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Senior Advocates
for Generational Equity

Summary of June 2020 Convening on Building Bridges Across Political Divides

Hosted by the SAGE Citizen Project

**Special thanks to the volunteers and organizations who
participated in this convening**

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Overview of SAGE and the Citizen Project

SAGE is a nonprofit organization that inspires people over fifty to give forward with their time, money and voice so that younger and future generations can thrive. Among our initiatives, we offer the Citizen Project – a series of educational events that respond to long-time trends showing Americans are growing increasingly divided politically and more contemptuous toward one another. Through our events, we collect and share examples of actions that individuals can take to build bridges (e.g., learning about self, listening to diverse views, identifying areas to work together). We are particularly interested in the leadership role that older adults play to bridge divides, and how generations can work together.

We are aligned with many other organizations that work to address political, racial, and generational divides in our country. Like many of these organizations, SAGE is concerned about long-term challenges that communities have been unable to resolve. We are also concerned that when challenges persist over time, our inability to overcome them may contribute to growing distrust and lack of confidence in governance. We also believe that when we invest time to build bridges between people who hold different views, it becomes easier to talk with one another, understand each other's priorities, and to identify enduring solutions.

Overview of 2020 Convening on Building Bridges Across Political Divides

SAGE was formed in 2011 and launched the Citizen Project in 2016. Over time, our staff and volunteers have developed relationships with many individuals and organizations that share similar interests. We organized our first Citizen Project Convening in 2018 in partnership with Oregon Public Broadcasting. The success of that convening led us to offer the 2020 convening.

The goals of the 2020 Convening were two-fold:

- a. Connect individuals and organizations from different regions who are working to build understanding and trust between people who hold different political views.
- b. Explore ways that we can help each other to strengthen local and state-wide initiatives that foster civil conversations on urgent and long-term community challenges. This may include finding ways for groups to:
 - Strengthen their existing work as is, and
 - Identify ways to work together differently (e.g., joint projects or being more explicitly complementary of others' approaches by sharing resources, practices, and expertise).

Due to COVID-19, SAGE offered the 2020 Convening online. Reflecting on the information in this summary and our post-event survey responses, we believe the above goals were met. We plan to host a third convening in April 2021. [See Attachment 1. Agenda for 2020 Convening.](#)

The 2020 Convening was hosted on June 19 (Juneteenth), a special day that commemorates the end of slavery in the United States. SAGE speaker, George Hocker, joined us for this convening to share his experience in public service, and to speak about how the challenges we experience in politics are also driven by ongoing and persistent challenges in race relations in our country.

Juneteenth is an opportunity to reflect on the need for racial equity and justice and to affirm the need to develop deeper relationships between people to address a huge range of divisions in our country that relate to race, age, income, and more.

Participants in the 2020 Convening and context for working together

SAGE was pleased to involve 46 guests in the convening. [See Attachment 2. Participant list with biographic information.](#) Several guests represented nonprofit and government organizations who offer civic engagement opportunities. [See Attachment 3. Mission statements for organizations.](#)

During the convening, participants briefly introduced themselves, and then SAGE recapped the results from its pre-event survey featuring responses from guests. As shown in the SAGE pre-event survey, participants believe that bridging divides is important and, collectively, our key strengths include facilitation skills, strategic thinking, and action-orientation. Some shared challenges include a shortage of moderate and conservative voices in bridging conversations and a need for more resources. [See Attachment 4. Some learnings from pre-event survey.](#)

At the convening, participants also attended small breakout sessions. During these sessions, participants developed deeper connections with others and discussed opportunities to work together. Participants described the breakout sessions as stimulating, engaging, encouraging, inspiring, informative, interesting, educational, challenging, great, lively, a great mix, a good dip in, a good sharing, connecting, thoughtful, short, with cautious optimism, great comments, wonderful people. [See Attachment 5. Summary of small group reports.](#)

Summary of key themes and hot topics

Near the end of the convening, the full group discussed key themes and hot topics on working together. To frame this conversation, participants completed a poll so the moderators could highlight some initial topics for further discussion. The following table shows a summary of the poll results. There are four action areas where participants showed greater interest in working together (see the four italicized/underlined).

SAGE has offered to facilitate one action - a joint article about bridging divides and will support others to spearhead other actions. SAGE will also invite participants to reconvene in April 2021.

Poll Results from June 19 Convening re How interested are you in:	Not at all	Somewhat	Very
<i><u>Helping to build a task force to engage more conservatives in conversations with liberals</u></i>	9	17	6
Working together to advocate for a specific policy change such as to address threats of violence against elected officials or to restrict threatening messages on public airwaves	16	15	1

<u>Working together to promote cross-regional or cross-cultural exchange programs between people (youth, adults, families) who live in different parts of the state</u>	2	16	14
<u>Writing a joint article or op-ed about bridging divides for statewide distribution</u>	9	14	9
<u>Helping to organize joint town halls with elected officials on the importance of building bridges across political divides</u>	10	16	6
Working together to raise money for a specific initiative such as civics education in school districts and libraries	15	12	5
Do you have other ideas for working together? If yes, please send them in the chat or share them out loud. Let SAGE know on your post-event survey, too.	Yes 9	Not Now = 23	

In addition to these action areas, participants raised the following themes and ideas. These themes/ideas were shared in the large group (or chat) and do not reflect the views of everyone.

- Consider who are we asking to come together and for what purpose. Are we asking people of different viewpoints to gather or are we asking people to gather for a common cause, regardless of their viewpoints? One model that bridges these two ideas is offered by SOLVE – an organization focused on beach cleanups with people from all walks of life who come together to pick up trash and talk to each other. This model creates a foundation for people with different views to convene, but without having the conversation being the focal point.
- Consider how we can expand this group of organizations to work together around racism. This is an issue we have not dealt with for 100s of years, and building bridges is about building bridges in community, regardless of the color of your skin. There are actions we can take personally to address racism, and some for this group too. As an example, there are many inequities around access to affordable housing and elevating the value of co-housing, particularly for people with different backgrounds / ages. We could solve one challenge while also forging stronger bridges across political and racial divides.
- There is a need for more racial diversity in these meetings. When we expand the diversity in the room, we deepen understanding of peoples’ views on race relations, racism, and institutional reform. When we diversify the group, the group will reflect the relationships we want to build (racial diversity, political diversity, urban/rural, etc.)
- One concern is the purpose for “bridging” – are we asking someone to “cross the bridge” toward our point of view or to weave together a shared view? The Braver Angels work on depolarizing from within is helpful for people to overcome personal obstacles toward bridging. One of their techniques is to ensure that if someone gives an example on the “left,” the facilitator asks for an example on the “right.” This is good facilitation.

- Keep in mind that the role of dialogue is to build trust. You can't act with other people if you don't trust each other. Trust building does not happen in a 3-hour meeting but unfolds when people have a chance to work together. One approach would be to emphasize that all bridging conversations engage people of different views and also of different racial or cultural backgrounds. If you grow diversity in the room, a deeper understanding will emerge.
- There is need for more "conservatives" in these meetings. Today, there is also confusion of what it means to be conservative or liberal. The conversation on political divides is framed as binary, but it is not. We have to get out of this "it's all or nothing." If we think something is a good idea, who cares about whether it's left or right. Let's solve the problem. Younger people are bringing the realization that significant (big structural) change doesn't (can't) come from the two party system, which creates and foments divides.
- This is a time when we need organizations to speak up and do things differently. In order to do this, nonprofit organizations have a need for more financial support and ways to secure more positive publicity for the value of hosting bridging conversations.
- Collaboration idea. One way to work together would be to form a portal that could help others in our communities get to know various organizations and how we relate to one another. A directory of all these organizations could make it easier to find people doing this work. Similarly, there could be a Facebook/LinkedIn account (managed by someone) that features posts from multiple organizations about relevant events. In these accounts, we could also post information about what groups need to work together (joint resource requests).
- Collaboration idea. What about continuing communication between these organizations? Braver Angels for example is working with other organizations and the Problem-Solvers Caucus to change the nature of Town Halls to be more deliberative and solutions-oriented. There are also opportunities for public forums on community well-being/community belonging and acceptance. There are also more needs for dialogue on policies around inequities in housing.
- Collaboration idea. To go beyond a meet and greet with other partners, consider offering workshops or working sessions where our organizations have a chance to connect and share best practices and ask questions about our different challenges.
- Collaboration idea: Create more sharable content that each organization can use for their outreach (newsletters, etc.). Along similar lines, we can also learn from existing models:
 - Institute for Civility in Government out of Texas has developed a model to work with Congress to encourage civility (a decades old program)
 - National Institute for Civil Discourse out of the University of Arizona, and Living Room Conversations offer a great accessible model

Summary of reading/viewing references for participants (click on links below to access)

- [Attachment 1. Agenda for 2020 Convening](#)
- [Attachment 2. Participant list with biographic information](#)
- [Attachment 3. Mission statements for organizations](#)
- [Attachment 4. Some learnings from pre-event survey](#)
- [Attachment 5. Summary of small group reports](#)

- [Video message from Senator Merkley on bridging divides](#)
- [Video interview with Senator Frederick on bridging divides](#)
- [Video interview with Marla Estes on the need for a conservative task force](#)