

Citizen Engagement Corner

## **Civil Discourse: The Foundation of Civic Engagement**

League of Women Voters of Brookline

Is civil discourse dead? What difference will my vote make in fostering a climate where my elected representatives will actually talk – and listen - across the aisle, to enhance understanding, find commonalities, figure out how to compromise and minimize polarization?

Recently, the Senate has been front and center as an example of the opposite, of total partisanship - “my way or the highway”. But it wasn’t always that way. Historically, civil discourse, negotiation, collaboration, and leadership leading to solutions for pressing problems have been a hallmark of the Senate.

On October 17<sup>th</sup>, the League of Women Voters of Brookline (LWVB) will hold its opening meeting with Dr. Mary K. Grant, President of the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate. She will use one of the Institute’s premier programs to illustrate how that collaboration can work: the award-winning Senate Immersion Module (SIM), a program for middle and high school students that uses negotiation and debate skills to learn about the legislative process. Some Brookline High School students have participated in the SIM program already – now we can all experience it.

Dr. Grant, along with her colleagues, and students from BHS will utilize this model - role playing as senators from different parties with different points of views and interests, addressing a problem and finding a solution. This is the essence of civic engagement. Dr. Grant will involve the audience in the way the Institute engages its visitors in civil discourse and civic life.

She will also explain some other programs at the Institute, which is dedicated to educating the public about the important role of the Senate in our government, encouraging participatory democracy, invigorating civil discourse, and inspiring the next generation of citizens and leaders to engage in the civic life of their communities. She will provide some examples of the program’s impact on students and what they have gone on to do.

The Institute, along with many others, has been influential in the introduction of a civics education bill in the Massachusetts House and Senate. The Legislature passed a civics education bill in July 2018. Under the bill, schools would be required to teach U.S. history and social science, including civics, "to promote civic service and a greater knowledge thereof and to prepare students, morally and intellectually, for the duties of citizenship." Students would also have to complete a hands-on civics project. It would not be a graduation requirement for students. In August, Gov. Baker sent the bill back to the Legislature with an amendment. It may be voted in the current "informal session"; otherwise, it must be filed again in January 2019. Contact your MA Representative and Senator if you want to support this legislation.

**On Wednesday, Oct. 17, join us and BHS students for refreshments at 6:30, and the interactive program from 7:00 – 9:00, 6<sup>th</sup> floor Town Hall (Select Board Hearing Room), 333 Washington St., Brookline. The program will be live broadcast by Brookline Interactive Group on Channel 23 (Comcast) or 15 (RCN), as well as streamed live <https://brooklineinteractive.org/live/>**

*Prepared and submitted by a member of the League of Women Voters of Brookline (LWVB). The League is a nonpartisan organization that encourages informed and active participation in government and that works to influence public policy through education and advocacy.*