



## A DCI Deliberation Guide

### **Balancing Self-Government and National Stability: The Case of Presidents, Institutions, and the People**

*How should democratic societies respond when elected majorities pursue actions that challenge constitutional norms, institutional checks on power, or minority protections?*

#### **About the Deliberative Series on American Values**

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*As the United States nears the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the nation's founding, this Deliberative Series on American Values invites participants to reflect on the foundational ideals that have shaped our republic. Approaching this milestone in an era marked by historical amnesia and selective memory, the series aims to foster a more complete understanding of our nation's past and present. Each forum draws from both the Declaration and the Constitution's Preamble to explore a pair of core American values that often complement each other but also have been – and remain – at the heart of deep tensions, particularly during moments of national change. Through dialogue grounded in history, informed by philosophical inquiry, and connected to current policy challenges, this series and this guide is designed to encourage thoughtful deliberation on how best to uphold and balance these enduring commitments in an ever-changing democracy.*

#### **Format for Deliberation**

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##### **Before the Deliberation**

- I. Read this Deliberation Guide (Required)

##### **During the Deliberation**

- I. Setting Expectations (5 min.)
- II. Getting to Know Each Other (10 min.)
- III. Understanding Self-Government & National Stability (15 min.)
- IV. Connecting with Other Values (10 min.)

- V. Analyzing the History of Self-Government & National Stability in the US (20 min.)
- VI. Break (5 min.)
- VII. Considering the Case of Executive Orders and Separation of Powers (25 min.)
- VIII. Identifying Value Priorities in the Separation of Powers Discussion (20 min.)
- IX. Reflections (10 min.)

## **Background**

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### **Introduction**

In the 1970s, a new anti-government phenomenon called the Sovereign Citizen movement began to form. Its adherents believe that by declaring themselves sovereign citizens, rather than Americans, they are no longer subject to US laws, regulations, and even debts.<sup>1</sup> While widely deemed illegitimate by people across the political spectrum, the movement claims that its legitimacy is based on the Declaration of Independence, which reads, “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” The sovereign citizens draw attention to the consent component of this claim—if we never formally consent to being ruled, what legitimacy does our government have?

Though often associated more with personal efforts to reject taxation and law enforcement, the sovereign citizen movement draws attention to a crucial philosophical conflict in America’s founding values. If the US recognized the legitimacy of these sovereign citizens, the nation would quickly fall into unprecedented lawlessness. However, without genuine efforts to create a “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” in the words of Abraham Lincoln in his famed Gettysburg Address, the US fails its founding promise of self-government.

In this way, both self-government and national stability are aspirational concepts. The country can never fully include every citizen in every aspect of government, nor can it maintain complete stability in perpetuity. One of the central challenges of American democracy, then, lies in navigating the persistent tension between honoring the ideal of self-government and preserving some basic level of stability that its people demand and require.

This guide will explore how the US has approached that tension and the desire to realize two of our foundational commitments. Stretching from Thomas Jefferson’s vision of democracy to security measures after 9/11, this text seeks to empower deliberators to discuss both our country’s historical view of self-government and national stability and what can be done today.

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<sup>1</sup> [“The Sovereign Citizen Movement in the United States.”](#) Anti-Defamation League. 2023.

## **Understanding Self-Government & National Stability in the American Historical Context**

### **Pathways towards Self-Government**

As we saw in our last deliberation about unity and equality, the concepts that are integral to our contemporary political culture, while also important 250 years ago, had very different meanings at the nation's founding. Once again, we will examine how the basic ideas of self-government and national stability have evolved over time.

In comparison to the absolute monarchies and democracies with even more limited franchises, the American experiment represented a new frontier in self-government. Though American townships enjoyed limited democratic autonomy since colonists arrived in Jamestown in 1607, the establishment of the new national government was predicated upon the rejection of The Crown and the sovereignty of the people.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, when Thomas Jefferson emphasized the importance of the consent of the governed, he was not referring to the consent of his daughters, his poorer neighbors, or the hundreds of slaves at his Monticello plantation. During Jefferson's lifetime, consenting to the American government—initially by voting to ratify the Constitution and then by participating in subsequent elections—was a privilege reserved for white property owners.<sup>3</sup> Over the following centuries, suffrage was extended first to poorer white men, then to all men regardless of race, then to women, and eventually to eighteen-year-olds, as Americans slowly redefined who counted as part of “the governed” entitled to give their consent.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, even as Americans have moved closer to universal suffrage, they have in many ways become more distant from the processes of self-government. Over the past century, from expanding the federal criminal code to regulating election procedures, authorities in Washington, D.C have assumed much of the power of state and local governments, which citizens have far more influence over.<sup>5</sup> Increased lobbying and skyrocketing campaign spending incentivize elected officials to value the opinions of powerful organizations and wealthy donors over the views of their constituents.<sup>6</sup> The growth of the

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<sup>2</sup> [“Principles of the American Revolution.”](#) National Constitution Center.

<sup>3</sup> [“Voting Rights: A Short History.”](#) Carnegie Corporation of New York. 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> [“On the Decline of Federalism.”](#) *Daedalus* Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. 2006.

<sup>6</sup> [“Political donations from mega-donors affect political representation in US politicians.”](#) Rotterdam School of Management. 2024.

federal bureaucracy, even if effective or beneficial, means far more governmental power is not directly accountable to the electorate.<sup>7</sup>

Self-government is more complex than just having a ballot to cast in an election. Just as significant is the ability to make one's voice heard – whether at a town council meeting or in a presidential election – in ways that affect policy. In today's digital landscape, that dynamic is even more complex: while social media and online platforms can amplify voices and mobilize communities, they can also spread misinformation, polarize debate, and create echo chambers that distort democratic discourse.

### **Pathways towards National Stability**

Likewise, the meaning of national stability has expanded greatly over the past quarter millennia. The Constitution's preamble declares that a fundamental purpose of creating this new government is to "provide for the common defense" and "insure domestic Tranquility." These two concepts form the bedrock of the contemporary idea of national stability: the common defense ensuring a collective response to foreign threats and domestic tranquility providing order in the face of rebellions which threaten the Union. Speaking the language of "defense" and "tranquility," the Constitution was principally concerned with stability towards the goal of survival.

Over time, as the realization of this basic survival objective has grown more certain, the government has been able to take up many other mantles in the name of stability. Controlling the money supply through the Federal Reserve, busting trusts and monopolies, and stimulating the economy in its greatest hours of need, the US government has assumed responsibility for the country's economic stability as well.<sup>8</sup> Given its role as the "leader of the free world" and a "global policeman," the US is now expected to maintain stability not only within its borders, but around the globe.<sup>9</sup> The government is also responsible for the stability of its own democratic practices. While at the founding, the populace had few expectations about such practices (given the world's unfamiliarity with democracy), today's America has numerous valued institutions and norms that its citizens generally do not want to see threatened. Thus, as the powers of the federal government have grown, so has its obligation to uphold various types of stability.

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<sup>7</sup> "[Understanding Accountability in Democratic Governance](#)." Cambridge University Press. 2023.

<sup>8</sup> "Growth of Government." The American Leader. 2021.

<sup>9</sup> "[Why Is America the World's Police?](#)" Boston Review. 2020.

## Historical Interplay Between Self-Government and National Stability

### *Jacksonian Democracy*

Described as “the first populist,” the presidency of Andrew Jackson represented a radical experiment that embodied the principle of transferring more power to the people.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, while expanding the people’s self-governing capacities, Jackson’s presidency was a turbulent one and generated many threats to national stability. It provides some of the best examples of how self-government and national stability can be in tension with one another.

There is perhaps no clearer way to expand the scope of self-government than to include more people in the democratic process. Though the executive branch could not itself expand the franchise, Jackson’s advocacy for white male suffrage helped drive turnout from under 30% in 1824 to nearly 80% by 1840, as state after state heeded his advice and dismantled property and taxpaying requirements.<sup>11</sup> By more than doubling the franchise, Jackson made more people feel a part of the “self” in self-government. Many affluent Americans, accustomed to controlling the vote, resisted these changes, worrying that it would empower “indolent or vicious” men and destabilize the nation.<sup>12</sup>

Jackson also gave self-government new meaning through his reaction to the 1832 *Worcester v. Georgia* Supreme Court decision. In *Worcester*, the Supreme Court ruled that Georgia had no authority to impose its laws on Cherokee territory, but Jackson refused to enforce the decision, effectively allowing the state to ignore federal protections for Native Americans.<sup>13</sup> In some ways, this represented a boon to self-government, allowing the will of the voters of Georgia—as expressed through their elected representatives—to prevail over an unelected Supreme Court. It was also a threat to national stability, which depended on an empowered judiciary to maintain the rule of law and rein in the impulses of the other branches of government that might privilege the interests of majorities at the expense of the rights of minorities (in this case, the Cherokees who were forced to leave their homelands via the infamous Trail of Tears).<sup>14</sup>

Jackson’s battle with the Second Bank of the United States marked another opportunity for him to reshape government. This national bank was a powerful national financial institution that regulated currency and credit, but Andrew Jackson vetoed its recharter and withdrew federal

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<sup>10</sup> “[The First Populist: The Defiant Life of Andrew Jackson](#),” Scribner. 2022.

<sup>11</sup> “[Rise of Democratic Politics](#),” Digital History.

<sup>12</sup> “[“The Interests of the Many:” The Expansion of Democracy in the Jacksonian Era](#),” National Humanities Center.

<sup>13</sup> “[Worcester v. Georgia](#),” Britannica.

<sup>14</sup> “[What Happened on the Trail of Tears?](#)” National Parks Service. 2025.

deposits in 1832.<sup>15</sup> This marked a victory for foes of what Jackson saw as a new aristocracy controlling financial matters with little accountability. It shifted economic policymaking into the political arena and subjected it to greater oversight by the people's representatives. However, the bank's demise weakened federal oversight over the financial system and created significant financial instability, encouraging risky lending and speculation that helped trigger the Panic of 1837 and a severe economic downturn.<sup>16</sup>

In one notable instance, Jackson chose authoritative national stability over self-governing state-based democracy. When South Carolina attempted to nullify federal tariffs in 1832, Jackson responded forcefully, asserting federal supremacy and threatening military action to preserve the Union.<sup>17</sup> In doing so, he limited the South Carolinians' ability to govern themselves, instead subjecting them to the policies of the federal government. In the process, Jackson upheld national stability at the expense of local self-government, forbidding the state nullification of policies emanating from Washington D.C. Such nullification could quickly have led to the obliteration of federal authority and the unraveling of the Union.

### ***The New Deal***

The presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt also offers insights into the relationship between self-government and national stability. Taking office in 1933, Roosevelt wanted to waste no time fulfilling his electoral promise to provide immediate relief, recovery, and reform to a nation crippled by the Great Depression. Yet while his bold intervention through the New Deal, a sweeping set of federal programs and regulations aimed at economic recovery, offered hope to millions, it also raised alarms about how such expansive action might unsettle the nation's constitutional balance and long-standing norms of governance.

Granting citizens a social safety net popular among the American people, the New Deal was an exemplar of self-government. This much was clear from the results of Roosevelt's 1936 re-election campaign, when he trounced Republican Alf Landon 523-8 in the Electoral College, signaling the electorate's overwhelming approval of the New Deal.<sup>18</sup> However, such monumental change also incited fears of instability, with business leaders raising the alarm that the New Deal would undermine America's foundations of capitalism, free enterprise, and personal freedom.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “[Andrew Jackson & the Bank War](#),” Andrew Jackson’s Hermitage.

<sup>16</sup> “[Andrew Jackson: Domestic Affairs](#),” Miller Center of Public Affairs.

<sup>17</sup> “[The Nullification Crisis](#),” Bill of Rights Institute.

<sup>18</sup> “[United States presidential election of 1936](#),” Britannica.

<sup>19</sup> “[The New Deal Made Them ‘Right.’](#)” Cato Institute. 2009.

Roosevelt relied on the nascent administrative state to carry out his extensive agenda, creating new agencies and generating new debates about self-government and national stability.<sup>20</sup> Typically, the establishment of a larger bureaucracy stabilizes governance, but at a cost to voters' input in politics. By seeking to exert his own meticulous control over those agencies' affairs as an agent of the people, Roosevelt worked to flip that dynamic on its head. While the people would enjoy a bureaucracy responsive to a president they elected, they would also suffer the tumult of a new federal apparatus that might change direction with each new administration. In the 1935 case *Humphrey's Executor v. U.S.*, the Supreme Court limited this effect of presidential turnover on national stability by ruling that Roosevelt could not fire a Federal Trade Commissioner without cause, instituting a degree of separation between the presidency and the bureaucracy.<sup>21</sup>

In many cases like *Humphrey's Executor*, the Supreme Court was a thorn in Roosevelt's side, invalidating many of his reforms.<sup>22</sup> Frustrated by his unrelenting judicial opposition, Roosevelt launched a campaign to persuade Congress to expand the Supreme Court and fill the new seats with justices sympathetic to his cause.<sup>23</sup> Though the "court-packing" bid eventually fizzled, its potential underscores the clash in values that is the focus of this guide. On the one hand, court packing would allow a remarkably popular president to implement his remarkably popular agenda. On the other, it would undermine the judiciary's independence, introduce more unpredictability at the federal level, and set a precedent for presidents to reshape the Court whenever it stood in their way.

### ***Post-9/11 Security Measures***

A more recent episode in American history further demonstrates the tensions between efforts to promote self government and maintain national stability. The horrors that shook the US on September 11, 2001 reverberated deeply over the coming years. For one, unlike in the aforementioned epochs of Jackson and Roosevelt, the federal government decided to prioritize national security above all else, including the value of self-government.

In the days after 9/11, Congress wasted no time passing the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), giving President George W. Bush carte blanche to execute military operations against the perpetrators of the terrorist attack.<sup>24</sup> This legislation allowed the country to

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<sup>20</sup> "[The Birth of the Administrative State: Where It Came From and What It Means for Limited Government.](#)" Heritage Foundation. 2007.

<sup>21</sup> *Humphrey's Executor v. United States*, 295 U.S. 602. 1935.

<sup>22</sup> "[On this day, Supreme Court invalidates key FDR program.](#)" National Constitution Center. 2022.

<sup>23</sup> "[How FDR lost his brief war on the Supreme Court.](#)" National Constitution Center. 2024.

<sup>24</sup> "[What the AUMF Is and Why You Should Care.](#)" Bipartisan Policy Center. 2018.

respond more rapidly and decisively to strategic developments in the Middle East, but it also effectively transferred Congress's constitutional war powers to the executive branch, sidelining public debate and undermining democratic oversight over military decisions.

Signed into law a month later, the PATRIOT Act expanded the government's ability to conduct surveillance, access personal records, and monitor communications.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the American people could feel safer from the threat of another devastating terrorist attack. However, there was a price to pay for this stability. Due to the requisite secrecy in such counterterrorism surveillance, the people could not conduct meaningful oversight over their government's new surveillance actions.

Defending many of their counterterrorism actions in court, the Bush administration relied heavily on the state secrets doctrine, which "permits the government to block the release of any information in a lawsuit that, if disclosed, would cause harm to national security."<sup>26</sup> This doctrine can help preserve national stability by preventing the exposure of sensitive intelligence methods or operations that could jeopardize ongoing efforts to prevent future attacks. Yet by shielding entire programs from legal scrutiny, it also allows the executive branch to evade accountability, cutting the public and the courts out of decisions usually subject to democratic oversight.

### **The Case of Executive Orders and the Separation of Powers**

Donald Trump's second administration provides a host of examples that enable us to further explore the relationship between the important but often competing values of self-government and national stability. Returning to the Oval Office, President Trump wasted no time asserting executive authority to enact what he viewed as the people's will. The morning after his victory in the 2024 presidential election, Trump hailed his "unprecedented and powerful mandate" to use the executive branch to reshape the federal government and expediently carry out his agenda.<sup>27</sup> In the early weeks of his second term, Trump posted on Truth Social, "He who saves his Country does not violate any Law."<sup>28</sup> Between direct statements like these and the substance of his policy agenda, which has been explicitly designed to bypass roadblocks from Congress, agencies, and the judiciary wherever possible, Trump's outlook is clear: by electing him last November, the American people have empowered him to move fast and forcefully to reclaim the nation from what he sees as years of decline.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "[Patriot Act](#)." Legal Information Institute.

<sup>26</sup> "[Background on the State Secrets Privilege](#)." American Civil Liberties Union. 2007.

<sup>27</sup> "[Trump claims 'unprecedented and powerful mandate'](#)." Politico. 2024.

<sup>28</sup> "[Trump Suggests No Laws Are Broken if He's 'Saving His Country'](#)." New York Times. 2025.

<sup>29</sup> "[Trump claims a 'massive' mandate, but presidents often overread their victories](#)." NPR. 2024.

As Trump's rhetoric intensified around presidential strength, so did outcry in response to what many deemed a dictatorial power grab.<sup>30</sup> Some legal scholars declared the country in "constitutional crisis," viewing American foundational safeguards maintaining the nation's stability as imperiled.<sup>31</sup> On June 16, millions of Americans across the country took to the streets in the "No Kings" protests to condemn what they saw as Trump's gross expansion of unilateral power.<sup>32</sup> The protests reflected a broader wave of resistance against what many perceive as an escalating assault on the norms, institutions, and constraints that have long defined American constitutional democracy.

It is against this long-standing backdrop of America's relationship with self-government and national stability that the current presidential power debate takes shape. Consistent with H.L. Mencken's famed quote, "Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard," Trump's justifications for the expansion of executive power revolve around the ethos of self-government. From this perspective, **populism** serves as the purest expression of democratic will, where the direct support of the people, expressed via a narrow presidential victory, not only legitimizes bold executive action, but demands it.

Conversely, dissidents warn that his appeals to the popular will veer into demagoguery, stirring instability by elevating personal rule over institutional norms. In this view, **constitutionalism** is the true foundation of American democracy, ensuring that power is exercised through lawful means and dispersed across institutions to prevent tyranny. While populism and constitutionalism, respectively, cannot perfectly be equated with self-government and national stability, these contemporary political positions provide helpful frameworks for understanding American foundational values.

Throughout Trump's many efforts to expand executive power, his tool of choice has remained the same: the **executive order**, a presidential directive on federal government policy and administration. From Harry Truman's desegregation of the military to Ronald Reagan's grant of amnesty to thousands of migrant children, the executive order has been used consequentially many times.<sup>33</sup> In recent years, the executive order has become more broadly applied, as presidents on both sides of the aisle seek to execute their agendas in the face of a polarized and gridlocked Congress.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Trump's executive orders have attracted unique scrutiny,

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<sup>30</sup> ["Democracy at a Crossroads: How Americans View Trump's First 100 Days in Office."](#) Public Religion Research Institute. 2025.

<sup>31</sup> ["I'm a legal scholar. We're in a constitutional crisis — and this is the moment it began."](#) MSNBC. 2025.

<sup>32</sup> ["No Kings" protests draw crowds in cities across U.S."](#) CBS News. 2025.

<sup>33</sup> ["10 of the Most Consequential Executive Orders and Proclamations."](#) History.com.

<sup>34</sup> ["Explainer: Executive orders as a governing tool."](#) Harvard Kennedy School. 2025.

with many of his unprecedented number of directives (143 in his first 100 days, 44 more than any other president in the same period of time) raising questions about whether they violate the legal limitations of executive orders, namely that “they cannot override laws, direct agencies to act unlawfully, or dictate how state and local governments must act.”<sup>35</sup>

Many of Trump’s most dramatic clashes this year have come with the judiciary. On subjects from tariffs to immigration to USAID cuts, plaintiffs viewing Trump administration actions as unconstitutional have looked to the courts to redress their grievances.<sup>36</sup> In response to court orders ruling in such plaintiffs’ favor, the Trump administration’s responses have ranged from reluctant to resistant. For example, after the Supreme Court unanimously ordered that the administration facilitate the return of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a wrongly deported Marylander, to the US, the administration took two months to comply.<sup>37</sup> However, that same Court has not always been the Trump administration’s foe in its attempts to enact its agenda. Among other favorable rulings this year, the Court in *Trump v. CASA* halted the practice of nationwide injunctions, a (previously) popular tool for judges to circumscribe presidential actions.

To the Trump administration, these unelected judges represent a significant obstacle in the way of the popular will. Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt underscored that “liberal judges... are thwart[ing] the will of the people.”<sup>38</sup> However, where Leavitt sees a rigid undemocratic blockade of unelected dictators, some constitutional advocates see empowered judges as a last line of defense against the consolidation of power in a single branch, majoritarian overreach, and violations of rule of law. Dissenting from the Court’s ruling in *CASA*, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson laments that the majority opinion, which limited the judiciary’s ability to respond to executive overreach, ignored how the Constitution was “designed to split the powers of a monarch between the governing branches to protect the People.”<sup>39</sup>

Impatient with the legislative branch’s slow pace of action amid partisan gridlock and an array of clashing interests, the Trump administration has also frequently looked to circumvent Congress, inviting controversy in the process. One flashpoint came when Trump raised tariffs, which the U.S. Court of International Trade later held exceeded his power and encroached on congressional authority.<sup>40</sup> In June, evoking comparisons to George W. Bush and Barack Obama’s unilateral combat decisions in the Middle East, Trump directed the military to target nuclear

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<sup>35</sup> “[UC Law SF Experts Examine Legal Limits of Trump’s Sweeping Executive Orders](#).” UC Law SF. 2025.

<sup>36</sup> “[Trump Administration Litigation Tracker](#).” Lawfare. 2025.

<sup>37</sup> “[Kilmar Abrego Garcia, wrongly deported to El Salvador, is back in the U.S. to face smuggling charges](#).” NPR. 2025.

<sup>38</sup> “[What might happen if Trump were to defy a court order](#).” Washington Post. 2025.

<sup>39</sup> *Trump v. CASA, Inc.*, 606 U.S. \_\_\_\_\_. 2025.

<sup>40</sup> “[US court blocks most Trump tariffs, says president exceeded his authority](#).” Reuters. 2025.

sites in Iran, drawing bipartisan backlash in Congress from representatives emphasizing the legislative branch's constitutionally delegated war powers.<sup>41</sup> Trump's refusal to spend congressionally appropriated money has also drawn scrutiny, with the Government Accountability Office contending that such impoundment infringes upon Congress's power of the purse.<sup>42</sup>

For many voters who elected Trump under the promise of an ambitious legislative agenda, their president's actions are admirable. Much of a president's ambitious policy agenda can be hamstrung on Capitol Hill by complex procedural rules, the demands of lobbyists, and intra-party squabbles. The president's unique power to act unilaterally should not be wasted. However, to others, the primacy of Congress in the Constitution's delegation of political power is a feature, not a bug. After declaring independence from what they viewed as a tyrannous English Crown, the Founding Fathers were wary of vesting great power in one person. They viewed the diffusion of political power across the halls of Congress, not inside the Oval Office of one man, as the safest check on tyranny and the best assurance of democratic stability.

Trump has also had conflicts with many of the agencies of the federal government and has attempted to exert greater control over their affairs than his predecessors. His Executive Order 14215 requires congressionally established agencies to channel significant regulations through the White House-controlled Office of Management and Budget, eroding their previous relative independence from the executive branch.<sup>43</sup> The creation of the Department of Government Efficiency, an initiative from the Trump administration and billionaire Elon Musk, embedded itself in numerous federal organizations to slash their budgets and personnel.<sup>44</sup>

The Supreme Court also allowed Trump to fire members of independent boards without cause, leading many to wonder if the fall of *Humphrey's Executor* – the Roosevelt-era ruling prohibiting total executive control over many agencies (see The New Deal section above) – precedent is imminent. For proponents of expanding executive authority, the Constitution's declaration that "the executive Power shall be vested in a President" means that all executive power must run through the president, with no reservations for independent bodies exempt from presidential oversight.<sup>45</sup> Other scholars, pointing to the weak historical foundation of the

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<sup>41</sup> "[Reps. Khanna, Massie, Introduce Bipartisan War Powers Resolution to Prohibit Involvement in Iran.](#)" Congressman Ro Khanna. 2025.

<sup>42</sup> "[Trump's attempt to claw back funding already approved by Congress, explained.](#)" PBS. 2025.

<sup>43</sup> "[Executive Order 14215—Ensuring Accountability for All Agencies.](#)" The American Presidency Project. 2025.

<sup>44</sup> "[Elon Musk's DOGE has access to these federal agencies.](#)" NewsNation. 2025.

<sup>45</sup> "[Putting the 'Executive' in 'Unitary Executive.'](#)" Law & Liberty. 2025.

unitary executive theory, argue that when Congress creates agencies with insulation from presidential control, those agencies should retain their independence.<sup>46</sup>

From the House of Representatives to the Federal Reserve to numerous federal district courts, President Trump has pushed back against the institutions designed to check the president more forcefully than arguably any of his predecessors. While many of his populist sympathizers celebrate a victory for self-government every time Trump unilaterally notches a policy win, constitutionalists fear his relentlessness will tear at the fabric of American democratic stability. The result is a deepening divide over whether Trump's presidency represents a restoration of popular control or erosion of the guardrails that sustain it.

## **Setting Expectations (5 min.)**

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In this section, we will review the "Expected Outcomes," Deliberative Dispositions," and "Conversation Agreements" below.

### **Expected Outcomes of the Conversation**

The purpose of this deliberation is to deepen our understanding of the relationship between national stability and self-government in American political culture, reflect on the tensions that can arise between order and self-government, and consider how we might preserve both in a time of polarization and institutional strain. Over the course of the deliberation, we will have the opportunity to listen to the perspectives of our fellow deliberators as well as share our own thoughts about the topic. Finally, we will have reflected on our conversation, our areas of agreement and disagreement, and what we have learned from our time together.

### **Deliberative Dispositions**

The DCI has identified several "deliberative dispositions" as critical to the success of deliberative enterprises. When participants adopt these dispositions, they are much more likely to feel their deliberations are meaningful, respectful, and productive. Several of the Conversation Agreements recommended below directly reflect and reinforce these dispositions, which include a commitment to egalitarianism, open mindedness, empathy, charity, attentiveness, and anticipation, among others. A full list and description of these dispositions is available at <https://deliberativecitizenship.org/deliberative-dispositions/>.

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<sup>46</sup> "[The Unbearable Lightness of the Unitary Executive Theory](#)." The Regulatory Review. 2025.

## **Conversation Agreements**

In entering into this discussion, to the best of our ability, we each agree to:

1. Be authentic and respectful
2. Be an attentive and active listener
3. Be a purposeful and concise speaker
4. Approach fellow deliberators' stories, experiences, and arguments with curiosity, not hostility
5. Assume the best - and not the worst - about the intentions and values of others, and avoid snap judgements
6. Demonstrate intellectual humility, recognizing that no one has all the answers, by asking questions and making space for others to do the same
7. Critique the idea we disagree with, not the person expressing it, and remember to practice empathy
8. Note areas of both agreement and disagreement
9. Respect the confidentiality of the discussion
10. Avoid speaking in absolutes (e.g., "All people think this," or "No educated people hold that view")

## **Getting to Know Each Other (10 min.)**

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In this section, we will take less than a minute to share our names and 2-3 aspects of our identities that are important to us. These could be our gender pronouns, our occupation, our family status (e.g., husband, mother, etc.), our hometown, our favorite hobby, etc. Please also explain briefly why these aspects of your identity are important to you. If you are online, while there is no pressure to do so, everyone is welcome to type in any, all, or none of these aspects of your identity into your Zoom nameplate after your name (just right-click on your own image and click "Rename").

1. Which fictional character do you relate to the most?
2. If you could swap lives with anyone for a day, who would it be?

## **Understanding Self-Government and National Stability (15 min.)**

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First, incorporating both American tradition and personal experiences and understandings, we will define two crucial terms in political life: self-government and national stability. We will each take 1-2 minutes to answer the questions below, without interruption or crosstalk. After

everyone has spoken once, the group is welcome to take a few minutes for clarifying or follow-up questions and responses. Continue exploring these questions as time allows.

1. In the context of America's foundational values, what is a key image for you of self-government? How would you define such self-government? What are its key foundations or characteristics?
2. In the context of America's foundational values, what is a key image for you of national stability? How would you define such national stability? What are its key foundations or characteristics?
3. Are the conventional American understandings of these terms accurate? Do they err in any noteworthy ways?

### **Connecting with Other Values (10 min.)**

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National stability and self government can both be seen as ends in themselves and means to achieve an ultimate goal. For example, national stability is important because it can enable economic prosperity and innovation, while self government is important because it enhances our autonomy and sense of equal status among our fellow citizens. As such, it is important to identify which of these other values are important to us, so we can consider how they relate to the values of national stability and self government. Below are some examples of values and ideas that might resonate with you.

|              |            |                 |
|--------------|------------|-----------------|
| Equality     | Progress   | Individualism   |
| Independence | Justice    | Acceptance      |
| Nationalism  | Inclusion  | Freedom         |
| Privacy      | Innovation | Success         |
| Opportunity  | Diversity  | Social mobility |
| Achievement  | Wealth     | Prosperity      |

1. Which of these values (or others) matter the most to you?
2. How do you see them connecting with the values of self-government or national stability, if at all?

## **Analyzing the History of Self-Government & National Stability in the US (20 min.)**

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In this section, we will review the nuanced history of self-government and national stability in United States, addressing the questions below. After everyone has spoken once, the group is welcome to take a few minutes for clarifying questions and follow-up responses. Continue exploring the topic as time allows.

1. Throughout its history, how has the United States navigated the conflicts between self-government and national stability?
2. Where have American legislators' approach to the conflicts between self-government and national stability been admirable?
3. Where have American legislators' approach to the conflicts between self-government and national stability been regrettable?

***Break (5 min.)***

## **Considering the Case of Executive Orders and the Separation of Powers (25 min.)**

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We will now move forward to the present day to analyze current debates about executive power and the separation of powers across the different branches of government. We will use the concepts of populism and constitutionalism to explore the different perspectives on these dynamics and their implications for our understanding of our founding values of self-government and national stability – and the relationship between them. We will each take 1-2 minutes to answer one of the questions below, without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has spoken once, the group is welcome to take a few minutes for clarifying questions and follow-up responses. Continue exploring these questions as time allows.

1. In light of debates about the use of executive orders, presidential declarations of war, and other unilateral applications of executive power, how should the US navigate the tensions between populist and constitutionalist approaches to governance?
2. How should the US manage tensions between the executive branch and the court system?
3. How should the US manage tensions between the executive branch and Congress?
4. How should the US manage tensions between the executive branch and agencies?

## **Identifying Value Priorities in the Separation of Powers Discussion (20 min.)**

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Finally, we will look to the future to chart a path for navigating the inevitable clashes we will encounter between self-government and national stability, exploring the values that transcend any one policy issue. We will each take 1-2 minutes to answer the questions below, without interruption or crosstalk.

1. How did you incorporate considerations of self-government and national stability into your assessment of the power allocation debate?
2. How are considerations of self-government and national stability reflected in American political figures' and the American public's approach to this topic?
3. How should we take into account the values of self-government and national stability when we engage with debates about separation of powers?
4. Should self-government or national stability be prioritized above the other in our approach to distributing power, or should they be equally balanced?

## **Reflections (10 min.)**

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While today's conversation is an important step in the journey, managing the interplay between two values present since the nation's founding is always an ongoing effort. Please reflect on the insights from your discussion with your fellow participants today and then answer one of the questions below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered, the group is welcome to continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

1. What was most meaningful or valuable to you during this deliberation?
2. Where are the areas of both agreement and disagreement in your group?
3. Have any new ways to think about this issue occurred to you as we have talked today? Any new ideas that might transcend our current way of conceiving of the problems and potential solutions?
4. Was there anything that was said or left out from the discussion that you think should be addressed with the group? Are there any perspectives missing from this conversation that you feel would be important to hear?
5. What did you hear that gives you hope for the future of conversations about self-government and national stability?
6. Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the deliberation you just had?

## About this Guide

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**The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative:** The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) is dedicated to the creation of opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the wider community to productively engage with one another on difficult and contentious issues facing our community and society. The DCI regularly hosts facilitated deliberations on a wide range of topics and organizes training workshops for deliberation facilitators. To learn more about these opportunities, visit [www.deliberativecitizenship.org](http://www.deliberativecitizenship.org).

**DCI Deliberation Guides:** The DCI publishes Deliberation Guides as a foundation for such conversations. They provide both important background information on the topics in question and a specific framework for engaging with these topics. The Guides are designed to be informative without being overwhelming and structured without being inflexible. They cover a range of topics and come in a variety of formats but share several common elements, including opportunities to commit to a shared set of Conversation Agreements, learn about diverse perspectives, and reflect together on the conversation and its yield. DCI staff, faculty, and students are the authors of these guides; generative AI is sometimes used to improve the clarity of the writing, identify errors, and provide background information, but all final text is confirmed by the authors. The DCI encourages conversations based on these guides to be moderated by a trained facilitator. After each conversation, the DCI also suggests that its associated Pathways Guide be distributed to the conversation's participants.

**DCI Pathways Guides:** For every Deliberation Guide, the DCI has also developed an associated Pathways Guide, which outlines opportunities for action that participants can consider that are related to the covered topic. These Pathways Guides reinforce the DCI's commitment to an action orientation, a key deliberative disposition. While deliberation is itself an important contributor to a healthy democracy, it becomes even more valuable when it leads to individual or collective action on the key issues facing society. Such action can come in a range of forms and should be broadly understood. It might involve developing a better understanding of a topic, connecting with relevant local or national organizations, generating new approaches to an issue, or deciding to support a particular policy.

**DCI Issue Guides and Issue Briefs:** Issue Guides are similar to Deliberation Guides but do not include the structured format for group conversations. Issue Briefs provide an outline of the main ideas that are presented in the Issue Guides. While both include a similar list of questions to consider about the topic, they are designed for personal reflection, perhaps in association with a panel or speaker event.

If you make use of this guide in a deliberation, please provide attribution to the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative, and email [dc@deliberativecitizenship.org](mailto:dc@deliberativecitizenship.org) to tell us about your event. To access more of our growing library of Deliberation Guides, Pathways Guides and other resources, visit [www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources](http://www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources).