

# Constitution Day lecture: Is American democracy doomed?

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To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, American democracy ended not with a bang, but a whimper.

During the 2064 presidential election, only 11 percent of eligible American voters turned out to cast their ballots, according to interstellar political anthropologist and cultural historian Goud Ranrag from Planet Bb of the Alpha Centauri Federation.

[Read student writer Samantha Figueroa's coverage of the lecture here.](#)

"People just simply abandoned democracy for other things," said the time-traveler, who gave the Sept. 17 Constitution Day lecture, "The Strange Death of American Democracy," while dressed as Abraham Lincoln – an image he thought humans would find familiar and comforting.



In another universe, this cosmic visitor is known as Professor Doug Garnar. And while Garnar's presentation was humorous – down to keeping lecture notes in his stovepipe hat, Lincoln-style – his lecture dealt with questions of a far deeper nature. What are the roots of today's often vitriolic political divide? What is the future of our nation's democratic experiment?

The division between those who support a strong federal government and those who prefer a weak one dates back to Founding Fathers Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, and their time in George Washington's Cabinet. A federalist, Hamilton supported a national bank – a notion preserved in today's Federal Reserve – as a way to solve the problem of past debts incurred by the Revolutionary War and promote economic development.

Jefferson, who instead saw the nation as a coalition of yeoman farmers, was opposed and viewed the bank as a step that could take the nation toward despotism, Garnar said.

Often quoted by people today who are opposed to a strong federal government, Jefferson violated his own principles during his presidency when he used the nation's Navy to fight the Barbary pirates and made the Louisiana purchase. However, his anti-federal position held sway until the Civil War.

It was the issue of slavery – and the doctrine of nullification it spawned, which allowed states to invalidate federal laws that they deemed unconstitutional – that proved the breaking point. President Lincoln operated in the Hamiltonian tradition, using the catalyst of the Civil War to marshal forces, create the transcontinental railroad and promote the Morrill Act, which led to the creation of land-grant universities.

Government regulation of industry began to emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, spurred by the Great Depression. Later acts that stem from a strong federal government include the creation of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, and student loan programs, Garnar noted.

Modern times, however, have seen the shift away toward civic engagement. Civic groups, associations and volunteer fire departments – once a strong part of the democratic landscape – are disappearing. The rise of consumer culture, 24/7 entertainment and other distractions take citizens further away from the democratic process, the cosmic visitor said.

To reverse this decline, Garnar suggests Democracy 2.0 – one based on [deliberation](#) rather than hostile debate. Overhauling the Constitution – a document that has been amended numerous times – should also be on the table.

“The Constitution was created by less than perfect people,” Garnar said.

One keystone of the democratic experiment is the need to hear all voices – exemplified by giving the vote to former slaves, women and young people via Constitutional Amendment. (A fact that many young people may not know: voting was restricted to ages 21 and up until the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution was adopted in 1971, and lowered the age to 18).

To drive home the importance of voting and civic engagement, each audience member received a copy of the Constitution and a voter registration form at the end of the lecture.

“Even we Alpha Centurians who embrace democracy on a much higher level understand that it always needs tweaking,” Goud Ranrag told the crowd.

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