we must also remember that a significant number of people are not partisan and do not strongly identify as Republican or Democrat.

While people may still lean toward one party or the other, there are more people who identify as Independent than identify as either Republican or Democrat.

While true independents have remained a small fraction of the electorate since 1994, the overall middle has grown by 5%. The middle is 7% larger than the number Democrats and 12% more than Republicans.

What would happen if the roughly one-third in the middle came together to defend democracy?
Tools to Engage in Constructive Conversation

How could such a conversation work?

A good place to begin is to have some ground rules. Rather than jumping into a conversation and letting System 1 thinking take over, what if we employed System 2 thinking from the beginning. What if we acknowledge that conversation is hard and establish some guidelines to help us be constructive? What could such rules look like? Consider the following:

1. **Check our confirmation bias**: Agree to critically reassess our own views. Rather than seeking confirming evidence, look for evidence that challenges our views. Be honest about our motives. Seek perspectives from others without asking leading questions. “Seek first to understand and then to be understood.”

   1. Check our confirmation bias
      Understand our motives.
      Enter the conversation to learn, not to convince. Challenge our own preconceived views; look for ways to disconfirm what we think. In what ways could I be wrong?
      Go beyond positions and examine underlying interests.

2. **Reduce the stress and discomfort by having a conversation about the conversation**. Jointly define “respect.” Use “I” language. Be affirming. One of the best ways to be affirming is to eliminate the phrase, “yes, but….” Replace it with “yes, and.”

   2. Have a conversation about the conversation
      Establish ground rules to reduce stress and discomfort
      Jointly define respect
      Use “I” language
      Eliminate “yes, but”

3. **Lean into discomfort**: have the courage to have the conversation, to work through the stress and discomfort. “Do not expect perfection, but assume goodwill.”

   3. Lean into the Discomfort
      When someone says something we don’t understand, listen harder
      Do not expect perfection, but assume goodwill
Remember what I shared about the Russians and Kaepernick earlier in the presentation? How many of you found Kaepernick hard to discuss with other people? With the help of the Russians and domestic sowers of discord, it was a subject most people just didn’t broach.

In my graduate class on institutional racism last fall, we spent a substantial part of class one night having a real conversation about Kaepernick. We were as divided as any other group. Interestingly, however, the division between those supporting Kaepernick’s protest and those opposing it did not break along any expected lines: racial, gender, or military. People in each of these categories were split.

Using the conversation tools just described, we were able to get beyond the positions and actually discuss the reasoning behind them, listening and seeking understanding. It was one of the most insightful conversations I’ve witnessed.

Did people actually change their positions? Probably not much; however, I think most of us, certainly myself, changed the way we thought about our positions and found respect for the other side. We found common ground on some values even while holding different perspectives on how best to demonstrate those values.
Important Conversations to Defend Democracy

At the beginning of this presentation I talked about the need for the rational and thoughtful voice in today’s political discourse, and I have attempted to show why it is so hard to achieve based on our own cognitive biases and the efforts of others to prey on those weaknesses. But I have also tried to provide some evidence that there are enough people in the middle of the political continuum who could constructively engage in difficult conversations if properly constructed.

With the League’s history and commitment of non-partisanship, how can it model critical thinking and respectful engagement in today’s environment? In what areas can the League be helpful in convening, facilitating, or participating in conversation among people who have differing views?

The list of potential conversations is long.

This graph lists a number of important topics and plots them according to the extent that Republicans and Democrats think each topic is a priority.

[Graph showing political priorities]

As the headline suggests, at the 75% threshold, there is not agreement; however, at the 50% threshold there is agreement that a number of issues should be a priority. The positions on the issues may differ, but there is agreement at least on their importance.
The current political climate is more attuned to look for differences than similarities.

As the League considers on what issues to engage, may I suggest two: one not on the Pew list of priorities: Voting Rights; and one that is: Race Relations.

Voting Rights - Protecting the Voting System

Protecting the right to vote is fundamental to democracy and an area in which the League has a long record of activity. For the League, the issue is less about having the conversation than continuing the conversation as you have for many years.

There is a direct threat to our voting system by the Russian government, as documented in Section III. of the Mueller report, Russian Hacking and Dumping (p. 36).

Even though important parts of this section are redacted, it explains how a unit of Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate (not the IRA) hacked into various campaign organizations, stole documents, and then strategically released those documents to affect the election. One release of Clinton documents was specifically timed to divert attention from the Access Hollywood recording of Trump’s “locker room” talk.

It does not matter which candidate or party that a foreign government may be trying to help or hurt. That Russia or any other foreign entity is manipulating our democracy should be an outrage to everyone. We must protect the security of our elections from foreign government. Period.

It is deeply concerning that the federal government is not taking this issue more seriously as the 2020 elections are rapidly approaching. We need a strategy and implementation plan to identify intrusion and stop it.

An even more frightening attack by the same Russian governmental unit was directed at local governments, state governments, state and local election boards, and officials who worked in those entities. They also hacked into records and systems of private companies that supply voting equipment. Much of this cyber-attack was accomplished by exploiting known software vulnerabilities.
Over a two-day period in June 2016, the Russian government scanned websites for more than two dozen states for such vulnerabilities. The unit sent “spearphishing” emails to public and private officials involved with voting administration and voting technology. In November 2016, the unit sent over 120 emails to county election officials in Florida and appear to have gained access to at least one county system. The Mueller Report documents that the Russian unit successfully gained access to information about millions of Illinois voters. (pp. 50-51).

In July 2018, a federal grand jury indicted twelve Russians for the hacking and dumping activities that broke U.S. laws. The defendants are obviously at-large and the Russian government is arrogantly unapologetic.

The lack of meaningful consequences for the Russian attacks on the U.S. voting system in the 2016 elections assures that another attack will be attempted. This conversation must shift from Trump-Clinton partisanship and into protecting the fundamental integrity of our voting system.

Ensuring the Right to Vote

Ensuring the right to vote has been central to much of the work of the League. At the national and state levels, the League understands the intentional efforts on the part of some to suppress voting. Suppression has been part of our election landscape with intensity since the passage of the 15th Amendment.

The threats, intimidation, and murders of the early 20th century have been replaced with much more subtle, “colorblind” suppression tactics that are well documented in League material: registration barriers, limited polling locations, limited voting hours and days, barriers to absentee voting, voter ID, purging voter rolls, and other strategies.

Gerrymandering is further used as a tool to ensure that if you vote, in many districts it won’t matter anyhow.

The League’s continued work in protecting the right to vote is critical to democracy, including efforts at civic education, helping as many people as possible understand how suppression undermines democracy.
Another important area for ensuring the right to vote is restoration of voting rights, as mentioned as the last item in the Virginia League’s Positions-in-Brief, Spring 2018.

Progress was made on restoration of voting rights under Virginia’s previous Governor. And the state of Florida made history by passing a statewide referendum in 2018 to restore voting rights. On Friday, May 3rd, however, the Florida state legislation undermined the referendum by passing legislation that requires people who have served their time (1) to also pay all “court fees, fines and restitution” before having voting rights restored, or (2) to incur the expense of going to court and (a) asking a judge to dismiss the restitution requirement if the victim agrees or (b) asking the judge to convert the payments into community service, which would have to be completed before restoration of voting rights.

Florida has essentially imposed a poll tax on people who have served their time, but who are poor. viii

May I suggest that the issue of voting restoration needs a deeper review, applying critical thinking that challenges the status quo.

A tool used for organizational problem solving is to ask “5 Whys.” ix

1. Why are voting rights taken away?
2. Why do so many people go to jail?
3. Why are some crimes felonies and others not; why do misdemeanors result in jail time?
4. Why do we require bail?
5. Why are arrests racially disproportional?

These questions lead to the second and more challenging area for conversation: race relations.
Race Relations

A short while ago, I discussed the Kaepernick conversation in my class. That conversation, at its core, was about race. Voter suppression, at its core, is also about race. Voting restoration is about race.

In Virginia, we reflect this year on the introduction of slavery into America 400 years ago, here in Hampton Roads. And we do so after racial controversies earlier this year involving our Governor and Attorney General.

After a civil war in the mid-19th century and after major court cases and legislation in the mid-20th century, we find significant disparities between black and white Americans on virtually every economic, social, health, education, and justice measure. We find disproportionality in school discipline, arrests, incarceration, and the loss of voting rights.

The Consequences of Discrimination

1 of 13 African-Americans has lost the right to vote due to felony disenfranchisement compared to 1 in 56 non-black voters

The scale of the disproportionality in voting is striking:

One in 13 African Americans of voting age is disenfranchised, a rate more than four times greater than that of non-African Americans. Over 7.4 percent of the adult African American population is disenfranchised compared to 1.8 percent of the non-African American population.\(^\text{x}\)
At the core of both disparity and disproportionality is structural racism, a topic in which we do not think we can constructively discuss.

Many white people recognize that there is discrimination against blacks, though not at the same levels as experienced by African-Americans.

But, most white people do not believe that we ourselves are advantaged because of our race.
Nonetheless, when you ask people if they feel that they will be treated fairly in different settings, the reality of the freedom that white people take for granted becomes clear.

It is not acceptable that 49% of African-Americans feel that they will not be treated fairly by police or that 46% will be treated unfairly in seeking a job.

The area with the lowest sense of unfairness is voting. Yet even here, almost four times more African-Americans believe that they will not be treated fairly when voting compared with white people.

The numbers for all of the categories, especially voting, should be zero.

Not surprising, we don’t even agree on how bad race relations are, but blacks and white are closer here than in some areas. None of us really think that race relations are great.

Like in the political polling that we reviewed earlier in this presentation, there is not only a gap in perceptions between Democrats and Republican, there is also a significant gap between views and experiences of white people and people of color.

These gaps are worthy of discussion, but as with political differences, we get stressed and uncomfortable talking about race.
Can Conversations Make a Difference?

Over the past year, I have conducted 15 workshops across the country on implicit bias and racism to diverse audiences of mostly local government employees. The conversations were not easy and some people came to the workshop skeptical. The workshops had to show attendees who are people of color that the conversation would be real while not having white attendees run out of the room.

Using the same conversation guidelines outlined earlier, I have consistently seen people engage with an intent to learn.

In my most recent workshops, over 93% of participants returning workshop evaluations said that they learned information that they can use in their professional lives and 97% said that they learned information that they can use in their personal lives.

The reason structural racism persists is because it is embedded in the implicit, unconscious cognitive biases that I discussed at the beginning of this presentation. To change, we must first become aware about these biases so that we can act with intentionality and re-train our brains.

The same is true for structural discrimination aimed at people based on any characteristic: gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, immigration status, disabilities, religion, and other areas.

Discrimination against each group is rooted in some form of cultural or societal bias that is embedded in our brains. Most of our brains are programmed to think in ways that perpetuate the status quo, which is a white male power structure. We support this system even when intellectually and emotionally our explicit values support equity, diversity, and inclusion. We want to be able to act based on our explicit beliefs.

And this is why diversity and inclusion are important. The more diverse our work circles, social circles, and family circles the more likely it will be that someone can spot our implicit biases and make them explicit – just as we can for others if we’re willing to talk with each other and embrace our differences as learning opportunities.

System 1 thinking wins if it is not challenged.
Take off our dirty shoes

Let me end with a simple story.

Many years ago, I was working with a multi-cultural group. We had an open and trusting environment that empowered people to ask silly, ignorant, and sometime unintentionally hurtful things in a shared effort to learn and grow. One of the white participants asked an Asian participant why Asians removed their shoes when they entered their homes.

The Asian participant looked puzzled and reflected on the question. Then she asked, “can you explain to me why you keep your shoes on? You’ve been out walking on dirty streets and sidewalks and yards and there is no telling what is on your shoes. Why would you track all of that dirt and those germs throughout your clean house?”

We wear a lot of dirty shoes in many of our policy debates and in our social and business interactions: the dirt of cognitive bias that is manipulated by people of ill intent.

In the age of the internet, our democracy is at multiple levels of risk. We must think critically, become self-aware of the cultural influences that shape our underlying biases, and avoid the allure of confirmation bias. We need to question the systems and structures of the status quo that disenfranchise and marginalize people.

And we need to discuss these matters, not just among the like-minded, but to have the courage to engage with people who think differently than we do, people with different backgrounds and experiences, and, certainly, with their own implicit biases.

Through exploration of different ideas and exposure to new approaches, we can take off the dirty shoes of unconscious bias and act with intentionality consistent with our values, respecting those with different views.
The best way to defend democracy is to live the ideals of democracy, ensuring liberty and justice for all. And this requires talking. It requires the rational and thoughtful voice of the League of Women Voters.

Thank you for what you do individually and what you do as the League of Women Voters.

Thank you for letting spend time with you.

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Top 4 Tips To Spot Bad Science Reporting

Endnotes

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