

Opinion: When political discussion brings despair

By Sam Daley-Harris

When the nation's political discussion drives one to despair it helps to find a quote that puts the craziness into perspective. This quote from a *New York Times* column by Frank Rich eight years ago does that for me:

Last weekend a new...poll found that the Democratic-controlled Congress and Mr. Bush are both roundly despised throughout the land, and that only 24 percent of Americans believe their country is on the right track. (That might mean that 76 percent believe the country is on the wrong track.)...

Wrong track is a euphemism. We are a people in clinical depression. Americans know that the ideals that once set our nation apart from the world have been vandalized...

A Real Clear Politics six poll-average from early January found the right track number virtually unchanged at 24.7 percent. So reread the quote with the updated number and insert Republican-controlled Congress and Mr. Obama and you still land at: "We are a people in clinical depression who know our ideals have been vandalized." If we change the players and still end up at the same grim place, how do we respond?

The remedy is to come off the sidelines and get involved using our voices as citizens, but that's easier said than done. Where do we start? Most nonprofit organizations don't acknowledge the toxicity into which they send their volunteer advocates. Consequently, they don't create a deep enough structure of support, one that can serve as an antidote to all the toxicity. Instead they offer mouse-click activism and

other kindergarten-level actions, thin gruel for anyone hungry to make a difference. Combine the toxic environment with rampant civic illiteracy and you have a dangerous brew that results in abysmal levels of voting and a paucity of thoughtful civic engagement between elections.

I first confronted the civic illiteracy more than 35 years ago when I spoke to 7,000 high school students on ending world hunger after reading statements from a National Academy of Sciences report calling for the “political will” to end hunger. Less than 3 percent of the students could name their member of Congress and 35 years later only 10 percent of students I polled on 15 college campuses could answer correctly.

There is great joy in being in action and knowing that your voice matters, but only a small number of organizations work to heal the break that exists between people and government. Here are some examples of groups that do.

The anti-poverty lobby RESULTS and the US Fund for UNICEF are committed to reaching the sustainable development goals agreed to by 193 nations of the U.N. in 2015, which include global goals such as: 1) eliminating preventable child deaths by 2030 (currently 16,000 children die every day from preventable malnutrition and disease), and 2) eliminating extreme poverty by 2030 (currently 700 million people live in extreme poverty).

The climate agreement in Paris sends hopeful signals but progress will require groups like Citizens’ Climate Lobby whose growing team of volunteers in the U.S. and Canada have had 3,474 letters and op-eds published last year, up from 56 published in 2010, all in support of a steadily rising fee on carbon 100 percent refunded to the public.

Friends Committee on National Legislation focuses on addressing mass incarceration while the Peace Alliance

supports a bill that would fund violence prevention programs throughout the U.S.

What's unique about these groups is the deep citizen empowerment each provides. An Iowa volunteer with FCNL described the fear around writing her first letter to the editor and how she hoped no one she knew would read it. "I was out of my comfort zone, but now I've had four published and it feels like a celebration." A Citizen Climate Lobby volunteer in Virginia spoke about starting with "climate trauma" but after 18 months and visits to 20 Congressional offices described the experience as "sacred and profound."

When the country's political discussion is enough to bring one to despair, it helps to find a quote that puts the craziness into perspective, but it's even more powerful to find an organization that will support you in making the difference you've always dreamed of making.

Sam Daley-Harris founded the anti-poverty lobby RESULTS, co-founded the Microcredit Summit Campaign, and now heads the Center for Citizen Empowerment and Transformation. He is author of "Reclaiming Our Democracy: Healing the Break between People and Government" (Camino Books, 2013).