

Strengthening Our Democracy: Lawyers Play a Vital Role

Lawyers can work each day to strengthen democracy by helping community members discuss important issues without the polarization that so often exists.

BY MICHELLE A. BEHNKE

I was honored to co-host the ABA Task Force for American Democracy Wisconsin Listening Session in July at the State Bar Center in Madison. The event was developed by a group of Wisconsin lawyers from various viewpoints, practice areas, and locations. We had a common goal: to talk about important issues around our democracy, elections, and civic engagement of Wisconsin residents in a nonpartisan environment. We wanted to encourage civic engagement, learning, and civil dialogue. We wanted to turn the temperature down on political rhetoric and turn the engagement up for lawyers and the public.

The Wisconsin listening session was more than I could have hoped for. With more than 100 people attending in person and 130 viewing the program online, I was elated that my fellow Wisconsin lawyers were ready to engage on these important topics.

At the beginning of the program, we heard sobering statistics:

- One in six American adults can't name even one of the three branches of the U.S. government.
- Less than one-third of Millennials consider it essential that they live in a democracy.
- About 38% of Americans support authoritarianism as a response to the direction of democracy.
- Nearly one-quarter of Americans say they're ready to use violence if their candidate loses.

The lack of basic civics knowledge, the breakdown of reliable news sources, the limited civic discourse between people of varying viewpoints, and the existence of deep fakes and unverified "information" sources weaken our

democracy, sow seeds of distrust, and threaten the rule of law. What can we do about them?

Lawyers can play a vital role in supporting and defending the U.S. Constitution and our democracy. We are often at our best when we teach. So, get involved with the ABA Task Force Wisconsin Host Committee or one of the other organizations working to support our democratic governmental system (for example, Keep Our Republic, Democracy Defense Project, Better Together America, WisAct). Seize this opportunity to teach about our democracy and how adhering to the rule of law protects the freedoms that we all identify as important.

We can teach that in a democratic society, the freedoms that we hold dear only exist if each branch of the government operates independently and provides checks and balances on the other two branches. We can teach about our obligations as citizens to actively participate in our governmental system and seek out reliable information so that we are well informed.

So, together, as lawyers, we can work each day to strengthen our democracy and help our fellow citizens discuss the important issues without the polarization that so often exists. We can lead by example and show that people can discuss and debate without being disagreeable. As we always have, lawyers need to do more than just practice law for their clients; we must be engaged in the civic life of our communities. We must ensure that the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Constitution survive and thrive. **WL**



Michelle A. Behnke, U.W. 1988, an attorney at Boardman & Clark LLP in Madison, is president-elect of the American Bar Association (ABA). She previously served as president of the State Bar of Wisconsin (2004-05). She is a Fellow of the Wisconsin Law Foundation.
mbehnke@boardmanclark.com