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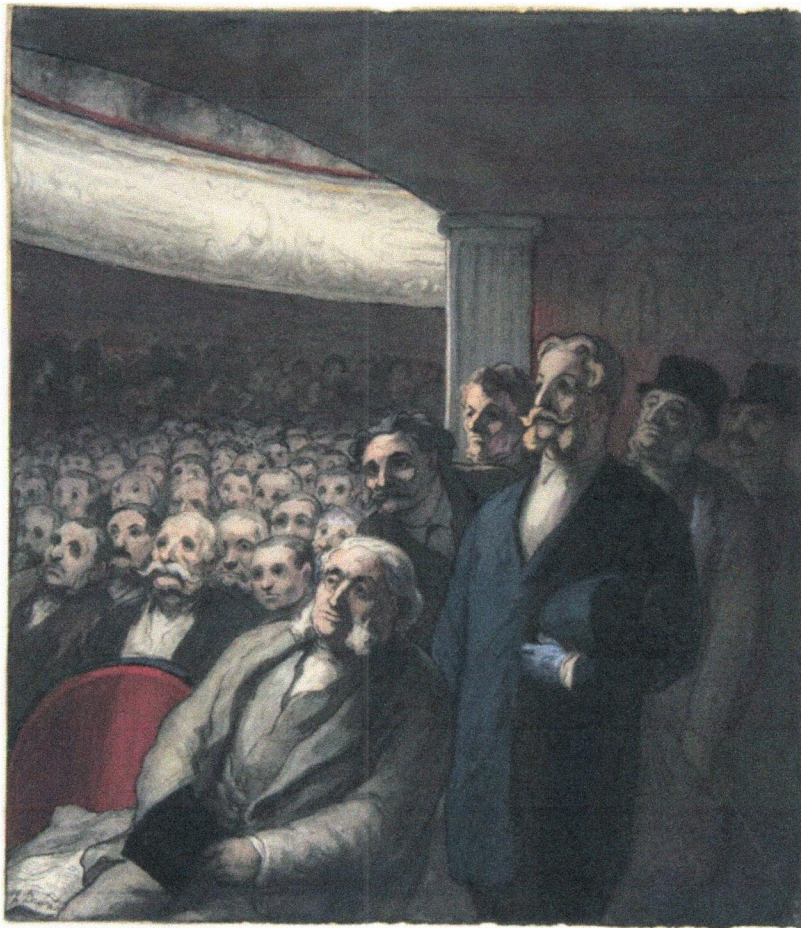
# The Deliberative Audience: Where True Power Resides

It's time that more people participate in the preservation of the performing arts.

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Honoré Daumier's 19th-century painting "A Theater Audience." The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public Domain

By Robert Cooperman

If you've read any of the articles I've **written** for this publication or have seen my website, you know I have two passions: the theater and the founding principles of our nation. I often look for ways these two enthusiasms intersect; this is how I had the idea for **The Natural Theatre**, the theater movement that celebrates American philosophical values of individualism, moral virtue, reason, and human nature. I believe our culture would do well to re-embrace our American ideals, especially as depicted through the arts.

It's a daunting task to portray American values these days, as our citizenry (particularly the younger generation) seems to lack a basic understanding of civics. In May 2023, Forbes reported on the "Nation's Report Card," describing what eighth graders know about U.S. history and civics as "grim." According to the **report**, only 13 percent of students were "proficient" in U.S. history and just 22 percent were proficient in civics. These are grim results indeed, and we have not been proficient in these subjects for decades.

As a result, young theater artists create, without much knowledge of our past or our philosophical underpinnings, for an audience who lacks this knowledge as well. The results are superficial plays lacking any appreciation for what came before. In fact, these plays often condemn those events and the people who lived through them. We are presented with art mired in misery and a one-sided view of our nation.

An understanding of our founding is key to returning theater to a more balanced, fair depiction of our culture. One way to do this is to examine how our Founders intended the nation to work and to apply those principles to what is happening today—in both government and the arts.

## Give and Take

A great starting point to examine those principles is Yuval Levin's new book, "American Covenant: How the Constitution Unified Our Nation—



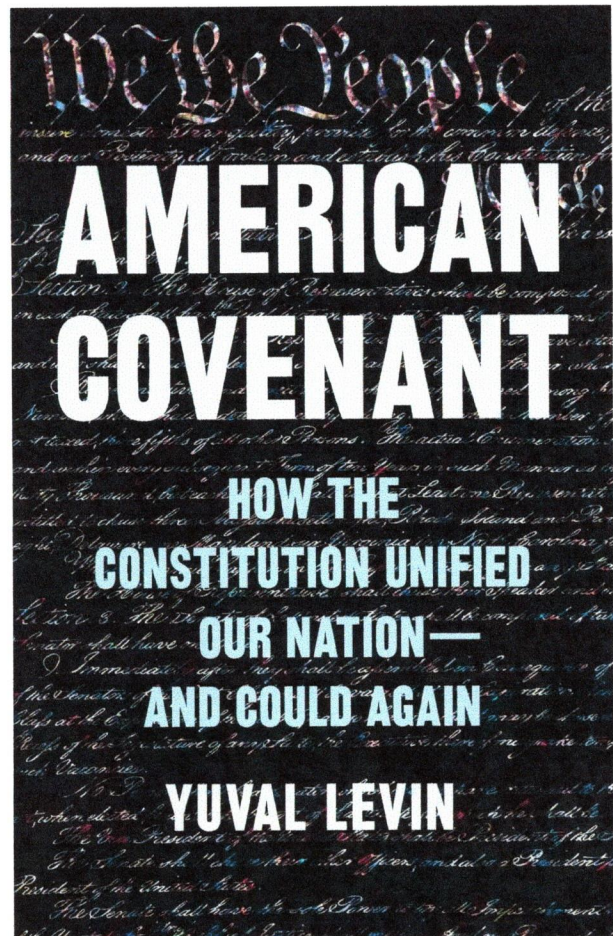
and Could Again.” Levin looks at the structure of our government as designed by the Constitution’s framers and points out that, in many instances, their vision has been cast aside by power-hungry politicians and their financiers.

According to Levin, our framers designed Congress to be a place of slow, deliberate negotiation. He calls it “an arena of contention.” The result of all this contention is to find a workable solution, with both parties giving and taking and coming away with a livable outcome that neither fully satisfies nor fully disappoints.

If we compare the structure of the modern theater with the structure of our government, particularly Congress as it was designed to act (not the way it is acting now), we will see that neither institution is living up to its original intent.

It’s pretty clear that theater is also “an arena of contention.” It presents an argument in the form of a dramatized story with a particular point of view. There is conflict, want, desire, and passion onstage, but here’s where the parallel ends: The play presents an outcome that is not the result of the give-and-take, but the result of the playwright’s purpose and the director’s interpretation. Therefore, the play’s presentation isn’t truly a deliberative process.

I believe, however, that deliberation does take place once the performance concludes and the audience thinks about what it has just seen. The deliberative body in the theater paradigm is the audience.



"American Covenant" by Yuval Levin, published in June 2024. Basic Books



# How It Works Today

In our contemporary society, neither the Congress nor the theater audience successfully fulfill their roles as deliberative bodies. Our legislature, for example, does a disservice to our republican framework by advancing an “all or nothing” stance. Rather than the two political parties forging compromise within the “arena of contention,” they place themselves in ideological silos, holding firm to their positions and blaming the other party for a lack of compromise and results.

A number of factors play into this unfortunate situation, including lobbyists and representatives more beholden to their financial supporters than their constituents. The result is a loss of power by the people who, as the founders envisioned it, should control their elected representatives.

Similarly, audiences have largely relinquished their deliberative role. They’ve allowed critics to determine a play’s worth from their own personal perceptions and/or partisan convictions; they’ve also allowed the academic world to accept or reject plays based on a predetermined political agenda. It would be much better if theatergoers had the ultimate say on a play’s merits based on their collective, innate sense of what is beautiful, good, and true.

However, it seems the debate over the artistic merits of any theater production is one-sided. Unlike in Congress, there doesn’t seem to be a healthy mix of viewpoints among theatergoers. For example, people who hold more traditional points of view rarely attend the theater. As I have argued in a [previous article](#), conservatives and even moderates don’t find the arts to be practical solutions to societal issues. Coupled with this is repulsion at what is touted as art these days, which is often gratuitously sexual, coarse, or hopeless. There is good reason to stay away from theater, but people of all points of view should not.

I am especially disappointed in the conservative response to art because I find it to be a very short-sighted view. For one thing, it lessens the vital contribution that the arts could make in defining our



culture, and it opens the door for only one set of ideas to shape that culture.

This is happening now (and has been for some time); our first reaction is to complain about it. That's fine, and we should complain and refuse to patronize the arts when we find them demeaning, but we do little to create art that offers another point of view.

We should be using the arts to offer a counterargument to the art we are seeing, putting our values out there in the “arena of contention” and demanding that they be considered. We can't even begin to deliberate on more traditional points of view if they're not presented.



President Richard Nixon with the cast of "1776," after a performance in the East Room of the White House. Public Domain

## What Could Be

As Levin explained in “American Covenant,” the legislative branch was meant to be the most important element in our three-part



republic (note that Congress is the first component to be described and defined in our Constitution). So, too, I would argue, the audience is the most important element in theater.

Neither of these entities is living up to its potential, as defined by the Constitution or the necessities of our culture. One, Congress, refuses to deliberate in good faith. The other, potential theater audiences, often refuse to participate at all. Both are detrimental to the citizenry.

There is no reason that theater should be as dysfunctional as Congress. Our survival as a nation may very well depend on the success of both institutions.

*What arts and culture topics would you like us to cover? Please email ideas or feedback to [features@epochtimes.nyc](mailto:features@epochtimes.nyc)*

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