HUMANITIES CENTER

Whither Democracy?

Finding the meaning in human events, at a teach-in.

The presidential election of 2016 raised some difficult questions about democracy and citizenship. Depending on whom you asked, the election of Donald Trump as president signaled the fragility of American democracy, the beginning of a frightening descent into racial and ethnic nationalism, and a rejection of science and reason; or a populist revival spearheaded by newly energized rural and small-town voters who rightly believed that they and their communities had been maligned, as well as written-off or harmed outright by the policies of self-satisfied coastal elites.

Parsing the meanings and implications of watershed human events—through open debate—is a big part of the mission of universities. In February, with that mission in mind, the Humanities Center held Knowledge and Citizenship: A Teach-In.

As co-organizer Joan Saab, chair of the Department of Art and Art History, noted, contemporary American (and global) politics teaches, if nothing else, that "history matters, and culture matters."

The event was inspired by, but not explicitly about, the 2016 elections. Faculty in disciplines such as English, history, anthropology, and art and art history spoke about their research in response to a call from organizers for work that broadly relates "to the current sociopolitical climate." Faculty members discussed with attendees the relationship between art and propaganda; the challenge of a free press; the role of intellectuals in a democracy; and whether events such as Trump's election and the success of the Brexit movement were part of a global backlash against "neoliberal elitism."

It's no secret that universities are designed to further science and foster reason, and that they tend to embrace pluralism—which, in the 21st century, also means globalism. But within those parameters, there's plenty of room for disagreement, discussion, and soul-searching. Said Joan Rubin, the Dexter Perkins Professor in History and director of the Humanities Center: "The humanities teach us the value of critical thinking, of inclusion, of empathy. The humanities teach us also about our connections to other people across time and geography, and we learn as well about our differences." ®

—KAREN MCCALLY '02 (PHD)

For more about the Humanities Center and its programs, visit Rochester.edu/humanities.

"KNOWLEDGE AND CITIZENSHIP": During a teach-in at the Humanities Center this winter, faculty members presented and discussed research related to the sociopolitical climate in the United States and abroad. The daylong session was titled "Knowledge and Citizenship."