At the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy, Mizzou students and faculty from various disciplines and viewpoints put the “thought” in “American political thought and history.” Story by Eric Ferguson  Illustration by Mark Smith

As he sits modeled in bronze on Francis Quadrangle, a thoughtful Thomas Jefferson appears to gaze placidly beyond today’s political polarization and incivility. But Jefferson would recognize our current climate all too well. His own time was rife with discord, and he cautioned his contemporaries against partisan bickering in his first inaugural address. “Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle,” he said.

The sentiment, succinct enough for contemporary political discourse via Twitter, offers insight into the history of our political institutions and traditions. Launched in 2015 with an eye toward drawing connections between our political past and present, MU’s Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy provides a venue where Mizzou students and faculty across disciplines can build a more united future.

“History is a great teacher,” says Rich Kinder, BA ’66, JD ’68, executive chairman of Kinder Morgan Inc. and the institute’s eponym. “It’s useful in understanding the issues that confront you in business or anything else in life to have some kind of understanding of how people in circumstances throughout history have handled problems. To me, that’s worth a lot more than the how-to-do-business books or self-help books.”

When Kinder, long a generous supporter of Mizzou, began thinking about making another gift to the university, he had a clear goal in mind. “We have to make certain that each generation understands the foundations of America. It’s not a matter of political persuasion — it’s just understanding what the Founding Fathers really did, how the Constitution was formed and how the government was formed. I don’t think you can be an intelligent voter, or a leader in a democracy, if you don’t have that kind of understanding.”
To help foster that insight in generations of MU students, the Kinder Foundation, founded by Rich and his wife, Nancy, gave $25 million to Mizzou to create the institute. The unit encourages interdisciplinary study and discussion of American political thought and history. Guided by an advisory board that includes Alan Atterbury, BA ’65, JD ’69, and Sara Scholes Morgan, BA ’80, the institute features undergraduate programs such as the Society of Fellows, a Washington, D.C., internship program; an academic minor and certificate program in American Constitutional Democracy; graduate and postdoctoral fellowships; study abroad opportunities; publications of the undergraduate Journal on Constitutional Democracy; and the Missouri Summer Teachers Academy for high school teachers across the state. Taken as a whole, the institute’s scope ranges from the intellectual (What have been the ramifications of the U.S. single-member district electoral system?) to the practical (How does an undergraduate intern in Washington, D.C., get to Nationals Park from Capitol Hill without a car?).

As with any worthy endeavor, the institute’s success starts with people, says Justin Dyer, professor of political science and the institute’s director.

Kinder agrees. “It’s not every day that set of encyclopedias, the Cape Girardeau, Missouri, native has maintained a lifelong passion for history and biography. His interests led him to study at the University of Missouri, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in history and a juris doctor degree.

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