



AMERICA'S HIDDEN COMMON GROUND ON OVERCOMING DIVISIVENESS

CHARTING A PATH FORWARD

By Will Friedman and David Schleifer
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Public Agenda/USA TODAY Hidden Common Ground survey, fielded in February 2021, finds a powerful consensus across political affiliations that the nation needs to move beyond the destructive divisiveness that plagues our politics. It also finds common ground on several approaches to overcoming divisiveness. Findings from this research, which updates and expands on [Public Agenda's 2019 report](#) on the same topic, include:

1. Americans are united across partisan lines in seeing divisiveness as a major problem and believe it has made dealing with the pandemic and other critical challenges more difficult. Yet most think there is more common ground among the public than is typically acknowledged, and many have worked across partisan lines in their communities.
2. Few Americans are optimistic that the country can overcome destructive political divisiveness in the coming years. Most, however, believe it is essential to try, particularly after the attack on the U.S. Capitol.
3. A majority of Americans think that divisiveness is driven more by leaders than by ordinary people. Few see any of the societal actors asked about in the survey—including social media companies and local and national politicians—as particularly constructive, suggesting a “constructiveness desert” in American public life.

4. A plurality of Americans think that a path out of divisiveness will require the efforts of both leaders and the public, and that the concern is less about people having differences of opinion and more about learning how to disagree constructively.
5. To address divisiveness, Americans across the political spectrum believe that our civic culture must change and that we need structural political and education reforms and a more equitable economy. But significantly fewer Republicans than Democrats, Independents or apolitical people recognize the impacts of racism, which may complicate addressing our nation's challenges.

The report concludes with reflections on the findings and implications for moving towards a less divisive, more collaborative America.

METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

This report summarizes findings from a nationally representative online survey of 1,283 adult Americans 18 years and older. The survey was fielded February 23 to 26, 2021 by Ipsos. Respondents completed the survey in English. The poll has a credibility interval of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points for all respondents.

The sample was randomly drawn from Ipsos' online panel, partner online panel sources, and "river" sampling. Ipsos calibrates respondent characteristics to be representative of the U.S. Population using standard procedures such as raking-ratio adjustments. The source of these population targets is U.S. Census 2018 American Community Survey data. Post-hoc weights were made to the population characteristics on gender, age, race/ethnicity, region, and education. The research includes comparisons to a 2019 Public Agenda Hidden Common Ground survey.¹

For a complete survey methodology, the topline with full question wording and cross tabulations by political affiliation, please go to www.publicagenda.org/reports/overcoming-divisiveness-charting-a-path-forward or email research@publicagenda.org.

ABOUT THE HIDDEN COMMON GROUND® INITIATIVE

This Public Agenda/USA TODAY report is part of the Hidden Common Ground initiative, spearheaded by Public Agenda and USA TODAY, with the National Issues Forums Institute, the America Amplified public media consortium and America Talks. Through research, journalism and public engagement, Hidden Common Ground is designed to help Americans identify and strengthen their common ground, productively navigate their differences, and create fair and effective solutions to the challenges of our time.

The Kettering Foundation served as a collaborator in this research. This research is supported in part by the Charles Koch Foundation and Civic Health Project.

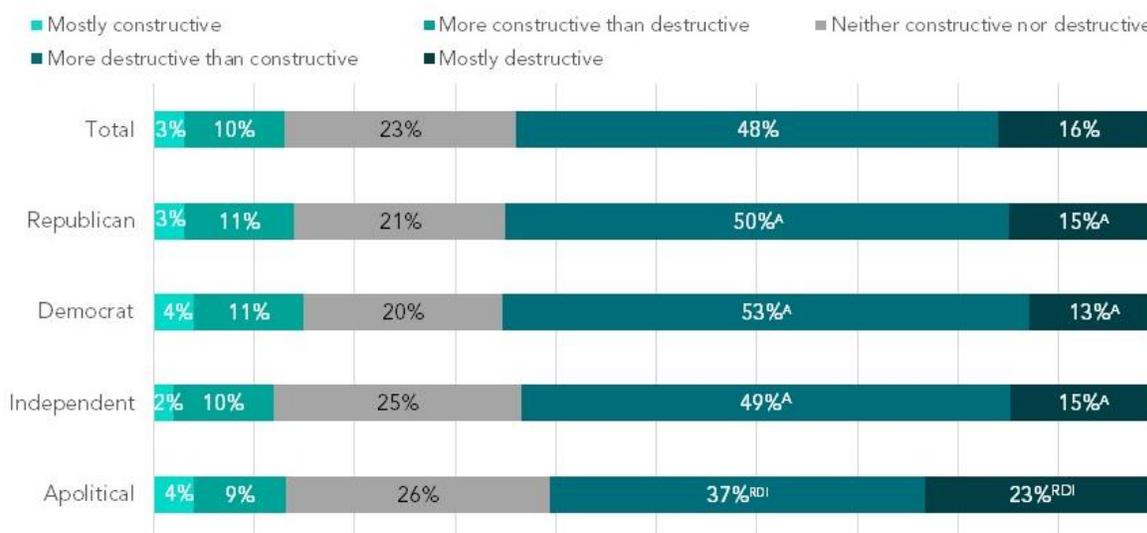
¹ Public Agenda, 2019, "Divisiveness and Collaboration in American Public Life," <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/divisiveness-and-collaboration-in-american-public-life-a-hidden-common-ground-report/>

FINDING 1: AMERICANS ARE UNITED ACROSS PARTISAN LINES IN SEEING DIVISIVENESS AS A MAJOR PROBLEM AND BELIEVE IT HAS MADE DEALING WITH THE PANDEMIC AND OTHER CRITICAL CHALLENGES MORE DIFFICULT. YET MOST THINK THERE IS MORE COMMON GROUND AMONG THE PUBLIC THAN IS TYPICALLY ACKNOWLEDGED, AND MANY HAVE WORKED ACROSS PARTISAN LINES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

Americans are overwhelmingly united across partisan lines in believing that divisiveness and gridlock in politics are big problems facing the nation. Only 17 percent of Americans say that divisiveness and gridlock are *not* problems.² In addition, two-thirds of Americans believe that our nation deals with disagreements in mostly destructive ways; see Figure 1.

Most Americans think that our nation deals with disagreements in destructive ways.

Figure 1. Percent of Americans who say whether they think America deals with disagreements in a mostly constructive or mostly destructive way, by political affiliation



Base: All respondents, N=1,283; Republican, N=301; Democrat, N=427; Independent, N=302; Apolitical, N=253

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Apolitical estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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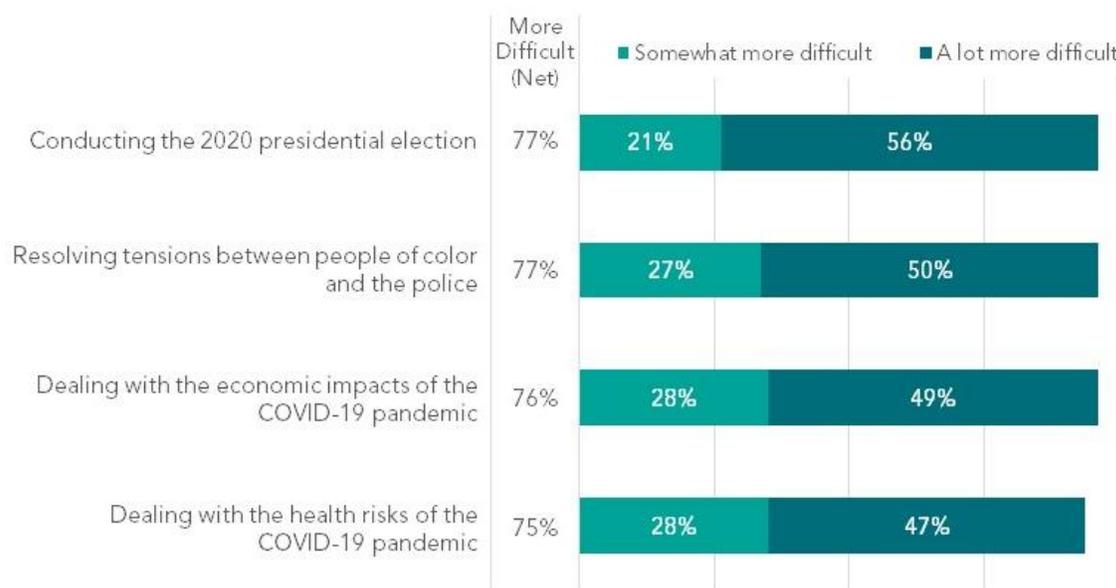
² The Independent subgroup includes those who self-identify as Independents or with another party. The “apolitical” subgroup includes those who have no preference towards political affiliation or skipped the question, “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as...”.

AMERICANS THINK DIVISIVENESS HAS MADE DEALING WITH THE PANDEMIC AND OTHER CHALLENGES MORE DIFFICULT.

Across the political spectrum, there is strong agreement that political divisiveness has made dealing with our nation's recent challenges and crises more difficult, including conducting the 2020 presidential election, dealing with the economic impacts and health risks of COVID-19, and addressing tensions between people of color and police; see Figure 2.

Americans believe divisiveness has made dealing with the pandemic and other challenges more difficult.

Figure 2. Percent of Americans who say, in general, how much more difficult they believe political divisiveness has made each of the following



Base: All respondents, N=1,283

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DIVISIVENESS HAS PERSONALLY AFFECTED ONE-THIRD OF AMERICANS.

Divisiveness can be a personal problem, not just a civic or political problem. A 36 percent share of Americans say that destructive partisan disagreements and divisiveness have affected their personal lives. Nearly one in five Americans (19 percent) report experiencing depression, anxiety or sadness as a result of partisan disagreements and divisiveness, with little variation by political affiliation. Fourteen percent of Americans say they have lost or had serious fights with friends or family as a result of divisiveness.

YET MANY AMERICANS BELIEVE THERE IS SUBSTANTIAL COMMON GROUND AND HAVE ACTUALLY WORKED ACROSS PARTISAN LINES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

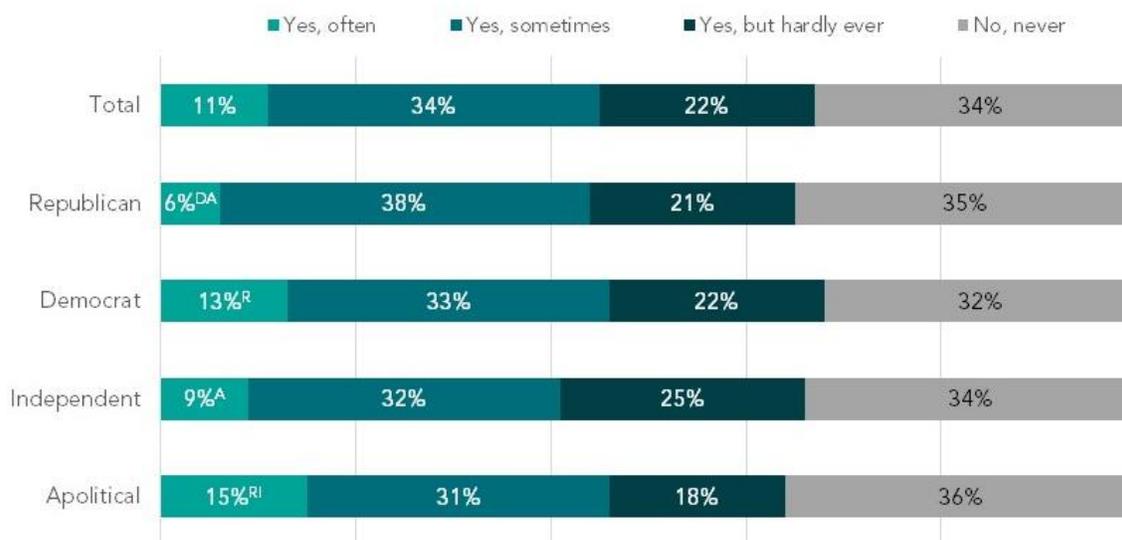
Despite the personal toll of divisiveness, 71 percent of Americans believe that there is more common ground among the American people than the news media and political leaders portray. This belief is relatively unchanged since Public Agenda's [October 2019 survey](#).³ It is widely held by Democrats (65 percent), Independents (76 percent), Republicans (76 percent), and apolitical people (70 percent).

Given the vitriolic character of much of the political discourse, it may be surprising that 61 percent of Americans, including 60 percent each of Republicans and Democrats, report that they have often or sometimes had constructive conversations with someone whose political views are different from their own.

³ Public Agenda, 2019, "Divisiveness and Collaboration in American Public Life," <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/divisiveness-and-collaboration-in-american-public-life-a-hidden-common-ground-report/>

Nearly half of Americans have worked across party lines to solve a problem in their community.

Figure 3. Percent of Americans who say how often they have worked together to try to solve a problem in their community with someone who has different political views than them, by political affiliation



Base: All respondents, N=1,283; Republican, N=301; Democrat, N=427; Independent, N=302; Apolitical, N=253

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Some people are even moving from conversation to action, with 45 percent of Americans across political affiliations reporting that they have often or sometimes worked together to try to solve a problem in their community with someone who has different political views than theirs—with little difference across political affiliations; see Figure 3. Moreover, the share of people reporting that they have often or sometimes engaged in this type of cross-partisan collaboration actually grew from 32 percent in the October 2019 survey to 45 percent in 2021.⁴ In addition, 53 percent of Americans say they have often or sometimes changed the way they use social media in order to be less divisive and more constructive—again with little difference across political affiliations.

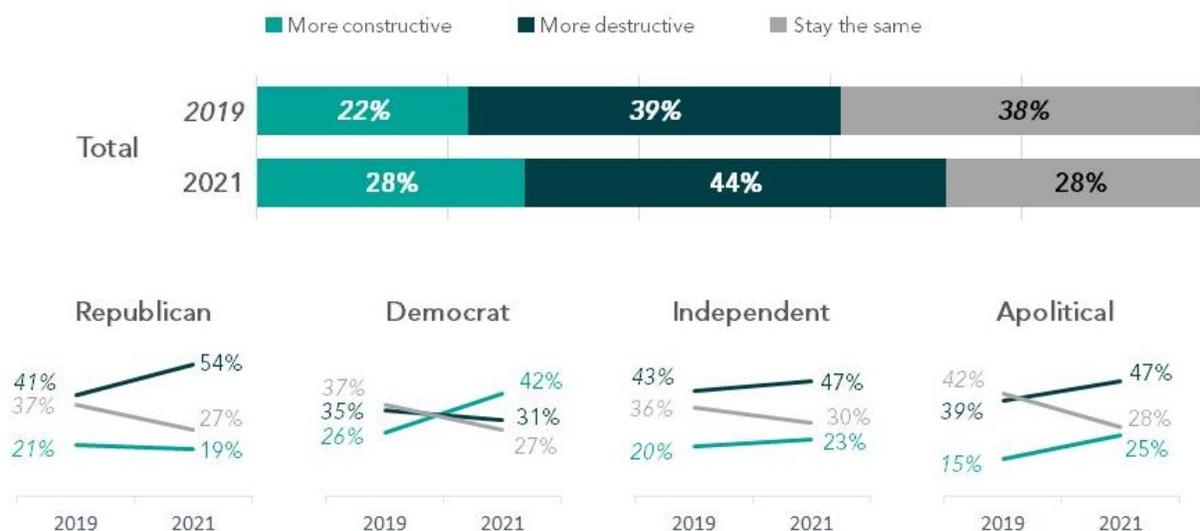
⁴ As part of the Hidden Common Ground Initiative, USA TODAY and its affiliates reported on concrete examples of working across political differences in communities across America in the “Strange Bedfellows” stories, available at <https://www.publicagenda.org/strange-bedfellows/>.

FINDING 2: FEW AMERICANS ARE OPTIMISTIC THAT THE COUNTRY CAN OVERCOME DESTRUCTIVE POLITICAL DIVISIVENESS IN THE COMING YEARS. MOST, HOWEVER, BELIEVE IT IS ESSENTIAL TO TRY, PARTICULARLY AFTER THE ATTACK ON THE U.S. CAPITOL

Only about a quarter of Americans think the country will become more constructive over the next ten years in how it deals with disagreements. About four in ten Americans say that it will become more destructive and about a quarter think it will stay the same. Perspectives on this question have shifted by partisan affiliation since 2019, with the 2020 election outcome as the likely cause. In the [2019 survey](#), Republicans were more optimistic than Democrats; the current survey finds that pattern has reversed.⁵ Overall, however, the outlook is less than hopeful that the nation can do a substantially better job of managing our disagreements in the coming years; see Figure 4.

Few Americans are optimistic about overcoming divisiveness.

Figure 4. Percent of Americans who say in the next ten years whether they think America will become more constructive or more destructive in how it deals with disagreements, by political affiliation and by year



Base: 2021: All respondents, N=1,283; Republican, N=301; Democrat, N=427; Independent, N=302; Apolitical, N=253

Base: 2019: All respondents, N=1,548; Republican, N=466; Democrat, N=533; Independent, N=359; Apolitical, N=190

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⁵ Public Agenda, 2019, “Divisiveness and Collaboration in American Public Life,”

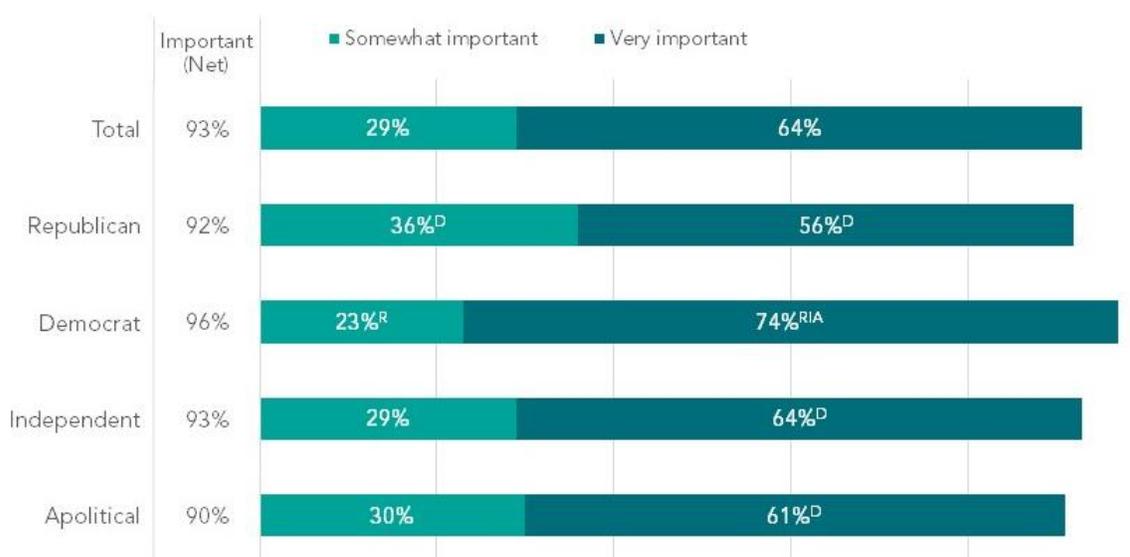
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MOST AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT IT IS IMPORTANT TO REDUCE DIVISIVENESS, PARTICULARLY AFTER THE ATTACK ON THE U.S. CAPITOL.

Notwithstanding the uptick in pessimism, an overwhelming 93 percent of Americans say it is important to reduce divisiveness in the United States, including two-thirds who say it is very important to do so. Democrats feel particularly strongly, but overall this is a consensus view, as it was in the [2019 research](#); see Figure 5.

Virtually all Americans, across party lines, agree on the importance of reducing divisiveness.

Figure 5. Percent of Americans who say how important it is for the United States to reduce divisiveness, by political affiliation



Base: All respondents, N=1,283; Republican, N=301; Democrat, N=427; Independent, N=302; Apolitical, N=253

Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Apolitical estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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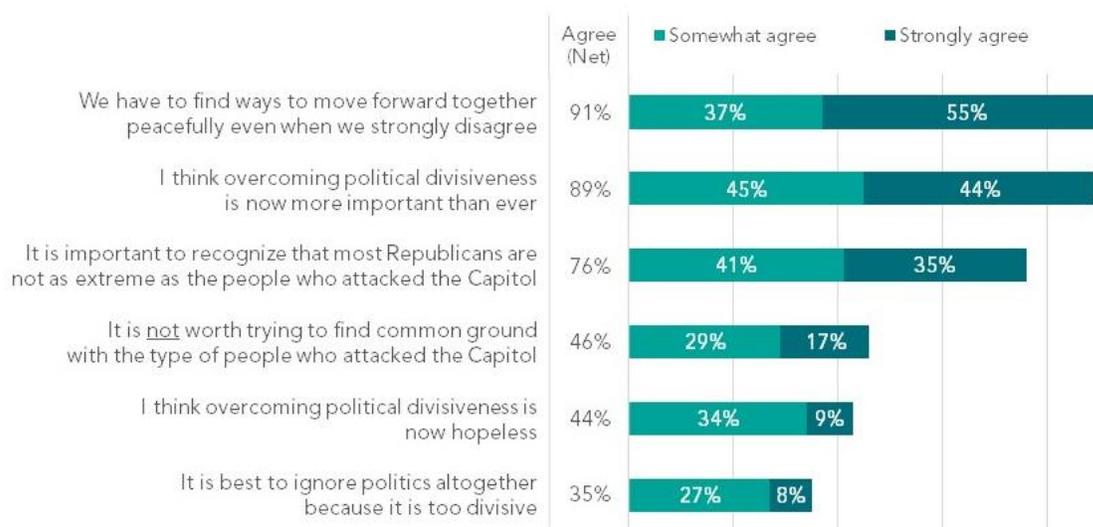
The survey asked people to reflect on the January 6 attack on the Capitol and finds that it triggered a complex mix of feelings and responses. For example, Americans are split over whether overcoming political divisiveness is now hopeless. They are also split over whether it is worth trying to find common ground with the type of people who attacked the Capitol; see Figure 6.

Yet nine out of ten Americans believe that overcoming political divisiveness is now more important than ever—with strong agreement across the political spectrum. There is also near

unanimity across the political spectrum that we have to find ways to move forward together peacefully even when we strongly disagree. Three-quarters of Americans also say it is important to recognize that most Republicans are not as extreme as the people who attacked the Capitol; see Figure 6. This view is particularly strongly held by Republicans, 64 percent of whom strongly agree and 27 percent of whom somewhat agree that it is important to recognize that most Republicans are not as extreme as the people who attacked the Capitol.

Although some Americans feel hopeless after the attack on the US Capitol, the vast majority believe in moving forward peacefully despite disagreements.

Figure 6. Percent of Americans who agree with the following statements in reflecting on the events in which a group of people attacked the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021



Base: All respondents, N=1,283

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FINDING 3: A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS THINK THAT DIVISIVENESS IS DRIVEN MORE BY LEADERS THAN BY ORDINARY PEOPLE. FEW SEE ANY OF THE SOCIETAL ACTORS ASKED ABOUT IN THE SURVEY—INCLUDING SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES AND LOCAL AND NATIONAL POLITICIANS—AS PARTICULARLY CONSTRUCTIVE, SUGGESTING A “CONSTRUCTIVENESS DESERT” IN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE.

Most Americans (77 percent) think the inability to constructively disagree in the United States is driven from the top-down, that is that leaders set an example that people follow. Only 23 percent think that the inability to constructively disagree is driven from the bottom-up, that is that leaders are just following the peoples’ behaviors. This finding is relatively unchanged since the [2019 survey](#).⁶

Few Americans see any institution that the survey asked about as particularly constructive.

Figure 7. Percent of Americans who say each of the following promote mostly constructive or mostly destructive public discussion and debate



Base: All respondents, N=1,283

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

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This ‘top-down’ viewpoint can be seen across various actors and entities. When asked whether certain actors and entities promote constructive or destructive public discussion and debate,

⁶ Public Agenda, 2019, “Divisiveness and Collaboration in American Public Life,”

<https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/divisiveness-and-collaboration-in-american-public-life-a-hidden-common-ground-report/>

there are none that people view particularly positively. This suggests that a strong majority of Americans perceive a “constructiveness desert” in civic life. National political leaders, social media companies, and journalism and news media companies are regarded as particularly destructive; see Figure 7.

But the public recognizes its own contributions to divisiveness. In another line of questioning, nearly half of Americans (48 percent) say that the main reason our political leaders are divided is because there is not much common ground among the American people—although the remaining 52 percent disagree. Somewhat more Black (59 percent) and Latino (56 percent) than white Americans (43 percent) think that the main reason our political leaders are divided is because there is not much common ground among the American people.

FINDING 4: A PLURALITY OF AMERICANS THINK THAT A PATH OUT OF DIVISIVENESS WILL REQUIRE THE EFFORTS OF BOTH LEADERS AND THE PUBLIC, AND THAT THE CONCERN IS LESS ABOUT PEOPLE HAVING DIFFERENCES OF OPINION AND MORE ABOUT LEARNING HOW TO DISAGREE CONSTRUCTIVELY.

Americans across the political spectrum are nearly unanimous in believing that it is important to reduce divisiveness and that, after the January 6 attack on the Capitol, we have to find ways to move forward together peacefully even when we strongly disagree; see figures 8 and 9 above. This section lays out the general principles for overcoming divisiveness that most Americans agree on across partisan, racial and other major lines of difference. The next section explores views on more concrete measures for making progress.

FEW AMERICANS THINK THAT POLITICIANS ALONE ARE LIKELY TO REDUCE DIVISIVENESS.

If the country is to become less divisive over the next decade, only 14 percent of Americans believe that will be driven primarily by politicians coming together across political divides to solve problems. Nearly twice that many (29 percent) believe that it is more likely to be driven by ordinary people coming together across political divides to solve problems, while a plurality (44 percent) believe both leaders and ordinary people are likely to be involved if the nation is to reduce divisiveness.

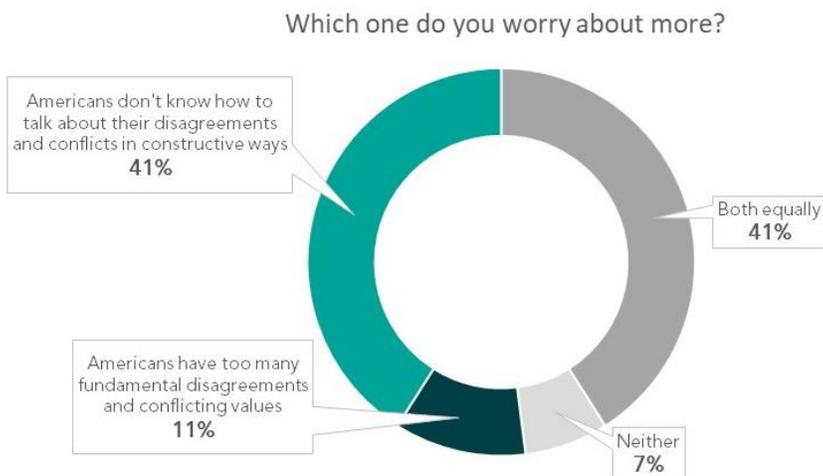
AMERICANS WORRY ABOUT OUR INABILITY TO PRODUCTIVELY DISAGREE AND WANT BETTER WAYS TO UNDERSTAND OTHERS ACROSS POLITICAL LINES.

Relatively few people are worried about Americans having too many fundamental disagreements and conflicting values. More are worried that Americans don't know how to talk about their disagreements and conflicts in constructive ways or worry about both problems equally; see Figure 8. For a plurality of Americans, people being afraid to speak their mind honestly and say what they really mean for fear of criticism is as much of a problem as people speaking thoughtlessly without regard for harming other people; see Figure 9. Pluralities across political affiliation share these views on both questions, and responses remain largely unchanged [since 2019](#).⁷

⁷ Public Agenda, 2019, "Divisiveness and Collaboration in American Public Life," <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/divisiveness-and-collaboration-in-american-public-life-a-hidden-common-ground-report/>

Differences of opinion are less of a problem than not knowing how to discuss differences productively, most Americans say.

Figure 8. Percent of Americans who worry more about each of the following

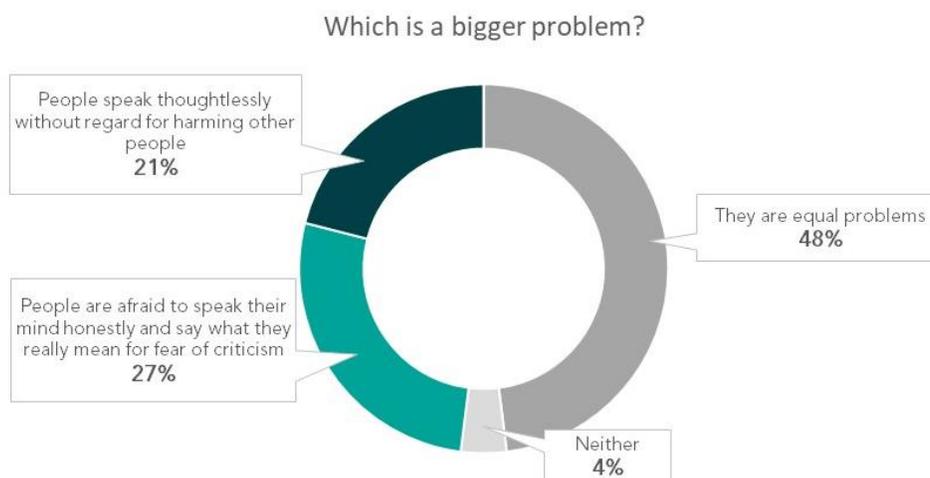


Base: All respondents, N=1,283
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

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A plurality of Americans believe that people being afraid to speak their mind is as much of a problem as people speaking thoughtlessly.

Figure 9. Percent of Americans who think each of the following is the bigger problem



Base: All respondents, N=1,283
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

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About two-thirds of Democrats, Independents and apolitical people say it is important to them to have better ways to understand the views and values of ordinary people who identify as Republicans; see Figure 10a. Similarly, about two-thirds of Republicans, Independents and apolitical people say it is important to them to have better ways to understand the views and values of ordinary people who identify as Democrats; see Figure 10b. In both cases, apolitical individuals are least likely to think having a better understanding of Republicans and Democrats is important to them.

Americans want better ways to understand others across political differences.

Figure 10a. Percent of Democrats, Independents and apolitical people say it is important to them to have better ways to understand the views and values of ordinary people who identify as Republicans, by political affiliation

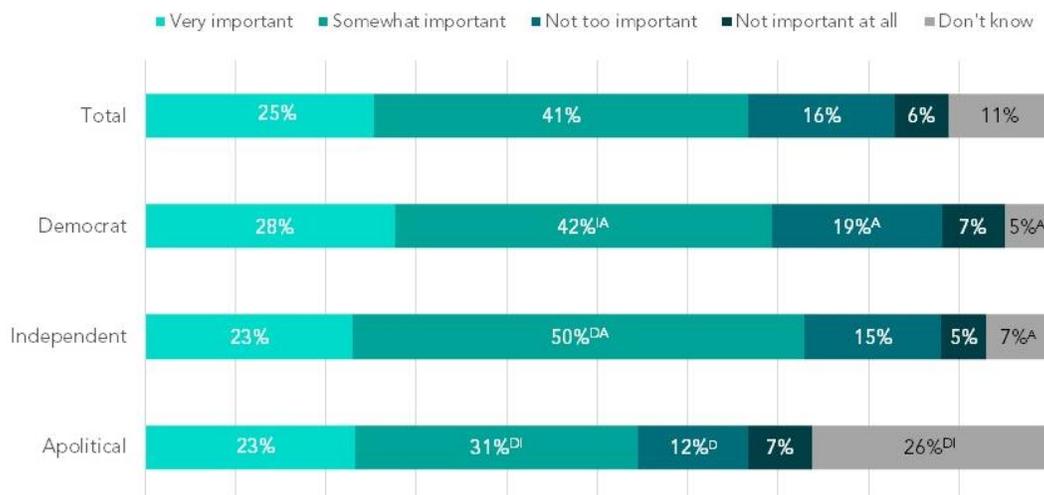
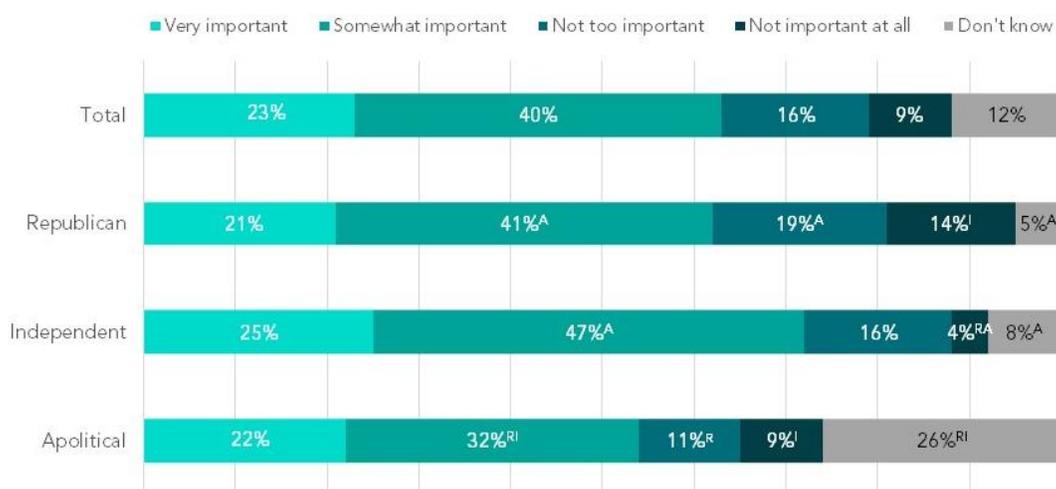


Figure 10b. Percent of Republicans, Independents, and apolitical people say it is important to them to have better ways to understand the views and values of ordinary people who identify as Democrats, by political affiliation



Base: All respondents, N=1,283; Republican, N=301; Democrat, N=427; Independent, N=302; Apolitical, N=253

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FINDING 5: TO ADDRESS DIVISIVENESS, AMERICANS ACROSS THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM BELIEVE THAT OUR CIVIC CULTURE MUST CHANGE AND THAT WE NEED STRUCTURAL POLITICAL AND EDUCATION REFORMS AND A MORE EQUITABLE ECONOMY. BUT SIGNIFICANTLY FEWER REPUBLICANS THAN DEMOCRATS, INDEPENDENTS OR APOITICAL PEOPLE RECOGNIZE THE IMPACTS OF RACISM, WHICH MAY COMPLICATE ADDRESSING OUR NATION’S CHALLENGES.

Americans across the political spectrum agree strongly on a range of approaches to reduce divisiveness and create a more collaborative nation, including changes to our political system, civic culture and economy. Yet the survey finds differences by political affiliation in how many people recognize the impact of racism, which may complicate efforts to create a more equitable economy and a more inclusive political system.

TRANSFORM OUR POLITICS

Give people a greater voice in decisions: When it comes to reducing divisiveness, powerful majorities believe that giving ordinary people a greater voice in the decisions that affect their lives would be very or somewhat effective in reducing divisiveness or destructive disagreements in the United States; see Figure 11.

Americans think giving people a greater voice will reduce divisiveness.

Figure 11. Percent of Americans who say how effective *giving ordinary people a greater voice in the decisions that affect their lives* would be at reducing divisiveness or destructive disagreements in the United States, by political affiliation



Base: All respondents, N=1,283; Republican, N=301; Democrat, N=427; Independent, N=302; Apolitical, N=253

Estimates indicated with a ^a are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^l are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Apolitical estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

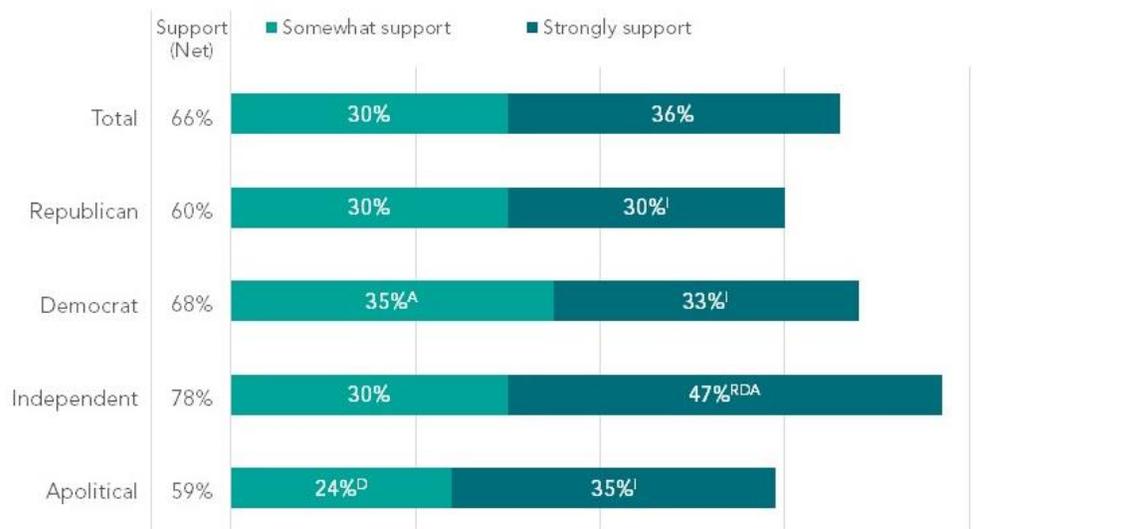
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Perhaps signaling one way to give people a greater voice, there is also modest support among 57 percent of Americans for shifting more decisions “from the federal to the local level, where politics are less partisan” as a way to reduce divisiveness. It should be noted, though, that this idea does not attract majority support across partisan and racial lines. More Republicans (70 percent) support it than Democrats (53 percent), Independents (59 percent) or apolitical people (45 percent). Forty percent of Black Americans support shifting more decisions from the federal to the local level compared with 60 percent of white and 65 percent of Latino Americans.

Make elections less divisive: Given that about 80 percent of Americans, across partisan lines, believe that traditional parties and politicians “don’t care about people like them,” it is not surprising that most Americans want a wider range of choices in elections. Two-thirds (66 percent) support making it easier for third-party candidates to run for office, so voters have more than just two choices. Independents are particularly enthusiastic about this idea; see Figure 12. Furthermore, 82 percent of Americans think that electing leaders who are deeply committed to unifying the country would be effective in reducing divisiveness.

Americans support making it easier for third-party candidates to run for office.

Figure 12. Percent of Americans who say how much they support *making it easier for third-party and independent candidates to run for office so voters have more than just two choices* as a way to reduce divisiveness or destructive disagreements in the United States, by political affiliation



Base: All respondents, N=1,283; Republican, N=301; Democrat, N=427; Independent, N=302; Apolitical, N=253

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TRANSFORM OUR ECONOMY

Broad support for creating a more equitable economy: Americans see fundamental problems with the economy and believe that there is a relationship between the economy and divisiveness. First, most Americans (77 percent) say that the economy is rigged to advantage the rich and powerful, including 61 percent of Republicans and 88 percent of Democrats, with Independents and apolitical people falling in between. A somewhat larger share of Black Americans (86 percent) than white (74 percent) or Latino Americans (75 percent) believe the economy is rigged.

Second, a large majority of Americans (83 percent) say that “improving economic opportunity and security for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, or where they live” would be an effective way to reduce America’s destructive disagreements and divisiveness, including strong majorities across political affiliations; see Figure 13. There are no statistically significant differences by race in responses to this question.

Americans think improving economic opportunity will reduce divisiveness.

Figure 13. Percent of Americans who say how effective *improving economic opportunity and security for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, or where they live* would be at reducing divisiveness or destructive disagreements in the United States, by political affiliation



Base: All respondents, N=1,283; Republican, N=301; Democrat, N=427; Independent, N=302; Apolitical, N=253

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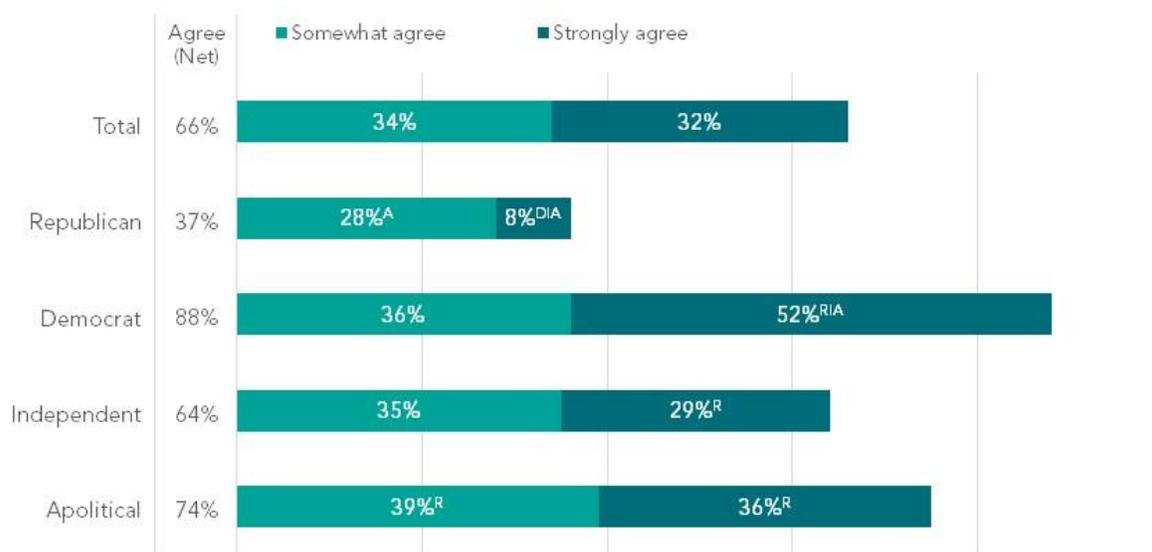
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Significant differences on the relationship between racism and economic opportunity: While there is strong cross-partisan agreement that improving economic opportunity and security for all would reduce divisiveness, there are substantial differences in how Americans view the relationship between racism and economic opportunity. Overall, two-thirds of Americans (66 percent) believe that racial discrimination makes it more difficult for people of color to succeed in America. The size of this majority, however, varies significantly by race, with 91 percent of Black Americans and 73 percent of Latino Americans saying that racial discrimination makes it more difficult for people of color to succeed in America, compared to 59 percent of white Americans.

The picture changes from uneven agreement to outright disagreement when we look at opinions on this question by partisanship rather than race. Only 37 percent of Republicans say that racial discrimination makes it more difficult for people of color to succeed in America, compared to the vast majority of Democrats (88 percent), as well as significant majorities of Independents (64 percent) and apolitical people (74 percent); see Figure 14.

While most Americans think racial discrimination makes it more difficult for people of color to succeed, few Republicans think so.

Figure 14. Percent of Americans agree or disagree with *racial discrimination makes it more difficult for people of color to succeed in America*, by political affiliation



Base: All respondents, N=1,283; Republican, N=301; Democrat, N=427; Independent, N=302; Apolitical, N=253

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[Public Agenda research from August 2020](#) asked about the impact of racial discrimination on economic success in people's communities. It found that more Black Americans (67 percent) said they think that racial discrimination is a barrier to success in their communities, compared to 56 percent of Latino Americans and 35 percent of white Americans. Many more Democrats (60 percent) said that in their communities, racial discrimination makes it more difficult for people of color to succeed, compared with relatively few Republicans (28 percent), Independents (30 percent) and apolitical people (37 percent).⁸

A [2019 Public Agenda study](#) found that more Black (65 percent) than white Americans (45 percent) say racism can make it difficult for some people to participate in civic and political life. The 54 percent of Latinos who say racism can make it difficult for some people to participate is statistically identical to the percentage of whites who say so. That research found that 71 percent of Democrats believe that racism can make it difficult for some Americans to participate in civic and political life—whereas few Republicans (25 percent) and only half of Independents (50 percent) believe this to be true.⁹

The conclusion of this report considers some possible implications of these complex differences in how people view the impacts of racism.

TRANSFORM OUR CIVIC CULTURE

Teach adults and children how to resolve conflicts: Americans often think first and foremost about the role of education in helping the nation tackle social problems. Eighty-two percent of Americans, with little partisan difference, support teaching children to resolve their conflicts more constructively as a way to reduce destructive disagreement, and 75 percent also support teaching conflict resolution to adults. These are two of the most strongly supported approaches to reducing divisiveness of those included in this survey.

Also relevant to the theme of education, there is significant but uneven support for emphasizing America's history, heritage and founding ideals in our public schools as a means for reducing divisiveness. While 70 percent of Americans overall support this approach, it is more popular among Republicans (82 percent) than Democrats (63 percent). About three-quarters of white Americans (76 percent), compared to 61 percent of Latino Americans and 51 percent of Black

⁸ Public Agenda, 2020, "America's Hidden Common Ground on Economic Opportunity and Inequality," <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/americas-hidden-common-ground-on-economic-opportunity-and-inequality/>

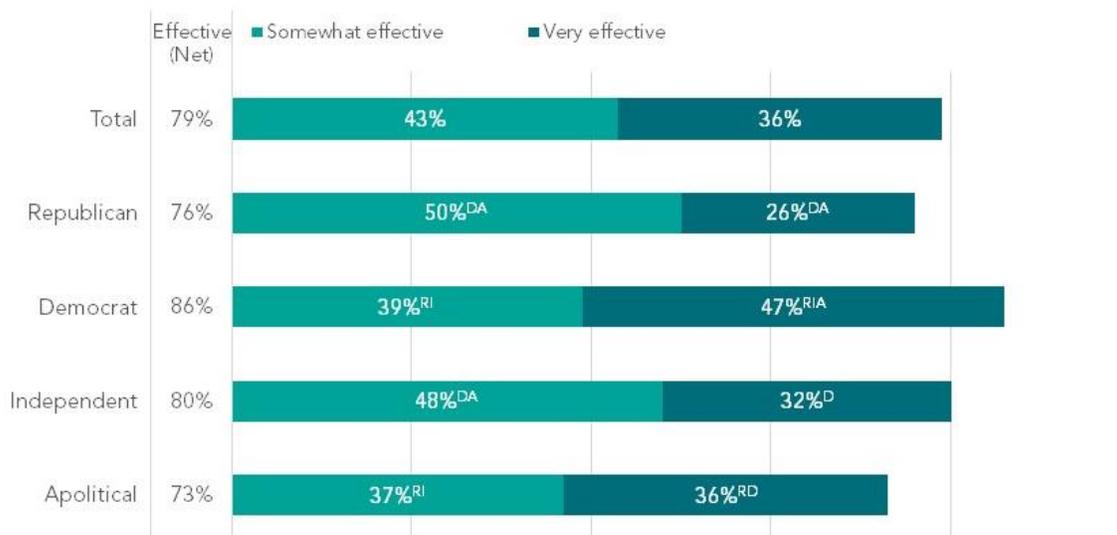
⁹ Public Agenda, 2020, "Greater Voice, Greater Impact: Americans' Views on Making Democracy Work for Everyone," <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/greater-voice-greater-impact/>

Americans support reducing divisiveness by emphasizing the nation’s history, heritage and founding ideals in public schools.

People also think that methods of overcoming divisiveness can be integrated into people’s daily lives, not just learned in school. Seventy-nine percent of Americans say that creating more opportunities for people to talk and interact with those who have different values and views would be effective in reducing divisiveness and destructive disagreement; see Figure 15.

Americans think creating more opportunities for dialogue would reduce divisiveness.

Figure 15. Percent of Americans who say how effective *creating more opportunities for people to talk and interact with people who have different values and views* would be in reducing divisiveness or destructive disagreements in the United States, by political affiliation



Base: All respondents, N=1,283; Republican, N=301; Democrat, N=427; Independent, N=302; Apolitical, N=253

Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Apolitical estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

Public Agenda/USA Today Hidden Common Ground Survey – Overcoming Divisiveness

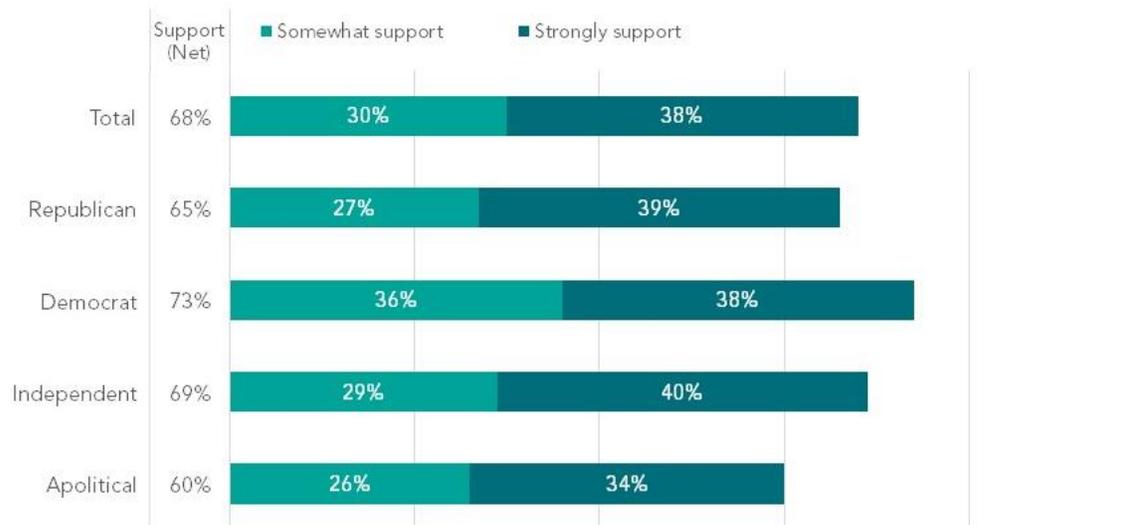
The nation is largely split, however, on supporting or opposing a year of national service for young people in which they would work together with Americans from different backgrounds. Forty-nine percent of Americans support it, 20 percent oppose it and 30 percent indicate

uncertainty. This idea is more popular among Democrats (60 percent) than Independents (50 percent), Republicans (40 percent) or apolitical people (41 percent).¹⁰

Regulate social media: If there is one place that our divisive political culture is manifest and reinforced, it is on social media. Most Americans believe we should do something about it. Sixty-eight percent support strengthening government regulation to stop social media from profiting from misinformation and divisiveness, with only minor differences by political affiliation; see Figure 16.

Americans support regulating social media to reduce misinformation and divisiveness.

Figure 16. Percent of Americans who say how much they support *strengthening government regulation to stop social media from profiting from misinformation and divisiveness* as a way to reduce divisiveness or destructive disagreements in the United States, by political affiliation



Base: All respondents, N=640; Republican, N=144; Democrat, N=223; Independent, N=152; Apolitical, N=121

Public Agenda/USA Today Hidden Common Ground Survey – Overcoming Divisiveness

Deepen spiritual values: A 59 percent majority of Americans believe that making spiritual values a bigger factor in American life would be effective at reducing divisiveness or destructive disagreements, but support is uneven across partisan affiliations. More Republicans (75 percent)

¹⁰ In 2017 Gallup reached similar findings about requiring national service. People may have responded differently if the survey had asked about creating more opportunities for national service, rather than requiring it. See <https://news.gallup.com/poll/221921/half-americans-favor-mandatory-national-service.aspx>

think this approach would be effective at reducing divisiveness, compared to Democrats (48 percent), Independents (55 percent) and apolitical people (56 percent).¹¹

Enlist popular culture: A 59 percent majority of Americans believe that creating more TV, movies and music that help people understand those who have different values and views would be effective at reducing divisiveness or destructive disagreements. Again, support is uneven, with more Democrats (75 percent) thinking this approach would be effective at reducing divisiveness compared to Republicans (46 percent), Independents (59 percent) and apolitical people (53 percent).

¹¹ The survey included a version of this question that asked about religion rather than spiritual values. Forty-eight percent of Americans say making religion a bigger factor in American life would be effective at reducing divisiveness or destructive disagreements, including 66 percent of Republicans and only 38 percent of Democrats, 47 percent of Independents and 42 percent of apolitical people.

REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research reveals growing doubt that the country can emerge from its divisive, dysfunctional politics. Yet it also reveals that Americans think we have no alternative but to try to turn things around. And they agree on many approaches to doing so.

The public recognizes that a range of actors and factors contribute to divisiveness, including political leaders, news media and social media. Many believe that political parties and the economy are rigged against ordinary people. In their view, solutions must likewise be multi-faceted and far-reaching, targeting America's civic culture, political system and economy. On these and many other questions, we find that differences in opinion across partisan affiliations are often greater than differences across racial groups.

Race and racism, always powerful factors in American civic life and politics, show up in complex ways in this survey. In general, we find that most Americans believe that improving economic security for all people, regardless of race, ethnicity or where they live, would be effective at reducing divisiveness—with no differences of opinion by race and only minor differences by partisan affiliation or for this question.

Yet this survey finds striking differences of opinion by partisan affiliation on the question of whether racial discrimination is an obstacle to the success of people of color, with far more Democrats, Independents and apolitical people recognizing the impact of racism than Republicans. Public Agenda previously found related partisan differences of opinion on how racism affects people's chances for success in their communities and on how racism affects civic and political participation nationally.¹² That previous research found that far more Democrats—a category that tends to include most Black Americans—are cognizant of the impacts of racism than Republicans. Independents and apolitical individuals tend to fall in between. Additionally, it found that Latinos' views sometimes fall in between Black and white Americans and are sometimes indistinguishable from the views of white Americans. Unfortunately, the sample sizes of these surveys are not large enough to analyze the views of Asian Americans.

These findings suggest that our nation has not yet arrived at a broadly held understanding of the impacts of racism, which will likely make it harder to equitably expand opportunity and address other tough challenges. Some leaders will also likely continue to both deny and exacerbate racism for their own ends. In order to make progress on equity and reduce

¹² Public Agenda, 2020, <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/greater-voice-greater-impact/> and Public Agenda, 2020 <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/americas-hidden-common-ground-on-economic-opportunity-and-inequality/>

divisiveness, far more work is needed to understand and address differing views on how structural and interpersonal racism functions; its toll on Black, Latino, Asian, Native American and indeed white Americans; and strategies for overcoming it.

Nonetheless, there are hopeful signs in the concurrence across partisan and racial lines that we must try to overcome destructive political divisiveness and that there are agreed upon effective ways to get started. For example, the current research shows a modest uptick in the share of Americans who say they have often or sometimes had constructive conversations with people of different political views (61 percent in 2021, up from 46 percent in 2019); watched news from an outlet with different political views than their own (51 percent in 2021, up from 44 percent in 2019), and, most importantly, actually worked together to try to solve a problem in their community with someone with different political views (45 percent in 2021, up from 32 percent in 2019).

Finally, a hopeful sign emerges from the public's analysis of the drivers of divisiveness. Political leaders often act as if the other side holds fundamentally conflicting values and has ideas that are just plain wrong. But relatively few Americans think our problem is solely about differences of opinion and conflicting values. Far more think we must do a much better job of constructively dealing with our disagreements and conflicts. Powerful majorities also agree that a key to overcoming divisiveness is that people should have a greater voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Giving people a greater voice while learning to constructively disagree might also be called "democracy."

AMERICA'S HIDDEN COMMON GROUND ON OVERCOMING DIVISIVENESS

A Hidden Common Ground® Report from Public Agenda

By Will Friedman and David Schleifer

2021

Available online at: www.publicagenda.org/reports/overcoming-divisiveness-charting-a-path-forward

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Public Agenda is a national nonpartisan organization dedicated to creating a better, more inclusive and informed democracy for everyone. Through research, engagement and communications, Public Agenda focuses on building trust and opportunity, raising up the voices of the public, and bridging divides to facilitate progress. Areas of focus include K-12 education, higher education, health care, economic opportunity, and democracy. Find Public Agenda online at PublicAgenda.org, on Facebook at facebook.com/PublicAgenda and on Twitter at [@PublicAgenda](https://twitter.com/PublicAgenda).



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Based in Dayton, Ohio, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves to promote public deliberation about difficult public issues. Its activities include publishing the issue guides and other materials used by local forum groups, encouraging collaboration among forum sponsors, and sharing information about current activities in the network.

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America Amplified is a public media initiative funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting aimed at using community engagement to inform and strengthen local, regional and national journalism.

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America Talks is a two-day national event that invites Americans to engage in 1:1, face-to-face conversation across our political divides. Inspired by Europe's highly successful My Country Talks program and spearheaded by a coalition of American bridge-building leaders, America Talks will showcase the power and potential of connecting Americans across divides at scale over a single weekend.

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