A CSC Citizen Dialogue

How long has it been since you have had a calm, reasoned discussion with someone you don't agree with on gun rights?

Most of us have strong opinions one way or the other, and in this time of personalized information streams, sometimes it's hard to understand why smart people can think so differently on this issue.

The Center is offering a chance to hear smart people on both sides of the issue present what they actually think and why, both with each other and then directly with the audience.

Join us at 7pm on October 17th in Hillberry A&B in the Student Center Building. There will be a moderated dialogue between the speakers, and then moderated conversation in a coffeehouse-type atmosphere.

James Makowski, Esq., Corporate Counsel to the Michigan Gun Owners’ Association, and Linda Brundage, EdD, Executive Director of the Michigan Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence, will discuss common ground as well as differences in the balance between gun ownership and public safety.

Brian Dickerson of the Detroit Free Press will moderate the formal presentation.

You can actually speak directly with people who may have very good reasons for their beliefs, that you may not have considered. At the same time, you may be able to help others understand your side.

It’ll be fun! It’ll be democracy! There will be coffee and cookies! Purchase tickets online here.
On October 17th, the Center for the Study of Citizenship at Wayne State University holds its inaugural Citizen Dialogue, the first of a series of civil civic discussions about important and controversial issues relating to citizenship. The topic of the first program is “Guns: Different Views.” The dialogue will be moderated by Brian Dickerson, columnist for the Detroit Free Press and deputy editor of the paper’s editorial page. For details about the dialogue, please see the front page of this newsletter.

The need for such a program is urgent. The divide among citizens appears impassable. Disagreement does not foster conversation or debate but degenerates into polarization and disharmony. It is essential, as the conservative New York Times’ columnist David Brooks writes, that we “understand that citizenship is a covenant, too, and we have a duty to feel connected to those who disagree with us.” (Brooks, “Let’s Have a Better Culture War, NYT, 7 June 2016) That duty to feel connected implies a responsibility to listen to those other citizens. Brooks’ liberal colleague, Nicholas Krystof, recently criticized the meager intellectual diversity at universities as a threat to “the quality of education itself. When perspectives are unrepresented in discussions, when some kinds of thinkers aren’t at the table, classrooms become echo chambers rather than sounding boards—and we all lose.” (Krystof, “A Confession of Liberal Intolerance,” NYT, 7 May 2016) As Detroit Free Press columnist Brian Dickerson observed, “…when Americans talk politics, we tend to talk past one another, even when both sides join the argument with the best of intentions. On a national scale, our individual self-righteousness is reflected in the seemingly unprecedented polarization of our political institutions, our news sources and our conversations on social media.” What are the consequences for us as citizens? “The costs of this gridlock are manifest in the deterioration of our roads and schools, the evaporation of confidence in our public institutions, and the shared sense that our political differences have become dramatically less susceptible to compromise” (Dickerson, “Why We Can’t Get Along in Polarized America,” Detroit Free Press, 18 June 2016).

This polarization and paralysis contributes not only to citizens’ disenchantment with the political process but also to their disengagement from public life. And the erosion of civic organizations in turn erodes the public entities and spaces that foster civic engagement. The result is a passive, if angry and fearful, electorate at a time in United States and world history when knowledgeable, active citizenship is essential to the well being of communities small, large and global. The Center for the Study of Citizenship proposes both to bridge seemingly unbridgeable divides and spur thoughtful, knowledge-based active citizenry through a series of civil civic dialogues on citizenship issues. Please join us on October 17th for an evening devoted to thoughtful conversation and the search for common ground.

Marc Kruman
Professor of History
Director
Center for the Study of Citizenship
2016 Elections Update, by Lauryn Boag, CSC Intern

The 2nd Amendment and the question of gun rights is a topic of great concern for many Americans, and there seems to be much at stake for this topic when considering this year’s presidential election.

Hillary Clinton, Democratic nominee, wants to lessen the presence of guns within the country to reduce the vast number of Americans who are killed in gun-related incidents each year. To do this, she believes in strengthening background checks for anyone seeking to purchase guns. She also calls for restrictions on who can buy guns, with a particular emphasis on restrictions for those previously convicted of violent crimes, as well as those who suffer from mental illness. Her platform states that the types of gun available to purchase for the average citizen should be controlled, thus keeping military weapons out of the hands of civilians.

On the other hand, Donald Trump, Republican nominee, wants to protect the rights of American citizens to bear arms he believes it was written in the Constitution. However, he does believe that it is necessary to indict those who abuse their rights and commit violent crimes. His opinion is that programs should be set in place to remove gang members and drug dealers from communities in order to make them safer. He recognizes what he calls a “faulty” mental health system, and states that it needs to be improved in order for us to see a decrease in the number of violent crimes, especially the large-scale violent acts. He does not believe that there should be any restrictions on the types of guns allowed to be sold.

While they have some similarities in their positions, there are certainly distinct differences, and the accessibility of guns may potentially be extremely different depending on who is elected.
Controversial Policy at UT-Austin
by Uroob Rahman, Center Associate

As of August 1st, 2016, the University of Texas at Austin began allowing licensed owners to carry concealed handguns on campus, in compliance with Texas Senate Bill 11. Many other states have campus carry laws, including Colorado, Mississippi, and Wisconsin. Licensed gun owners have previously been allowed to carry concealed handguns, but new legislation allows concealed carry inside campus buildings as well (open carry, however, is still illegal on campus).

Exceptions to the concealed carry law include places that get at least 51% of their income from the sale or service of alcoholic beverages, sports/interscholastic events, K-12 activities on campus, certain laboratories, and sole-occupant offices (which must give oral notice of being a gun-free zone). The most notable of these exceptions is the UT Tower observation deck, from where a 25-year-old engineering student shot 49 people, killing 16. 50 years later, the UT Austin shooting is considered to be the beginning of the era of gun violence America currently finds itself in.

Given this backstory, it’s understandable that the campus carry policy is far from happily accepted. Many students, professors, and even the university president himself are against campus carry. Ana Lopez, a sophomore at the university, worries about the effect the policy will have on classroom discussions involving divisive topics such as slavery and racism, and says that if she had known about the policy, she “probably would have gone somewhere else”.

Lisa Moore, an English professor who teaches gay and lesbian studies, also worries about the effect of guns on free speech, and is one of three professors suing the university and the state over campus carry, saying it violates the First and Second Amendments. “The Second Amendment allows for a well-regulated militia. What we have is not a well-regulated militia. It’s a 21-year-old with a backpack.”

Gregory Fenves, whose term as university president started only three days after the campus carry law was passed, has been trying to lessen the impact of the law on the university without courting opposition from gun rights groups or the state of Texas. “I don’t believe guns belong on campus,” he says, and is trying to limit signs around gun-free zones so that campus doesn’t “look like a war zone.”

There are those, however, who agree with the new law. According to university estimates, 14% of the licensed carry population of is under 30, and Huyler Marsh is one of them. A master’s student at the university, he supports campus carry and brings a gun to school with him. Knowing only one other student who carries, he feels like an outcast because of the controversy around the policy. When asked why he carries, he said it wasn’t out of fear of being attacked, but “it’s like a fire extinguisher or a seatbelt. You always have it and hope you never use it.”

Once the initial uproar over UT Austin’s campus carry policy dies down, we will begin to see how the policy impacts the university on a regular basis. The hope of many is that nothing will change, but the fear of another mass shooting remains a lingering threat. Regardless of any personal thoughts on the matter, all eyes are on Austin as it begins implementing its campus carry policy: How events play out there may serve as a model for how other cities in one of the most developed nations deals with its gun problem.

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Thank you.