



14 VOTERS, 13 STATES, ONE MESSAGE: WE NEED TO WORK TOGETHER

HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL INVITED VOTERS OF ALL POLITICAL LEANINGS FROM ALL OVER AMERICA TO TALK ABOUT WHAT MATTERS TO THEM AND HEAR THEIR HOPES FOR THE COUNTRY.

By Susan A. Hughes | May 5, 2025

The John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum often hosts elected officials from across the country, but last week, it hosted a group even more powerful: the voters who elect those officials. This effort is a part of a new series from the Institute of Politics—Spotlight: Voices Across America—which is gathering people together from across the United States, with differing backgrounds and views, to discuss their experiences, struggles, goals, and hopes.

“It is not uncommon for senators, members of Congress, governors, mayors, and even former presidents to be guests in this space,” said Setti Warren, the IOP’s director. “While those luminaries are important figures to host, what is just as important is to invite the voters that elected them to those offices.”

The IOP was created, in 1966, to honor the legacy of President John F. Kennedy and the new series strives to embody his hope for the country. Warren cited a speech from 1963 where Kennedy said, “We should not be blind to our differences, but to direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved.”

For this first discussion, HKS invited 14 voters—Democrats, Independents, and Republicans—to talk about how their individual priorities influenced their voting decisions and whether the political divide the nation faces can ever be bridged.

The JFK Jr. Forum transformed into a theater in the round, placing the guests in a circle at the center of the room with audience members around them. The speakers were identified by first name only and their home state.

Having spent the day in discussions with HKS students, the group was prepared to share their opinions. Diverse in gender, race, and economic status, they represented 13 states: Alabama, California, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Montana, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin.

John Della Volpe, the director of polling at the IOP, asked each participant to introduce themselves and describe their best life. For many, there were common themes: being happy, enjoying family, and giving back to their communities. “Having no regrets,” added Alison from Wisconsin. “Traveling,” said Raul from Texas, who spent 21 hours getting from his home in Laredo to Cambridge.

Warren then asked about the challenges they face.

Francesco, one of two voters from Massachusetts, noted rising costs and real estate taxes. "The dollar is not going as far as it did prior to COVID," he said. Everyone in the group agreed. Francesco, a director of an irrigation manufacturing company, whose company had to lay off 11 of their 47 employees in April, is an Independent who leans Republican. "I voted for Trump, but I am going to tell you I regret it," he said. "It's not just because of the tariffs. My family is full of veterans, and while he promised to take care of them, he has cut all these services for them."

Marlon, from Alabama, coaches in his community and has an 11-year-old son who is into sports. "If you haven't priced a baseball bat in recent years, a good bat will probably cost you \$250-\$300 dollars," he said. "It's hard to tell a child no."

Kathy from California shared the worries she has as a senior citizen: "I'm really concerned about Medicare and Medicaid because the most important thing to us at our age is health care."

Mark from Rhode Island said he felt the American dream of owning your own home is at risk, with many, including himself, working "side hustles" to make ends meet. A quick poll of the group indicated half work a second job to bring in extra income.

"I have a daughter who is graduating high school in a few weeks," said Alison from Wisconsin. "She wants to go into physical therapy, but I wonder if she will have a job. And even if she has a job, will she afford rent?"

Khaycee, from New Jersey, shared a concern facing young people. "I'm from the Gen Z generation," he said. "I feel like we're not being heard, and there's not a lot of people like me in government right now." An immigrant to the United States, Khaycee became a citizen two years ago. 2024 was his first election. "I'm proud as a new citizen to put my voice in," he said.

Della Volpe asked if anyone had examples of when the government worked for them. COVID relief

and aid with the California fires were among the answers.

Desi, from South Carolina, mentioned the 2009 Deepwater Horizon oil spill off the coast of Louisiana: "I remember there was a lot of government aid and help for that." Desi, who identifies as an independent, supported Trump in 2024. "Besides that, I can't think of a time I felt they had people's backs."

Robert, from Montana, recalled the 2008 first-time homebuyer's tax credit, referring to the Housing and Economic Recovery Act, signed into law by George W. Bush and enhanced in 2009 by Barack Obama as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. "It was one of the reasons we were able to get our first home," he said.

Such political cooperation is missing in today's government, Francesco said. "I feel like there wasn't as much personal bickering between the two parties, and more reaching across the aisles," he said, "especially with John McCain and Harry Reid in office."

Stephanie, from Indiana, agreed and said she felt that the country needs to embrace unity. "I think everyone needs to learn to work together and stop trying to be in it just for yourself," she said. "We need to take everyone into account." Stephanie supported Harris in the last election and felt forced out of her church of 20 years because of her vote. "I believe in God, but I also believe a woman has the right to choose, someone has the right to be gay. God should love all of us," she said.

Rachel, a real estate agent from New York, also felt under attack for her vote. "I voted for President Trump because I think we need to stop the wars. He wanted to work with Russia and China to get out of wars in general," she said. "I am in a democratic state, and people think I am crazy." Gerry, also from Massachusetts, said he thinks a lack of common values are keeping us apart. "It's the parties that have changed, and I don't think they have held true to their core values," he said. "It's a time of transition, and the values that can bring us together are unclear right now."



Gerius, who works in sales at a bank in North Carolina, agreed, saying the path toward unity starts at the top with President Trump, yet he feels Trump is not the right person to achieve this aim. "He does not respect previous presidents; he doesn't respect the senators," he said. "The disrespect is one of the reasons why I didn't vote for him, and it's getting out of control." He feels the president is not going to change, and offered this advice, "If you want to bring this country together, stop being immature."

STACY, FROM MARYLAND

"We don't know how to disagree anymore. But I think everyone in the room wants the nation we live in to thrive."

Desi, the South Carolina voter, said the country lacks empathy. As an independent, she saw attacks on her social media site from both sides. "In this last election, people couldn't understand how someone could be independent." She voted for Trump because she thought he did a good job with the economy in his first term. "I feel like the economy had tanked, and he would do a good job getting it back on track."

A self-identified Christian voter, Stacy from Maryland, feels the missing value is a lack of respect. "If I am being honest, I feel everything has become so sensitive and no one is allowed to have an opinion or speak their truth," she said. "We don't know how to agree to disagree anymore. But I think everyone in the room wants the nation we live in to thrive."

Warren asked the group for one word to describe America right now and despite the grim answers—shambles, crazy, isolation, chaos, divided, undecided, uncertain—he said the fact that a group like this can come together and share their views, peacefully and constructively, is a positive step forward. Della Volpe echoed that: "It takes a lot for someone to share their thoughts in a public setting like this, and I applaud you all."

"I think we fail in isolation," said Robert, the Montana voter. "We need to prop each other up, build partners, build communities and relationships."

The entire discussion is available on the Institute of Politics YouTube channel. The series will continue next academic year.

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Photos by Mike DeStefano.

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