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From our President

Luis Sanchez

In the August edition of *Democracy Chronicles*, I promised to elaborate on what I mean by “character education.” Let me begin with what I **don’t** mean: we are not proposing that our public schools and colleges become arbiters of everyday morality. That is a slippery slope leading toward a regressive kind of fundamentalism.

Yet a healthy and vibrant democracy depends on certain qualities in its citizens. When we fail to teach and nurture those qualities, we end up with leaders who corrupt our nation—as we see today—practicing cruelty and demagoguery, fleecing the public to line their own pockets, and pitting us against one another. It’s an old playbook for tyrants, and history offers no shortage of examples. Some days, it feels as though our political landscape has drifted into the realm of *Lord of the Flies*.

There are two essential virtues that a democratic republic must continually reinforce: **integrity** and **decency**. Integrity means telling the truth, keeping our word, and walking the talk. Decency means treating others as we wish to be treated.

If we can practice and promote these attributes—and insist that our elected officials model them—we can sustain our 250-year-old experiment in self-governance. We will still differ politically, because our population is large and diverse, but those differences can

strengthen rather than divide us. We can learn to disagree while remaining friends and neighbors.

As John Lennon once said, "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one."



Schools Shift Toward AI Literacy as the School Year Begins

By Jocelyn Gecker and Russ Bynum, AP

Across the country, educators are rethinking how to handle artificial intelligence in the classroom. In North Charleston, teachers gathered for a back-to-school training where an AI tool was asked to “create a map of the world.” The result — Mali labeled as “Mail,” Egypt as “Sopth,” and Libya replaced by “Africa” — drew laughter but made a serious point: students need to understand AI’s limits as well as its power.

After early attempts to ban AI outright, many districts are now encouraging guided use so students can see how generative AI can “hallucinate,” fabricate facts, or confidently present nonsense. “If you ever want kids not to over-trust these tools, try the map demo,” said Amanda Bickerstaff, CEO of AI for Education.

Charleston County, with 50,000 students, is building its own AI literacy program. Teachers, students, and parents helped draft a district policy after focus groups revealed that students were already using AI widely — but without guidance. This year, the district launches training for teachers and secondary students on how AI works, how to verify information, and how to protect personal data. “You can’t just get an answer and move on,” said AP Research teacher Ray Knauer. “You have to dig deeper.”

Other states are taking broader approaches. Utah created the nation’s first full-time AI education specialist and has already trained more than 7,000 teachers. Maine, West Virginia, and Georgia have followed suit. Utah also negotiates statewide privacy agreements and discounted tools so rural and under-resourced districts aren’t left behind.

Educators emphasize that AI literacy isn’t just about writing prompts — it’s about knowing when *not* to use AI, recognizing bias, and understanding that both people and machines can be wrong. As Utah’s Matt Winters put it, “AI literacy is much larger than saying ‘don’t use AI.’ It’s about preparing kids for the future.”

Source: [Associated Press](#) [summarized from a much longer article *with permission*]

Constitution Day 2026: Remembering the Constitution at 250

How a September observance became an opportunity to renew our understanding of American citizenship

Every September 17, Americans have an opportunity to pause and consider one of the most consequential documents in American history: the United States Constitution.

Constitution Day commemorates September 17, 1787—the day 39 delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia signed the Constitution and sent it forward for ratification.

In 2026, Constitution Day carries special significance. It falls during the nation's **250th anniversary year**, making this year's observance an especially appropriate moment to consider not only the Constitution's history, but also its continuing importance to American civic life.

From 'I Am an American Day' to Constitution Day

The September 17 observance has evolved considerably over the years.

In **1940**, Congress designated a day called "**I Am an American Day**," intended to celebrate American citizenship. In 1952, the observance was renamed **Citizenship Day** and moved to September 17, linking the celebration of citizenship with the anniversary of the Constitution.

The modern Constitution Day observance came in **2004**, when Congress enacted legislation requiring educational institutions receiving federal funds to provide educational programming about the Constitution on September 17—or on the preceding or following weekday when September 17 falls on a weekend.

Since then, schools, colleges and universities, libraries, museums, and civic organizations throughout the country have used Constitution Day as an opportunity for lectures, discussions, debates, public readings, and other educational programs.

In other words, Constitution Day is not simply a commemoration of something that happened in Philadelphia in 1787.

It is an invitation to learn.

Constitution Day 2026

This year's Constitution Day falls on **Thursday, September 17, 2026**, in the midst of the nationwide **America 250** commemoration.

That makes September 17 an especially fitting occasion for Americans to revisit the principles embodied in the Constitution and to consider what constitutional citizenship means in the twenty-first century.

Among the activities taking place around the country are likely to be:

- **Public readings** of the Constitution and its Preamble
- **Lectures and panel discussions** examining constitutional history and contemporary issues
- **Naturalization ceremonies** welcoming new American citizens
- **Constitutional education programs** in schools, colleges, and universities
- **Community discussions** concerning civil discourse, constitutional literacy, and civic engagement
- **America 250 programs** examining the Constitution's continuing role in American democracy

For educators and civic organizations, Constitution Day provides an opportunity to move beyond simply commemorating the document and instead encourage Americans to **read it, discuss it, question it, and understand it.**

Resources for Constitution Day

Organizations across the country provide excellent materials for educators, students, and members of the public.

National Constitution Center

Located in Philadelphia, the **National Constitution Center** is devoted to constitutional education and public understanding of the Constitution. Its resources include Constitution Day programs, educational materials, lectures, and online programming.

[National Constitution Center – America at 250](#)

National Archives

The **National Archives**, which houses the original Constitution, provides Constitution Day resources as well as educational materials, videos, and information about special programs.

[National Archives – Constitution Day](#)

U.S. Department of Education

The Department of Education provides information concerning the federal Constitution Day requirement for institutions receiving federal funds, along with links to educational resources.

[U.S. Department of Education – Constitution Day and Citizenship Day](#)

Bill of Rights Institute

The **Bill of Rights Institute** offers free resources for K–12 and college educators. Its Constitution Day materials include primary sources, videos, classroom activities, and lesson plans.

[Bill of Rights Institute – Constitution Day Resources](#)

ConstitutionDay.com

ConstitutionDay.com serves as a clearinghouse for information about the observance, including historical background, suggested activities, and event information.

[ConstitutionDay.com](#)

Daughters of the American Revolution

The **Daughters of the American Revolution** sponsors **Constitution Week**, September 17–23, with educational activities, community programs, and other opportunities to learn about the Constitution.

[DAR – Constitution Week](#)

A Constitution Is More Than a Document

For **The Madison-Lincoln Initiative**, Constitution Day offers something more than an annual historical observance.

It provides an opportunity to ask a fundamental question:

What does it mean to be an informed citizen of a constitutional democracy?

The answer cannot be found simply by memorizing dates, names, or amendments. Constitutional literacy requires an understanding of the principles behind the document—and the ability to discuss those principles thoughtfully with people who may understand them differently.

That makes Constitution Day particularly important in an era when Americans encounter an extraordinary volume of political information, commentary, and competing claims every day.

A healthy democracy requires citizens who can **listen, question, evaluate evidence, disagree respectfully, and participate knowledgeably in public life.**

As America celebrates its 250th anniversary, September 17 gives us an opportunity to return to the document that helped establish the nation's constitutional system—and to consider what we can do to ensure that the principles it established remain understood by the generations that will inherit them.

The Constitution was signed in 1787.

Its meaning is still being worked out by each generation of Americans.

The Madison-Lincoln Initiative encourages educators and citizens to use Constitution Day as an opportunity not merely to celebrate the Constitution, but to study it, discuss it, and understand the responsibilities of citizenship that accompany it.

Congress OF THE United States

begun and held at the City of New-York, on
Wednesday the fourth of March, one thousand seven hundred and eighty nine

THE Convention of Representatives of the States, having at the time of their adopting the Constitution, expressed advice in order to prevent any construction of its powers, that further declaratory and restrictive clauses should be added, And as extending the ground of public confidence in the Government, will best answer the long and well settled wish of the Nation.

RESOLVED by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, two thirds of both Houses concurring, that the following Articles be proposed to the Legislatures of the several States, as amendments to the Constitution of the United States, all or any of which Articles, when ratified by three fourths of the said Legislatures, to be valid to all intents and purposes, as part of the said Constitution, viz^t:

ARTICLES in addition to, and amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America, proposed by Congress, and ratified by the Legislatures of the several States, pursuant to the fifth Article of the original Constitution:

Article the first... After the first enumeration required by the first Article of the Constitution, there shall be one Representative for every thirty thousand, until the number shall amount to one hundred: after which the proportion shall be so regulated by Congress, that there shall be not less than one hundred Representatives, nor less than one Representative for every fifty thousand persons, until the number of Representatives shall amount to two hundred: after which the proportion shall be so regulated by Congress, that there shall not be less than two hundred Representatives.

What are the Youth Up To?

California Youth Turn to Hands-On Civic Programs to Strengthen Democratic Skills

Across California, young people are embracing a form of civic education that goes well beyond textbooks and classroom lectures. Through immersive, hands-on programs, students are learning how government works by stepping directly into the roles of legislators, judges, attorneys, advocates, journalists, and public officials.

One of the most established examples is the **YMCA Youth and Government** program, a national initiative that gives young people the opportunity to experience democratic government by participating in model legislative, judicial, and



executive programs. The program operates throughout the United States and Washington, D.C. and, according to recent program information, serves tens of thousands of high school students nationwide.

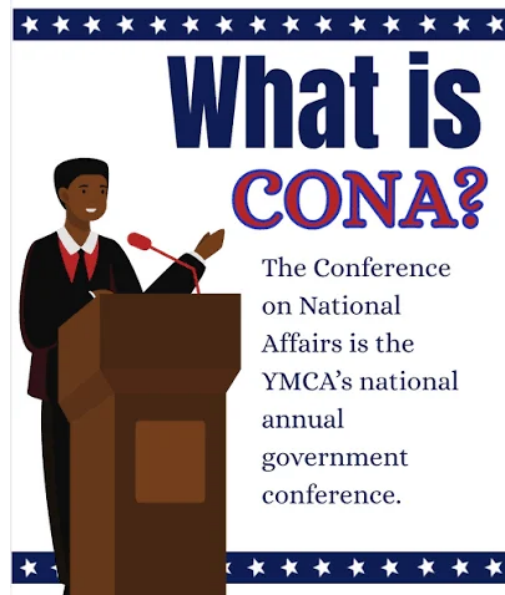
The program's philosophy can be summed up in a simple idea: **leaders are developed by doing.**

Rather than merely studying government, students practice it. They draft legislation, debate proposals, conduct hearings, argue cases, work through parliamentary procedures, and confront the challenges of reaching decisions with their peers.

National Youth and Government programs include the **YMCA Youth Conference on National Affairs (CONA), YMCA National Judicial Competition, Youth Governors Conference, Youth Advocate Program, and YMCA Changemakers Summit.**

This approach reflects an important principle of civic education: **democratic skills are learned through participation.**

California's Youth Take the Lead



California has one of the country's longest-running Youth and Government programs.

The **California YMCA Youth & Government** program began in 1948 and has provided educational and leadership experiences to **more than 70,000 middle- and high-school students** since its founding. Its stated mission is to build "values-based leadership and civic engagement in California's youth to strengthen our democracy."

[California YMCA Youth & Government](#)

The centerpiece of the California high-school program is the **Model Legislature & Court (MLC)**. The program brings thousands of students together to experience the legislative and judicial processes firsthand. Students assume roles that can include legislators, attorneys, judges, committee chairs, legislative analysts, lobbyists, political-party leaders, and members of the press.

A 2018 account of the California program, for example, reported more than **3,500 high-school students** participating in the Model Legislature and Court in



Sacramento. Students debated legislation, participated in mock court proceedings, and worked through the procedures used by California's legislative and judicial systems.

Middle-school students can participate in **Model United Nations** programs, while college students have opportunities to become involved through internship programs.

California YMCA Youth & Government was chartered as an independent YMCA in **2001**, giving it responsibility for administering the statewide program.

Learning Democracy by Doing

The value of programs such as Youth and Government is not simply that students learn more about the mechanics of government.

They learn how to **participate in it**.

A student writing a bill must determine what problem the legislation is intended to solve. A student serving on a committee must listen to competing arguments. A student acting as a judge must consider evidence



and competing interpretations. A student working as an advocate must make the strongest possible case for a position—even when other participants disagree.

These are precisely the kinds of skills that democratic societies require.

The experience also exposes students to something that textbooks cannot easily reproduce: **the necessity of compromise.**

A proposal that looks perfect on paper may have to be revised to gain support. An argument may be challenged by someone with a completely different perspective. A bill may fail. A position may change.

That is not a failure of democracy.

It is democracy.

A New Generation of Civic Leaders

From mock legislative debates to judicial competitions and national policy conferences, California's young people are gaining civic knowledge through direct experience.

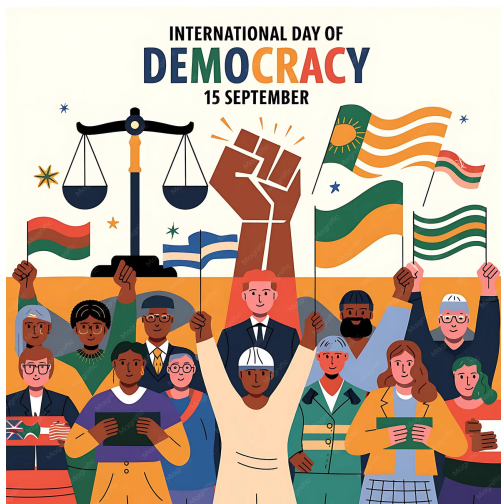


Programs like Youth and Government demonstrate that civic education does not have to be passive. Students can learn by **writing bills, arguing cases, negotiating policy, conducting research, listening to opposing viewpoints, and making decisions together.**

As civic education becomes increasingly important, California's young people are demonstrating a fundamental truth:

Democracy is not something we merely study. It is something we must learn how to practice.

That may be the most important lesson programs provide.



International Day of Democracy

Each year on **September 15**, countries around the world mark the **International Day of Democracy**, a United Nations observance established in 2007 to highlight the importance of democratic values, civic

participation, and the protection of human rights. This year's observance encourages communities, educators, and institutions to reflect on how democratic principles are practiced in everyday life and to strengthen opportunities for public engagement. It's a timely reminder that democracy depends not only on institutions, but on the active involvement of informed citizens.



Kettering Foundation Announces 2026 Democracy

Prize Recipients

The Charles F. Kettering Foundation has named the 2026 recipients of the Kettering Democracy Prize: **the people of the Twin Cities and Hong Kong publisher and free-speech advocate Jimmy Lai**. The award honors individuals and communities whose courage and commitment strengthen inclusive democratic practice.

Each recipient will receive **\$100,000** and the Kettering Democracy Prize medal at a ceremony in Washington, D.C., this November. The Twin Cities award funds will be directed to the **Minneapolis Foundation's OneMPLS Fund**, which supported urgent community needs during and after Operation Metro Surge.

Kettering President Sharon L. Davies noted that this year's honorees highlight democracy's dual reliance on "courageous individuals and communities," praising Lai's long-standing defense of free expression and the Twin Cities residents'

determination to stay engaged during challenging times.

<https://kettering.org/>

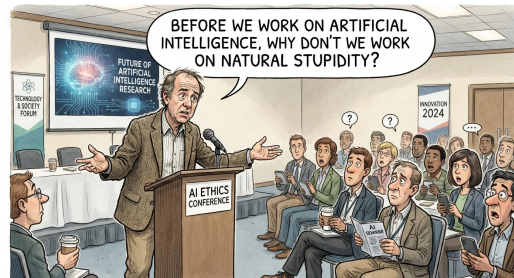
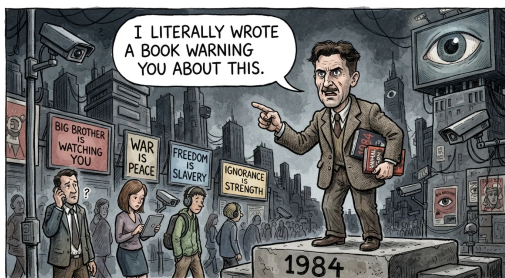
Kettering Foundation: Strengthening Democratic Practice

The is a based in Dayton, Ohio, dedicated to studying and strengthening .

Its core mission is to explore how ordinary citizens can work together to solve public problems — what Kettering calls Rather than focusing on partisan politics or policy advocacy, the foundation researches how communities deliberate, make decisions, and take collective action.



Cartoon Corner





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