

National Archives brings Senator, professor, attorney for Constitution panel  
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What are the first words of the U.S. Constitution? Who is considered the “father” of the document? How long are Congressional terms?

These questions and similar ones were posed to an audience of about 70 at the National Archive Museum’s McGowan Theater Sept. 17 for the seventh annual “State of the Constitution” panel, sponsored by James Madison’s Montpelier Foundation.

The event, held on the 226<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Constitution’s signing, “What Americans Really Know,” tested the knowledge of the audience that packed the plush red velvet seats of the Theater Tuesday night.

For the first time in the museum’s history, the discussion included an interactive component. Buzzers were given to the audience, and after each question the audience was given 15 seconds to answer. Responses were crosschecked with national averages, collected by the Foundation.

While the majority audience of business attired, over 40-year-old D.C. locals were able to answer 85 percent of the questions correctly, national statistics suggested that this is not the norm.

But there was a catch. Not every question had a simple answer. A panel of Constitutional experts weighed in on their opinions, including Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), the first female senator for her state, Akhil Reed Amar, the former clerk of Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer and current Yale Law School professor and William Jay, a partner at Goodwin Proctor and former Assistant to the Solicitor General at the U.S. Department of Justice. Kat Imhoff, President and CEO of The Montpelier Foundation, moderated the event.

While some topics sparked laughter, such as when Amar said that the first words of the Constitution should read “Congress shall make no law,” others stimulated serious discussion.

In response to a question on Congressional elections, Sen. Klobuchar said, “to uphold the standards of the Constitution we are going to need to reach across the aisle and end this national food fight between political parties. We need to step out of the opposite sides of the boxing ring.”

Staying true to this “food fight,” the panelists’ debates drew clear lines of political ideologies. Jay represented a strong conservative voice, Klobuchar offered a more liberal opinion and Amar fell in between the two.

Perhaps the biggest debate came after the audience was asked the name of the current Supreme Court Chief Justice. Once 96 percent audience answered correctly, it was revealed that only 15 percent of those nationally polled between the ages of 21-34 provided the right answer. At this time, Klobucher offered the idea of televising Supreme Court proceedings to raise recognition among the public and boost transparency within the government.

“The media needs to better portray the work of the Supreme Court, not turn the justices into rock stars,” Jay argued.

Amar offered his own opinions, suggesting that instead of televising courts, education is the long-term solution to every problem. “We need to get ordinary kids excited about getting to know their government,” he said.

Other questions, such as whether or not the Constitution protects the right to a secret ballot, brought the three together. In fact, the topic of voting rights took up almost half of the discussion time, which is no surprise after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made its way to the forefront of American politics with the recent Supreme Court decision.

“The right to vote is under assault and we must defend it,” Amar said, leading the audience and both of his fellow panelists to break into applause.

But regardless of political ideologies, all three agreed that interpreting the Constitution is a process that will take more than 226 years.

“The document came from the people, and it is up to the people to keep it known, keep it sacred, keep it relevant,” Amar said. “That is the only way to keep it powerful.”