

John, many thanks for the kind introduction. I have so enjoyed our work together and I look forward to many more years of collaboration. At some point, I suppose I'll have to retire—truly retire—but if Ron Cosby is any example, I have another decade to go.

You know, the City-County Observer—which was founded in 2002—was really ahead of its time. From its inception it was “Evansville’s True Watchdog” and its content was always free to everyone, sustained by advertisers, subscribers and supporters. Twenty-plus years later, most of the new entrants into journalism are following a version of Ron and Marilyn’s model, with most forming as non-profits, surviving on the generosity of civic-minded people and organizations like those here today.

In fact, my message today is that journalism and, I submit, our version of *democracy* won’t survive without “civic philanthropists” like the people in this room.

In his intro, John mentioned I had the great privilege to work for both Birch and Evan Bayh early in my career. So when I asked John for some advice for this speech, he said, “Well, Bill, I have heard you speak and you come off a bit, well, pedantic.” “Pedantic?” I said. “Okay, you can sound stilted and academic,” John said. “Not helpful.” “Well, let me put it this way, less Evan and more Birch.”

Hmmm, “less Evan and more Birch.” Please lower your expectations.

A quick word about our nonprofit, The Indiana Citizen Education Foundation. We’re supported entirely by civic philanthropists. If you look at our list of donors, posted on [indianacitizen.org](http://indianacitizen.org), you will see names you recognize, including folks from Southwest Indiana. Our supporters are among the most active, engaged, informed citizens in our state. These are Hoosiers who

support something they don't need and may rarely use, because they are committed to bringing millions of other Hoosiers into the civic life of our state.

And make no mistake, the civic health of our state is poor.

I need to cover a bit of ground in a short amount of time, so let me begin by seeing if we're in agreement on some key ideas:

-we live in a constitutional republic, to be sure, but it's okay to use the word "democracy" to describe how we choose our leaders, okay? So,

-voting is a good thing

-See if you agree: I never miss the chance to vote; no one can suppress my vote; heck, I'd walk barefoot over broken glass in a blizzard to vote if I had to.

-how about this: information is power

-an informed electorate is a good thing

-journalism plays a vital role in ensuring an informed electorate

-with all its flaws, a healthy, competitive two-party system has served our country pretty well

-and Libertarians have something to say!

-the greatest singer-songwriter of all time is Jackson Browne [just checking if you were listening]

-municipal elections really matter, and I wish more people voted in them

-how about this: competitive elections lead to greater turnout

-one of my pet peeves: why do we elect the County surveyor and coroner in partisan elections, right?

-and finally this one, "Bill, if you guys are successful in significantly increasing the number of informed voters, I am great with that, because it means more of my preferred candidates will win by bigger margins because we have better ideas." Let me repeat that one, because if you disagree with it, well, search your civic soul. [repeat]

So let's run through some data:

-In the 1970s, 80s and 90s, Indiana's voter registration and turnout numbers put us at or slightly above the national average.

-Beginning in 2000, Indiana has consistently been below and sometimes well below the national average for registration and turnout.

-According to the Indiana Civic Health Index, our national ranking for turnout was 48<sup>th</sup> in 2010, 38<sup>th</sup> in 2012, 47<sup>th</sup> in 2014, 41<sup>st</sup> in 2016, 43<sup>rd</sup> in 2018, 46<sup>th</sup> in 2020.

-In 2020, Indiana had record turnout, but we dropped from 41<sup>st</sup> to 46<sup>th</sup> because our turnout went up 9% when the country went up 15%.

-Oh, for those who believe that "higher turnout favors Democrats," in 2020 in Indiana President Trump and Governor Holcomb both substantially increased their vote over 2016 and the House Republicans picked up four seats.

-My sense is that turnout in the Evansville city elections will go up substantially this year, right? Anyone think it'll hit 30,000?

-We appear to be losing the next generation of voters. A national study of new registrants right before the 2020 election in the 18-19 age cohort showed Indiana dead last in the country, with 54% **fewer** registrants than four years earlier.

-So Hoosiers are not showing up to vote, and we're not well-informed when we do: When the American History questions on the naturalization exam were given to Americans in every state, Indiana ranked 41<sup>st</sup>, with 64% receiving an F and 14% a D.

-At the same time our civic metrics are headed in the wrong direction, traditional sources of information are drying up. More than 2500 US newspapers have shut down since 2005. Since 2008, more than 65% of local journalism jobs have disappeared. This community can bear witness to what happens when its newspapers are bought by a national chain. Remember when the Indianapolis Star was considered almost a statewide newspaper? The Star's total editorial staff is around 50, down from more than 200. One of its recent departees told me the Star cannot adequately cover Indianapolis, much less statewide news.

-In 1989, 43 credentialed journalists covered the Indiana Statehouse full-time during the General Assembly session. They included reporters from Terre Haute, Muncie, Bloomington, South Bend, Elkhart, Gary, Hammond, Louisville, and 2 from Evansville, because the Courier and Press each had one.

-In 2023, no one maintains that number, but fewer than 10 journalists are in the Statehouse full time when the General Assembly is in session. That's why Franklin College's TheStateHouseFile project is so important.

-Most in this room can remember when you could rely on your local newspaper to provide a voter guide in advance of an election. Those have disappeared, which is why so much of our time and energy at The Indiana Citizen is devoted to producing unbiased information on the candidates and the issues. When you go to CCO's landing page this week, you will see "Explore Evansville's Virtual Ballot," which is our address-driven tool that will take voters to information they need about the candidates on their ballot.

At the same time what's called "traditional journalism" is dying, there's more access to information than at any time in our history, BUT many Americans get all their information from their social media feeds. BTW, it might not surprise any of you that I am a "late adopter" of social media. It's only been since retirement I've gotten connected to Twitter, now called "X," I guess. More sheer nonsense now hits my eyeballs than at any time in my life, but I have sufficient education and access to traditional media to separate truth from fiction. Many Americans don't. Commentators and social scientists have coined the term "tribalization" to describe what's happening to America.

And here's a scary look inside tribalization through a new study from the Center for Politics at University of Virginia:

They surveyed more than 2000 registered voters in August and September. The respondents were asked to pick their preference for president between President Biden and former President Trump. 70% of the Biden voters and 68% of the Trump voters believed electing officials from the opposite party would result in lasting harm to the United States.

Roughly half of the Biden and Trump voters viewed those who supported the other party as threats to the American way of life. About 40% of both groups at least somewhat believed that the other side has become so extreme that it is acceptable to use violence to prevent them from achieving their goals. 41% of Trump supporters at least somewhat agreed with the idea of red

states seceding from the Union to form their own separate country, while 30% of Biden supporters thought blue states should do the same.

Nearly one-third of Trump supporters and about a quarter of Biden supporters at least somewhat agree that democracy is no longer a viable system and that the country should explore alternative forms of government to ensure stability and progress.

The survey probed many other core beliefs of Americans, all with disturbing results. The head of the Center for Politics summarized the findings this way: “We stand on the precipice of a developing emergency. Dislike of the other side combined with a pervasive disregard for the fundamental freedoms contained in the US Constitution poses a grave threat. If these sentiments go unchecked and grow, our nation could face disastrous divisions.”

I think it's high time I inject some good news.

There's a startup local journalism initiative which includes both *The Indiana Citizen* and [thestatehousefile.com](http://thestatehousefile.com). It's been named “Free Press Indiana” and it's the product of years of study and fundraising by the American Journalism Project.

During the research phase, it became clear that while the volume of original news reporting has decreased across the state, some audiences — particularly Indiana's Black and Hispanic communities as well as immigrant communities, Hoosiers with relatively low incomes, rural communities and small town residents — have long been underserved by local news. Free Press Indiana will prioritize these overlooked and underserved communities, focusing on relevant news and information that reflects their perspectives. All at no cost to readers.

Existing Indiana news outlets are struggling to meet the needs of even those they say they serve. Much of the reporting that does exist is in English, behind paywalls, and focused on Indianapolis. There is even less accountability reporting/investigative reporting outside Indy,

and Indiana's historically underserved communities — including Hispanic and Black communities — continue to be among the least served audiences.

There's a consensus the state lacks a critical mass of sustained coverage that makes the goings-on in government, the economy, and other aspects of life, relevant and accessible to most people. Poorly funded community papers aren't positioned to inform residents of rural areas or small towns about what their representatives are doing, how state policies are impacting their lives, or any other issues that fall outside the purview of major metro newspapers.

I urge you to keep an eye out for the rollout of Free Press Indiana. Its first platform, focused on Gary, launched yesterday. Mirror Indy will be the next to launch.

Another bit of good news comes in the area of civic literacy.

The Indiana Bar Foundation has been the leading force behind civics education for more than 20 years, under the leadership of the able Chuck Dunlap. I'll bet many of you here are familiar with Chuck and the Bar Foundation's great work with such school programs as We the People and Mock Trial.

They're the driving force behind the biennial Indiana Civic Health Index, which has become the definitive work on how Indiana ranks across a range of civics metrics. The 2019 edition called for the creation of a task force to study ways to improve civics education.

The task force was quickly formed, led by Lt. Gov. Suzanne Crouch, who's pretty well-known around these parts, right? The final report was turned into legislation which created the first-ever sixth-grade civics requirement which is being rolled out next semester. From recommendation to implementation in a little more than three years, and the task force continues its work under the Lt. Gov's leadership.

Let me conclude with some suggestions about concrete things we can all do to improve Indiana's civic health.

When non-voters are surveyed, the most common excuse is some version of "My vote doesn't count; my vote doesn't make a difference."

These are expressions of powerlessness, of disconnection, of apathy. It's also a self-fulfilling cop-out, right? So, our first priority is to ensure we pass on to those we love our love for this great country and our "walk barefoot over broken glass" attitude toward voting.

And as we think about all the other communities we touch, are we doing everything we can to get our neighbors registered and to the polls? Registration couldn't be easier. If your neighbor has one of these, **[LICENSE]** you can register them online in minutes. And you can connect them to trustworthy sources of information like the Indiana Citizen voter guide and you can help them get to the polls. So let me lay down a challenge.

Between now and next Tuesday, round up and take to the polls five people who might otherwise not have voted. Next year, make a goal of registering 10 new voters and taking responsibility for getting them to the polls.

But here's something to consider, when the excuse "my vote doesn't matter" is supported by hard evidence, democracy is at risk. And here's where we need to be open to structural reforms.

Here are some examples:

If you live in Indiana—or in most state that's isn't a battleground state--it's hard to say my one vote is going to sway our electoral college votes one way or the other. So, channeling my very



best Birch Bayh, it's time to do away with the electoral college and make every citizen's vote in every state equal.

Gerrymandering inhibits voter participation, which is exactly what it's intended to do. When the outcome of an election is pre-determined by the way the map is drawn, it causes non-voters to say, "Why bother?" Gerrymandering is wrong whether it's done by Republicans in Indiana or Democrats in Illinois.

Also, Indiana could adopt some of the policies enacted in states that consistently rank in the top 10 for voting, like automatic voter registration, same-day voter registration, no-excuse absentee voting, heck, even longer hours on Election Day.

We could move our municipal elections to an even-numbered year, preferably a presidential year. We could ask ourselves whether some of our offices should be elected at all, and if so, why are they partisan elections? We permit the County Commissioners to appoint the County Engineer, but we insist upon electing the County Surveyor in a partisan election? Would we get more candidates for judge, sheriff and prosecutor if we elected them on a non-partisan basis? Should the quality of the administration of justice—which at its core is based on impartiality--depend upon which political party wins the election?

And we need to stand up to those who are undermining the public's confidence in the integrity of our elections.

I'll bet the majority of folks in this room have spent time helping to administer an election. It's hard, thankless work, but when the polls close on Election Day, you don't have any doubt that the vote tallies are accurate, because you have seen the system work first-hand, up close, administered honestly by your friends and neighbors, even those with whom you disagree politically.

Case in point: Four years ago, you no doubt followed the mayor's race in Tell City, decided by two votes. After the mandatory recount, the incumbent mayor, Jim Adams, was the first to congratulate his opponent. Not for a moment did he say the election was "stolen."

These attacks on the integrity of voting results have reached the point where there's now a national campaign to restore public confidence in voting. Y

ou may have seen the news article. It was front-page in the Indianapolis Star last week: "Instilling trust in elections is big challenge; Fearmongering has spurred calls to overhaul process across nation" was the headline.

The lede of the story was: "Ahead of an election cycle already shaping up to be contentious, federal and state election officials are waging campaigns of their own to convince wary voters of the integrity of casting their ballots."

So is there an antidote to Indiana's civic health crisis?

Indiana needs more journalism. Think of journalism like you think about public broadcasting. If you take advantage of their programming—which I suspect most of you do—are you a "free rider" or do you send in an annual contribution? You obviously support the City-County Observer, bless your hearts, right Ron?—and if you consume journalism from other sources—which you all do--send them a check, too. More journalism requires more money from more sources.

Indiana needs more voters. That, my friends, begins at home. Are you raising the next generation of "walk barefoot across broken glass" voters? Are you supporting initiatives and organizations that promote civic values? Are you backing candidates who promote policies to encourage voting? Are you standing up for the integrity of the administration of elections?

Let me leave you with a challenge that has been attributed to both John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. When it comes to revitalizing democracy in Indiana by adding more journalism and more voters, the people in this room, the civic philanthropists of Indiana are going to make the difference.

Because...If not us, who? If not now, when?