

# AMERICA'S HIDDEN COMMON GROUND ON RENEWING DEMOCRACY

## A HIDDEN COMMON GROUND REPORT

By David Schleifer, Will Friedman and Erin McNally  
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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Public Agenda/USA TODAY Hidden Common Ground survey, which is also part of Public Agenda's ongoing series of Yankelovich Democracy Monitor surveys, was fielded in May 2021. The research updates and expands on findings from Public Agenda's two previous Yankelovich Democracy Monitor surveys, published in [2019](#) and [2020](#). Findings include:

1. Most Americans think our democracy is in trouble. Half of Americans think we need to change the political system, while half think we simply need to elect the right leaders.
2. Americans across the political spectrum view elected officials' disregard for the public and the influence of special interests as major obstacles to a responsive, healthy democracy where people have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.
3. To build a healthier democracy, Americans across partisan lines emphasize responsive government, fair and secure elections, unifying leadership, and accurate news and information. Americans are united in believing that elections can be both secure and accessible and that the federal government should make sure voting is simple, convenient and hassle-free for every person in every state.
4. Many Americans want ways to participate in democracy beyond voting. They want their local governments to create opportunities for them to deliberate, make decisions, and collaborate with elected officials. Americans say they would be more likely to get involved in public affairs if they could exercise real power, build common ground, and if decision-making processes were user-friendly. More people want government to work with communities rather than want it to get out of the way.

5. Americans of different partisan affiliations disagree on whether racism is a barrier to political participation and on whether addressing racism requires systemic change. Republicans' views on these questions stand in contrast to those of Democrats, Independents and unaffiliated Americans; differences by racial identification are more modest.

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

## METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

This report summarizes findings from a nationally representative survey of 1,260 adult Americans 18 years and older. The survey was designed by Public Agenda and fielded May 24 to 27, 2021 by Ipsos. Respondents completed the survey in English. When referencing this report, please cite Public Agenda.

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. Unfortunately, the sample size of this survey was not large enough to analyze the views of Asian Americans separately.

The findings include trend data from Public Agenda's two previous Yankelovich Democracy Monitor surveys. The first was fielded September 14 through October 15, 2018, with findings published in August 2019. The second was fielded November 6 to December 28, 2019, with findings published in July 2020.<sup>1</sup>

For a complete methodology, including a topline with full question wording and cross tabulations by political affiliation, please go to <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/renewing-democracy/> or email [research@publicagenda.org](mailto:research@publicagenda.org).

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

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<sup>1</sup> Public Agenda, 2019, "Strengthening Democracy: What Do Americans Think?," <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/strengthening-democracy-what-do-americans-think/>; Public Agenda, 2020 "Greater Voice, Greater Impact: Americans' Views on Making Democracy Work for Everyone," <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/greater-voice-greater-impact/>

## 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 help create fair and effective solutions to the challenges of our time.

## ABOUT THE YANKELOVICH DEMOCRACY MONITOR

The Yankelovich Democracy Monitor is a multi-year study designed to track Americans' views on democracy and how to strengthen it, conducted in partnership with the Kettering Foundation. The study is named for and informed by the insights of Daniel Yankelovich (1924–2017), a co-founder of Public Agenda and master public opinion researcher.

The Democracy Monitor aims to make several contributions to understanding the public's views and values regarding democratic renewal:

- The Democracy Monitor is oriented toward solutions and what should be done to make progress, rather than on who is to blame for our problems.
- This research emphasizes the roles that ordinary people and communities play in democratic problem solving, rather than focusing solely on institutions and elections.
- The Democracy Monitor is designed to track the evolution over time of public opinion on the problems facing our democracy and their potential solutions.

**FINDING 1: MOST AMERICANS THINK OUR DEMOCRACY IS IN TROUBLE. HALF OF AMERICANS THINK WE NEED TO CHANGE THE POLITICAL SYSTEM, WHILE HALF THINK WE SIMPLY NEED TO ELECT THE RIGHT LEADERS.**

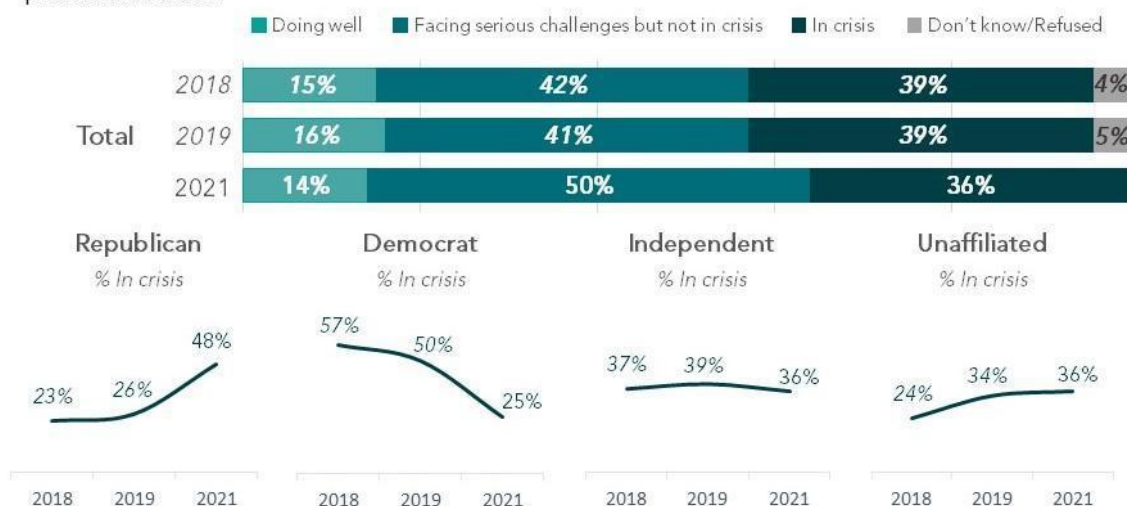
Very few Americans think our democracy is functioning as it should. This survey began by proposing to respondents that “the United States is meant to be a democracy, where citizens have a voice, rights are protected, and laws are fairly enforced,” and then asking them whether they think our country’s democracy is in crisis, facing serious challenges but not in crisis, or doing well. Only 14 percent of Americans say that our country’s democracy is doing well. About half say it is facing serious challenges and about one-third say it is in crisis; see Figure 1.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Independent subgroup includes those who self-identify as Independents. The “politically unaffiliated” subgroup includes those who have no preference towards political affiliation with the three dominant categories of political affiliations (Republican, Democrat, or Independent) or skipped the question, “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as...”. In previous Hidden Common Ground surveys, we referred to political unaffiliated people as “apolitical”.

## Few Americans think our democracy is functioning well. More Republicans than other groups believe our democracy is in crisis.

**Figure 1.** Percent who think our country's democracy is the following when told that that the United States is meant to be a democracy where citizens have a voice, rights are protected and laws are fairly enforced, by political affiliation:



**Base:** 2021 Online: All respondents, N=1,260; Republican, N=306; Democrat, N=405; Independent, N=307; Politically Unaffiliated, N=242  
**Base:** 2019 Telephone/Online: All respondents, N=1,000; Republican, N=285; Democrat, N=321; Independent, N=337; Politically Unaffiliated, N=57

**Base:** 2018 Telephone/Online: All respondents, N=1,000; Republican, N=267; Democrat, N=319; Independent, N=363; Politically Unaffiliated, N=51

While significant changes in data points from the telephone surveys to the online survey can largely be attributed to the changing environment, the online approach may have also generated a mode effect.

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In the aggregate, Americans' views on this question are similar to findings from Public Agenda's two previous Yankelovich Democracy Monitor surveys.<sup>3</sup> But Democrats' and Republicans' views on this question have changed. Compared to the earlier surveys, more Republicans and fewer Democrats now say our democracy is in crisis; see Figure 1. This shift is likely a result of how Democrats and Republicans feel after winning or losing a presidential election.

If most Americans believe our democracy is in poor shape now, what do they think about its prospects going forward? Overall, a 42 percent plurality of Americans believes that the state of our democracy will get worse in the next few years. Only 27 percent believe it will get better, while 31 percent believe it will stay the same.

<sup>3</sup> Data collected in 2018 was published in 2019. Data collected in 2019 was published in 2020. "Strengthening Democracy," 2019, <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/strengthening-democracy-what-do-americans-think/>; "Greater Voice, Greater Impact," 2020, <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/greater-voice-greater-impact/>

Most Republicans (63 percent) believe that the state of our democracy will get worse in the next few years, compared to relatively few Democrats (20 percent). Independents (44 percent) and politically unaffiliated people (46 percent) are almost precisely in between.

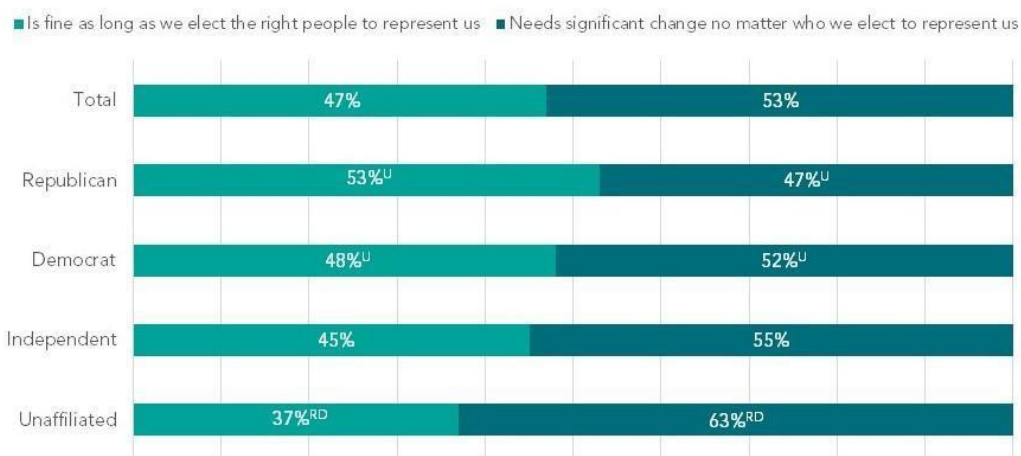
### HALF OF AMERICANS THINK WE NEED TO CHANGE THE POLITICAL SYSTEM, WHILE HALF THINK WE SIMPLY NEED TO ELECT THE RIGHT LEADERS.

Despite substantial concern about the state of our democracy and partisan differences in their degrees of concern, the American public is almost evenly divided over the scale of change we need to improve things. About half of Americans think the design and structure of our nation's government are fine as long as we elect the right people to represent us, while about half think the design and structure of our nation's government need significant change no matter who we elect; see Figure 2.

These differences of opinion are not primarily a matter of political affiliation. Democrats, Republicans and Independents are all almost evenly divided on this question, while most politically unaffiliated people (63 percent) say that the design and structure of our nation's government need significant change no matter who we elect; see Figure 2. This may suggest that one reason many of these people are unaffiliated is because they believe that the system is so broken that no matter who is elected, needed change will not be forthcoming. Younger people, non-voters, and people who think our democracy is in crisis are all also more likely to say that our democracy needs systemic change. Politically unaffiliated people are less likely to report voting in the 2020 election and tend to be younger, lower-income and without college degrees.

Half of Americans think we need to change the political system, while half think we simply need to elect the right leaders.

**Figure 2.** Percent of Americans who say each of the following about the design and structure of our nation's government, by political affiliation:



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,260; Republican, N=306; Democrat, N=405; Independent, N=307; Politically Unaffiliated, N=242  
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding  
 Estimates indicated with a <sup>R</sup> are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>D</sup> are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>I</sup> are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>U</sup> are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

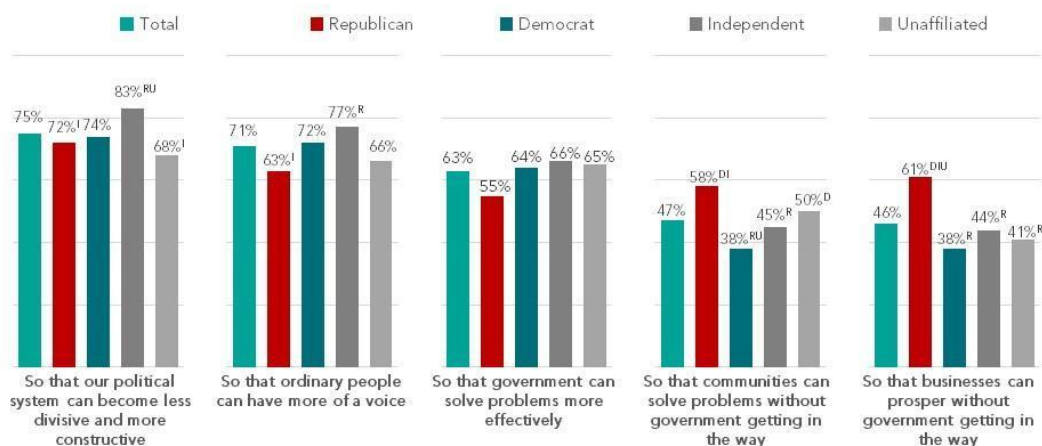
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ACROSS PARTISAN LINES, AMERICANS WHO BELIEVE THAT THE DESIGN AND STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO CHANGE CITE THE IMPORTANCE OF REDUCING DIVISIVENESS AND GIVING PEOPLE A GREATER VOICE IN DECISIONS.

Among those who think our democracy needs systemic change, not just different leaders, there is substantial agreement across political affiliations on two major reasons why: so that our political system can become less divisive; and so that ordinary people can have more of a voice; see Figure 3.

Americans who believe that the design and structure of government needs to change cite the importance of reducing divisiveness and giving people a greater voice in decisions.

**Figure 3.** Percent who say each of the following is a major reason why they believe that the design and structure of government need significant change, by political affiliation:



**Base:** Believe the design and structure of government need significant change, N=661; Republican, N=142; Democrat, N=206; Independent, N=161; Politically Unaffiliated, N=152

Estimates indicated with a <sup>R</sup> are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>D</sup> are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>I</sup> are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>U</sup> are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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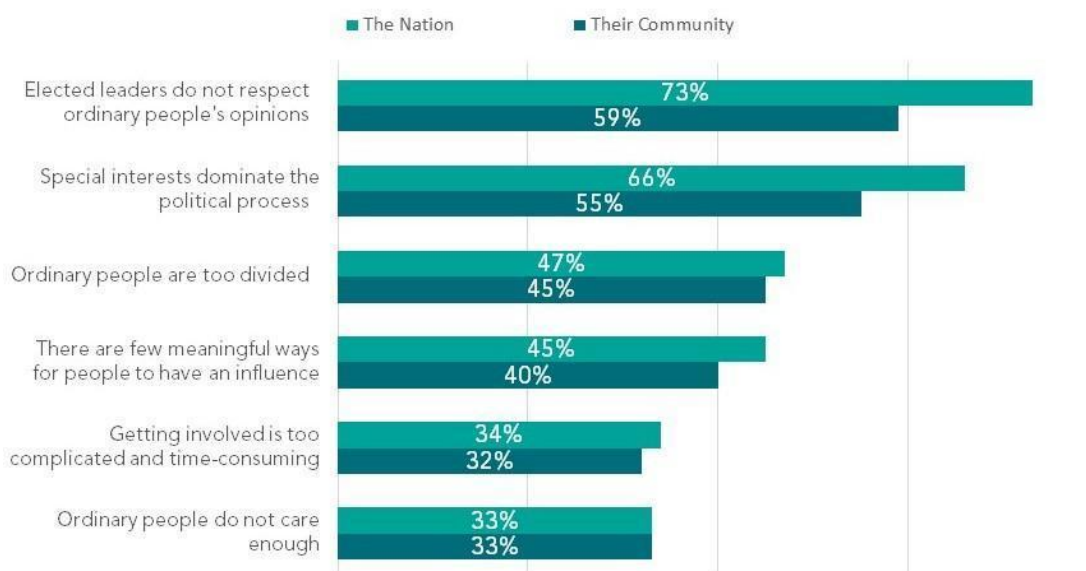
**FINDING 2: AMERICANS ACROSS THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM VIEW ELECTED OFFICIALS' DISREGARD FOR THE PUBLIC AND THE INFLUENCE OF SPECIAL INTERESTS AS MAJOR OBSTACLES TO A RESPONSIVE, HEALTHY DEMOCRACY WHERE PEOPLE HAVE A VOICE IN THE DECISIONS THAT AFFECT THEIR LIVES.**

A strong majority of Americans (73 percent) believe that “when enough people get involved,” they have a lot of influence over how their communities address problems. And despite widespread worry about the state of our national politics, a 58 percent majority of Americans also feel that “when enough people get involved,” they have a lot of influence over how the nation addresses problems. There are no significant partisan differences in responses to either of these questions.

But Americans perceive elected leaders as obstacles rather than allies to influencing problem-solving in their communities and the nation. Majorities of those who feel that ordinary people have little influence, whether locally or nationally, say that a major reason is that elected officials do not respect ordinary people’s opinions. Majorities also point toward the dominance of special interests in the political process; see Figure 4.

## Americans see elected officials and special interests as standing in the way of ordinary people having an influence in their communities and the nation.

**Figure 4.** Percent who say each of the following is a major reason why they believe that ordinary people have little influence over how their community or the nation addresses problems:



**Base:** Believe that ordinary people have little influence over how the nation addresses problems, N=543

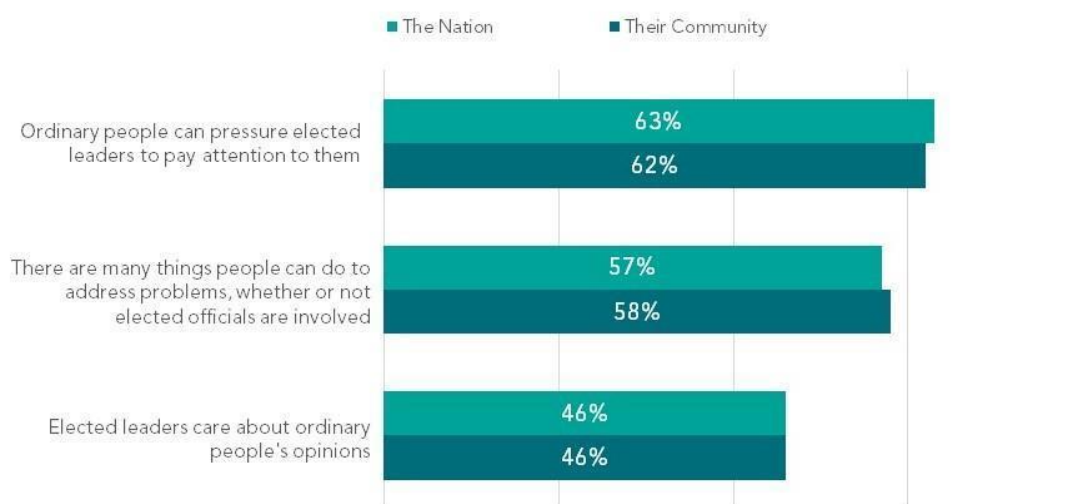
**Base:** Believe that ordinary people have little influence over how their community addresses problems, N=328

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Relatedly, among those who think that ordinary people have a lot of influence in their communities and nationally, about two-thirds say a major reason is that ordinary people can pressure elected leaders to pay attention to them. Over half also say it is because there are many things people can do to address problems, whether or not elected officials are involved. Relatively few say they can have influence because elected leaders care about ordinary people's opinions; see Figure 5.

### More Americans see elected officials as needing to be pressured to listen than see them as caring about people's opinions.

**Figure 5.** Percent who say each of the following is a major reason why they believe that when enough people get involved, they have a lot of influence over how their community or the nation addresses problems:



**Base:** Believe that when enough people get involved, they have a lot of influence over how the nation addresses problems, N=717

**Base:** Believe that when enough people get involved, they have a lot of influence over how their community addresses problems, N=932

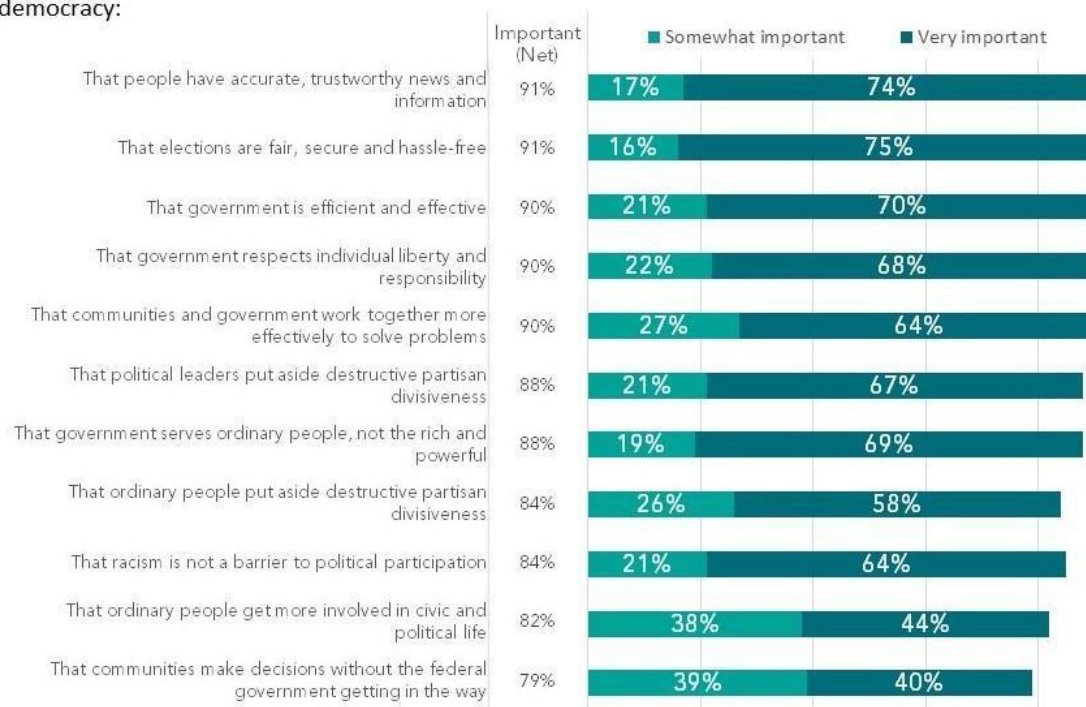
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**FINDING 3:** TO BUILD A HEALTHIER DEMOCRACY, AMERICANS ACROSS PARTISAN LINES EMPHASIZE RESPONSIVE GOVERNMENT, FAIR AND SECURE ELECTIONS, UNIFYING LEADERSHIP, AND ACCURATE NEWS AND INFORMATION. AMERICANS ARE UNITED IN BELIEVING THAT ELECTIONS CAN BE BOTH SECURE AND ACCESSIBLE AND THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD MAKE SURE VOTING IS SIMPLE, CONVENIENT AND HASSLE-FREE FOR EVERY PERSON IN EVERY STATE.

What do Americans think our nation needs to do to achieve a healthier democracy? The survey asked Americans about eleven possibilities and found a good deal of cross-partisan common ground on many of them, including on the importance of trustworthy news and information and of fair, secure and hassle-free elections; see Figure 6.

### What do Americans think is important to creating a healthier democracy?

**Figure 6.** Percent of Americans who say each of the following is important to create a healthier democracy:



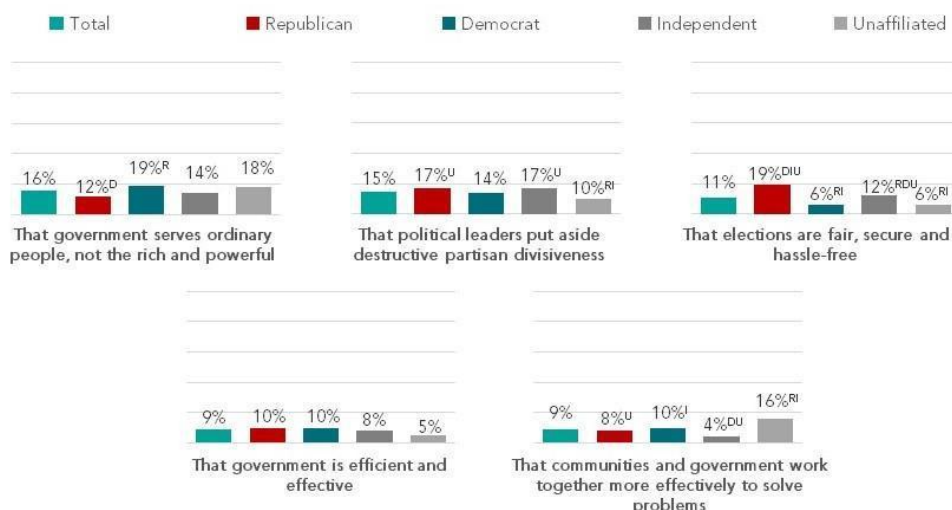
Base: All respondents, N=1,260

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When we asked our sample to select their single most important priority among all eleven of the options, two rise above the rest for people of all political affiliations: That government should put the needs of ordinary people above those of the rich and powerful; and that leaders should put aside destructive partisan divisiveness; see Figure 7.<sup>4</sup>

### Americans' top priorities for creating a healthier democracy

**Figure 7.** Percent of Americans who say each of the following is the single most important to create a healthier democracy, by political affiliation:



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,260; Republican, N=306; Democrat, N=405; Independent, N=307; Politically Unaffiliated, N=242

Estimates indicated with a <sup>R</sup> are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>D</sup> are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>I</sup> are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>U</sup> are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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REPUBLICANS ARE ESPECIALLY FOCUSED ON ELECTIONS AS THEIR TOP PRIORITY. BUT MAJORITIES ACROSS PARTISAN LINES BELIEVE THAT ELECTIONS CAN BE BOTH SECURE AND ACCESSIBLE, AND THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD ENSURE THAT VOTING IS SIMPLE, CONVENIENT AND HASSLE-FREE FOR EVERY PERSON IN EVERY STATE.

Asking for people's single highest priority revealed some partisan differences that were not apparent when they were asked to simply rate the importance of each item. For example, while large majorities of Americans across political affiliations rate "fair, secure, hassle-free elections" as very important to achieving a healthier democracy, Republicans are significantly more likely than others to name it as their very top priority. By contrast, it is tied for sixth place among

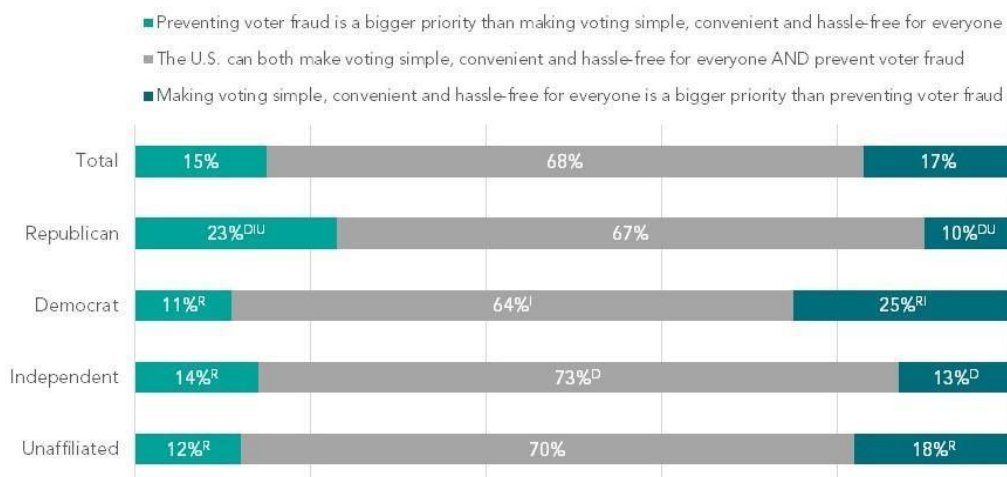
<sup>4</sup> Because people chose their single top priority from among eleven possibilities, the percentages of people who prioritized any one individual item are relatively low. It is the differences between high picks and low picks that is of interest here more than absolute percentages.

Democrats; see Figure 7 above. It is possible that Republicans particularly prioritize elections in response to the ongoing and baseless assertions of widespread fraud in the 2020 election.

Be that as it may, Americans of all partisan persuasions are united in rejecting the zero-sum framing that political elites are conveying about elections as if convenient voter access and secure, accurate elections were mutually exclusive; see Figure 8.

### Most Americans believe we can make voting simple, convenient and hassle-free while also preventing fraud.

**Figure 8.** Percent of Americans who say the following comes closest to their view, by political affiliation:



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,260; Republican, N=306; Democrat, N=405; Independent, N=307; Politically Unaffiliated, N=242  
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding  
 Estimates indicated with a <sup>R</sup> are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>D</sup> are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>I</sup> are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>U</sup> are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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Some modest partisan differences emerge in response to this question. More Republicans than Democrats say that preventing voter fraud is a bigger priority than making voting simple, convenient and hassle-free for everyone, while more Democrats than Republicans say the reverse. But overshadowing these differences are the two-thirds or more of Americans across partisan affiliations who agree that the U.S. can and should make sure elections are both accessible and secure.

Common ground among the American public on elections does not stop there. While political elites are polarized about whether the federal government should ensure fair access to voting in every state, we find a very different story among the general population. Super-majorities of Democrats (92 percent), Republicans (83 percent), Independents (86 percent) and politically unaffiliated people (81 percent) agree that the federal government should make sure that voting is simple, convenient and hassle-free for everyone in every state; see Figure 9.



Americans across the political spectrum agree that the federal government should make sure that voting is simple, convenient and hassle-free for everyone in every state.

**Figure 9.** Percent of Americans who agree that the federal government should make sure that voting is simple, convenient and hassle-free for everyone in every state, by political affiliation:



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,260; Republican, N=306; Democrat, N=405; Independent, N=307; Politically Unaffiliated, N=242. Estimates indicated with a <sup>a</sup> are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>D</sup> are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>I</sup> are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>U</sup> are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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The cross-partisan consensus on the role of the federal government stands in contrast to partisan disagreement on corporations' roles in advocating for voting rights for people of color. Far more Democrats (84 percent) than Republicans (46 percent) believe that corporations should use their influence to discourage states from making it harder for people of color to vote, with Independents and politically unaffiliated people falling in between; see Figure 10.

More Black Americans (84 percent) than white (61 percent) or Latino (68 percent) Americans believe that corporations should use their influence to discourage states from making it harder for people of color to vote. But these differences by race are significantly less pronounced than the differences by partisanship. This is consistent with other findings from this survey, in which people disagree more across partisan lines than across racial identities on many questions about racism and democracy. Republicans respond to these questions quite differently than Democrats do, with Independents and the politically unaffiliated tending to be much closer to Democrats than Republicans, a pattern that is discussed at length in Finding 5 of this report.

## Far more Democrats than Republicans think corporations should use their influence to discourage states from making it harder for people of color to vote.

**Figure 10.** Percent of Americans who agree that corporations should use their influence to discourage states from making it harder for people of color to vote, by political affiliation:



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,260; Republican, N=306; Democrat, N=405; Independent, N=307; Politically Unaffiliated, N=242. Estimates indicated with a <sup>R</sup> are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>D</sup> are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>I</sup> are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>U</sup> are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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## POLITICALLY UNAFFILIATED AMERICANS ARE ESPECIALLY LIKELY TO PRIORITIZE COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNMENT WORKING TOGETHER AND, MORE GENERALLY, TO BELIEVE THAT SYSTEMIC CHANGE IS NEEDED TO FIX OUR DEMOCRACY.

Among politically unaffiliated people, the second most-commonly selected priority for creating a healthier democracy is that communities and government work together more effectively to solve problems -- second only to the idea that government should serve ordinary people rather than the rich and powerful; see Figure 7 above. By contrast, community-government collaboration is tied for fourth highest for Democrats, tied for sixth highest for Republicans and tied for second to last for Independents. Politically unaffiliated Americans are also more likely to say that the design and structure of our government need significant change no matter who is elected; see Figure 2.



**FINDING 4: MANY AMERICANS WANT WAYS TO PARTICIPATE IN DEMOCRACY BEYOND VOTING. THEY WANT THEIR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEM TO DELIBERATE, MAKE DECISIONS, AND COLLABORATE WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS. AMERICANS SAY THEY WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO GET INVOLVED IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS IF THEY COULD EXERCISE REAL POWER, BUILD COMMON GROUND, AND IF DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES WERE USER-FRIENDLY. MORE PEOPLE WANT GOVERNMENT TO WORK WITH COMMUNITIES RATHER THAN WANT IT TO GET OUT OF THE WAY.**

When it comes to problems facing communities or the nation, 59 percent of Americans say that “it’s mostly our responsibility as Americans to help find solutions—it’s not enough to just vote and pay taxes.” The remaining 41 percent say that “it’s mostly the government’s responsibility to find solutions -- that’s why we vote and pay taxes”; see Figure 11.

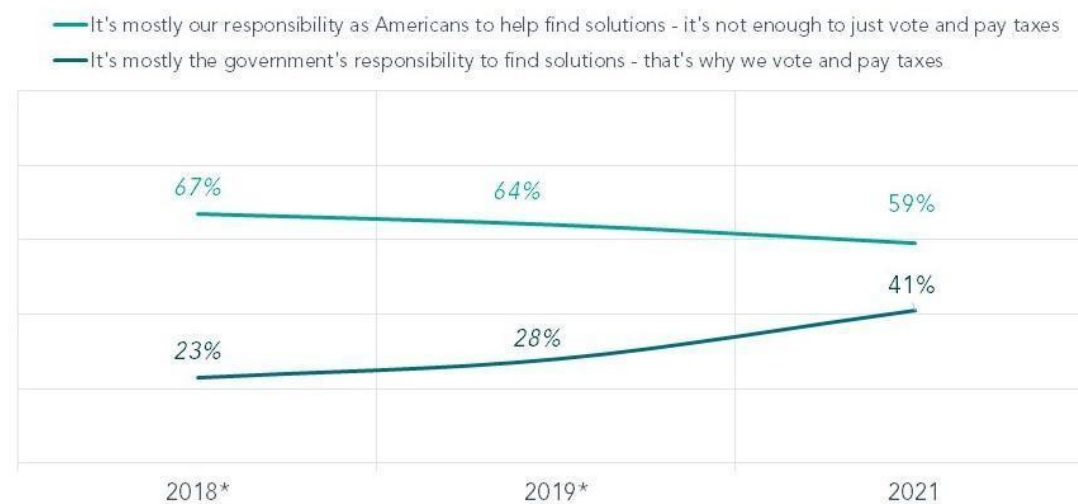
Views on this question differ only slightly by political affiliation or by race. Compared to Public Agenda's two previous Yankelovich Democracy Monitor surveys, this year's results show an uptick in the percentage of Americans saying it is mostly the government's responsibility to find solutions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Data collected in 2018 was published in 2019. Data collected in 2019 was published in 2020. “Strengthening Democracy,” 2019, <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/strengthening-democracy-what-do-americans-think/>; “Greater Voice, Greater Impact,” 2020, <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/greater-voice-greater-impact/>

## Most Americans continue to feel responsible for finding solutions to problems in their communities and the nation.

**Figure 11.** Percent who say each of the following when it comes to problems facing communities or the nation, 2018, 2019 and 2021 surveys:



**Base:** 2021 Online: All respondents, N=1,260

**Base:** 2019 Telephone/Online: All respondents, N=1,000

**Base:** 2018 Telephone/Online: All respondents, N=1,000

\*2018: 9% of respondents responded that they don't know or refused; 2019: 7% of respondents responded that they don't know or refused

*While significant changes in data points from the telephone surveys to the online survey can largely be attributed to the changing environment, switching from a phone to online approach may have also generated a mode effect.*

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It is possible that people who say it's mostly the government's responsibility to find solutions may feel that only government entities can operate at the scale of the problems that communities and the nation face. They may also be more comfortable with a government playing a more active role in problem-solving.

However, the worse people think our democracy is doing, the more they tend to think that voting and paying taxes is not enough, it's up to us as Americans to help find solutions. For example, 67 percent of Americans who say that our democracy is in crisis also say it's mostly our responsibility as Americans to help find solutions, compared to 57 percent of those who say our democracy is facing serious challenges, and 48 percent of those who say it is doing well.

As explained below, people who think our democracy is doing worse are also more likely to say that their local government should adopt some -- but not all -- of the systems for democratic decision-making that were asked about in the survey.

## MORE AMERICANS WANT GOVERNMENT TO WORK WITH COMMUNITIES RATHER THAN WANT IT TO GET OUT OF THE WAY.

The proper size and role of government is often a point of contention between Democratic and Republican politicians. But among the general public, most Americans (64 percent) say that in order to create a healthier democracy, it is very important that communities and government work together more effectively to solve problems -- with statistically identical shares of Democrats (64 percent), Republicans (66 percent), Independents (62 percent) and the politically unaffiliated (62 percent) saying it is very important. By contrast, only 40 percent of Americans say it is very important that communities make decisions without the federal government getting in the way, including half of Republicans (50 percent) and just over one-third each of Democrats (35 percent), Independents (38 percent) and the politically unaffiliated (37 percent).

## AMERICANS WANT THEIR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEM TO DELIBERATE, MAKE DECISIONS, AND COLLABORATE WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS.

Americans say they want their local governments to implement a variety of systems for democratic decision-making -- including participatory budgeting, citizen juries, community councils, ballot initiatives and online ideation -- that would foster deliberation, give people more decision-making power, and allow them to collaborate with elected officials.<sup>6</sup>

For example, two-thirds of Americans say their local government should implement systems for deliberation, described in the survey as "creating well-organized opportunities for people to get together and discuss different ideas for addressing problems. Just over three in five also say their local government should implement community councils, described in the survey as

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<sup>6</sup> The survey asked people about seven systems for making decisions:

Deliberation, described in the survey as "creating well-organized opportunities for people to get together and discuss different ideas for addressing problems."

Community councils, described in the survey as "creating councils of community members and elected officials, who make decisions together about local issues."

Ballot initiatives, described in the survey as "ordinary people vote directly on whether to approve laws or regulations."

Citizen juries, described in the survey as "a small representative group of ordinary people is appointed to study an issue and make recommendations to elected leaders."

Participatory budgeting, described in the survey as "ordinary people develop ideas for spending tax dollars and then vote on which ideas to fund."

Online ideation, described in the survey as "ordinary people go online to share ideas for solving problems, comment on other people's ideas, and prioritize their favorites."

Artificial intelligence, described in the survey as "using computer programs, algorithms and artificial intelligence to make more government decisions."

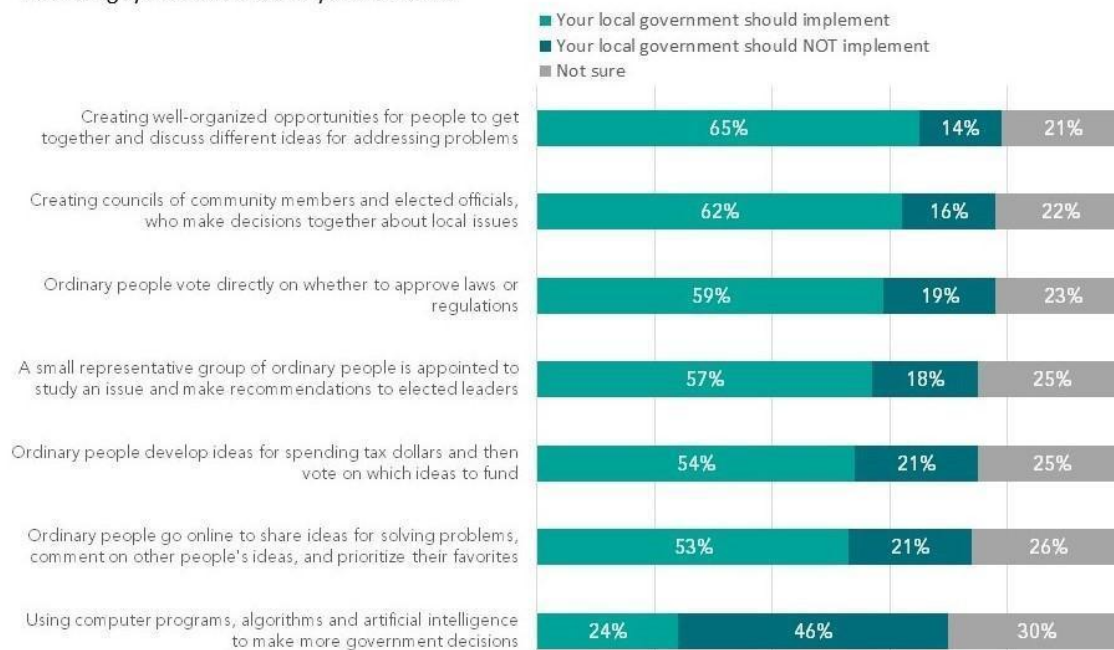
“councils of community members and elected officials who make decisions together about local issues.” Nearly as many think their local government should implement ballot initiatives; see Figure 12.

Democrats and Republicans are all similarly interested in their local governments implementing these systems. Politically unaffiliated people are generally more apprehensive. It is possible that the interest Americans express in these systems could grow as more people experience these and other participatory approaches to democracy between elections.<sup>7</sup>

More people who think our democracy is in crisis or facing serious challenges think their local government should implement systems for deliberation, citizen juries and ballot initiatives than those who think our democracy is doing well.

### Americans want their local governments to create opportunities for them to deliberate, make decisions, and collaborate with elected officials.

**Figure 12.** Percent of Americans who say their local government should or should not implement each of the following systems or that they are not sure:



Base: All respondents, N=1,260

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Compared to Public Agenda's previous Yankelovich Democracy Monitor survey, this survey found growing enthusiasm for online ideation as an approach to democratic decision-making.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. for research on the growth of participatory budgeting and its impacts on spending, see <https://www.publicagenda.org/participatory-budgeting/>

In the Yankelovich Democracy Monitor survey fielded in 2019, 37 percent favored implementing online ideation, while 53 percent favor implementing it in 2021. This may be due to people becoming more comfortable doing things online during the pandemic.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite growing enthusiasm for online ideation, few Americans favor using artificial intelligence to make government decisions. In fact, a 46 percent plurality of Americans are against their local government using computer programs, algorithms and artificial intelligence to make more government decisions; see Figure 12.

**AMERICANS SAY THEY WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO GET INVOLVED IN LOCAL DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING IF THEY COULD WORK WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS, EXERCISE REAL POWER, BUILD COMMON GROUND, AND IF THE PROCESS WAS USER-FRIENDLY.**

The survey asked people what would make them more or less likely to get involved in an issue in their local community that they felt needed to be addressed. The responses show that people want to exercise real decision-making power, build common ground, and want participatory processes to be user-friendly.

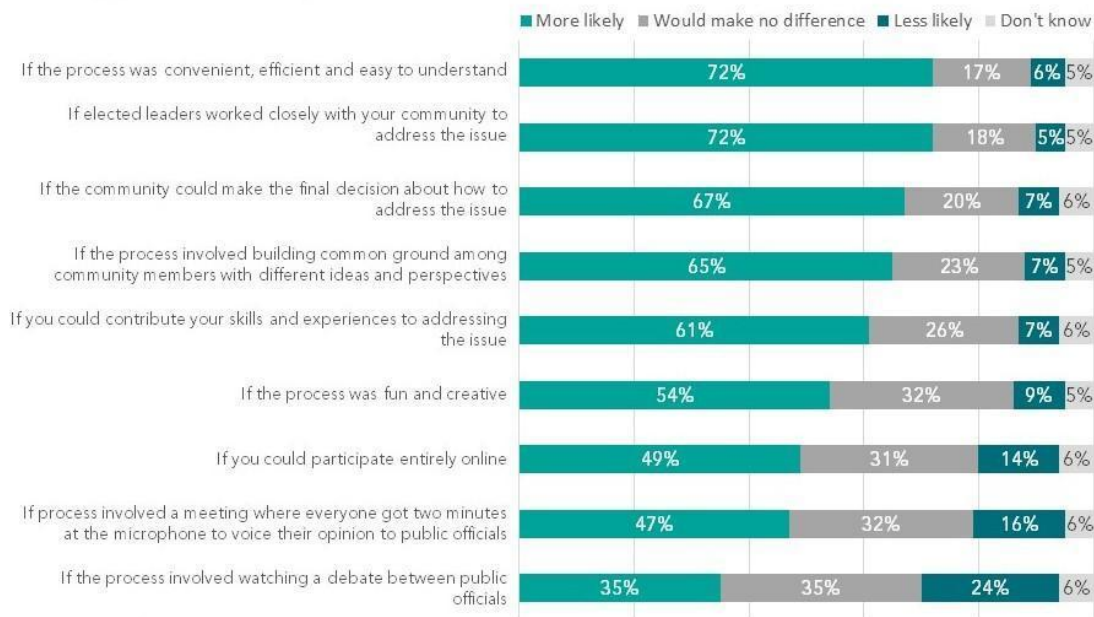
For example, about two-thirds of Americans say they would be more likely to get involved in a local issue if the community could make the final decision about how to address it. Despite their tendency to see elected officials as obstacles, about three-quarters of Americans nonetheless say they would be more likely to get involved in an issue in their community if elected leaders worked with them to address it. This may be because they see working with elected officials as a way to exercise real power; see Figure 13.

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<sup>8</sup> Data collected in 2019 was published in 2020. "Greater Voice, Greater Impact," 2020, <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/greater-voice-greater-impact/>

Americans say they would be more likely to get involved in democratic decision-making if they could work with elected officials, exercise real power, build common ground, and if the process was user-friendly.

**Figure 13.** Percent of Americans who say their local government should or should not implement each of the following systems or that they are not sure:



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,260

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Other factors that Americans say would have an impact on getting them involved in local democratic decision-making include a process that is convenient, efficient and easy to understand; and a process that involves building common ground among community members with different ideas and perspectives. There is little variation across political affiliations in which factors people say would make them more likely to get involved locally.

However, fewer Americans say they would be more likely to get involved if the process involved everyone getting two minutes at the microphone to voice their opinion to public officials or if it involved watching a debate between Democratic and Republican elected officials; see Figure 13. These traditional elements of townhall meetings are less likely to attract many people to participate in local public affairs than more innovative approaches to democratic decision-making.



**FINDING 5: AMERICANS OF DIFFERENT PARTISAN AFFILIATIONS DISAGREE ON WHETHER RACISM IS A BARRIER TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ON WHETHER ADDRESSING RACISM REQUIRES SYSTEMIC CHANGE. REPUBLICANS' VIEWS ON THESE QUESTIONS STAND IN CONTRAST TO THOSE OF DEMOCRATS, INDEPENDENTS AND UNAFFILIATED AMERICANS; DIFFERENCES BY RACIAL IDENTIFICATION ARE MORE MODEST.**

As detailed in previous findings, this survey found substantial cross-partisan common ground on numerous goals and policies for building a healthier democracy. But questions about racism and its impacts emerge as substantial areas of partisan disagreement.

**WHILE MOST PEOPLE SAY THAT OVERCOMING RACISM IS IMPORTANT, REPUBLICANS ARE SUBSTANTIALLY LESS LIKELY TO SAY THAT IT POSES A BARRIER TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION.**

Three-quarters of Americans strongly or somewhat agree that “overcoming racism is now more important than ever.” There are only modest differences of opinion by race on this question, with 84 percent of Black Americans, 73 percent of white Americans, and 73 percent of Latino Americans agreeing with the proposition.

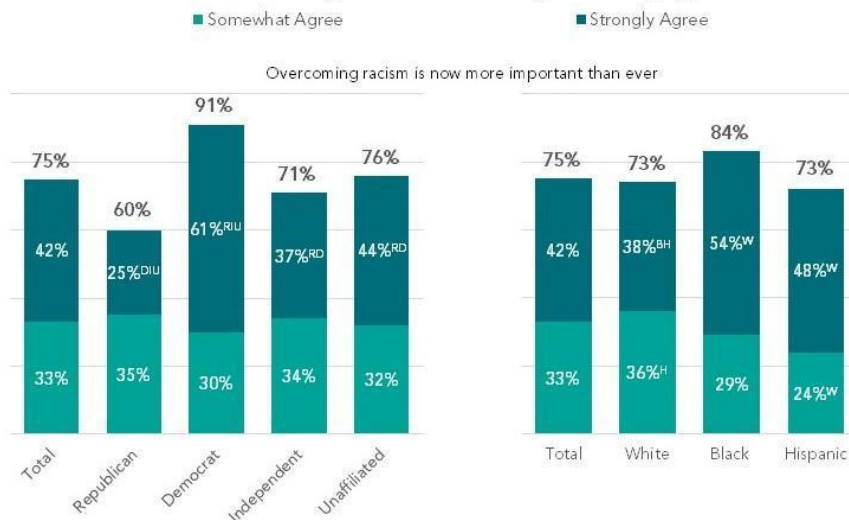
The gaps are larger when the data are broken down by partisanship, although majorities still agree across partisan lines. An overwhelming 91 percent of Democrats say that overcoming racism is now more important than ever, compared to smaller majorities of Republicans (60 percent), Independents (71 percent) and politically unaffiliated people (76 percent); see Figure 14.

Partisan differences of opinion are more stark when it comes to questions about the impact of racism on political participation. While a modest majority of Democrats (58 percent), along with similar percentages of Independents and politically unaffiliated people, say that “racism can make it difficult for some Americans to participate” in civic and political life, only 20 percent of Republicans agree. The remaining 80 percent of Republicans say that, “all Americans have an equal opportunity to participate regardless of race;” see Figure 15.

There are modest differences by racial identification on this question. Fifty-six percent of Black Americans agree with the proposition that racism can make it difficult for some Americans to participate in civic and political life, compared with forty-one percent each of white and Latino Americans.

Three-quarters of Americans say that overcoming racism is now more important than ever, but fewer Republicans say the same.

**Figure 14.** Percent of Americans who agree with the following statement, by political affiliation and by race:



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,260; Republican, N=306; Democrat, N=405; Independent, N=307; Politically Unaffiliated, N=242; White, N=903; Black, N=121; Hispanic, N=151

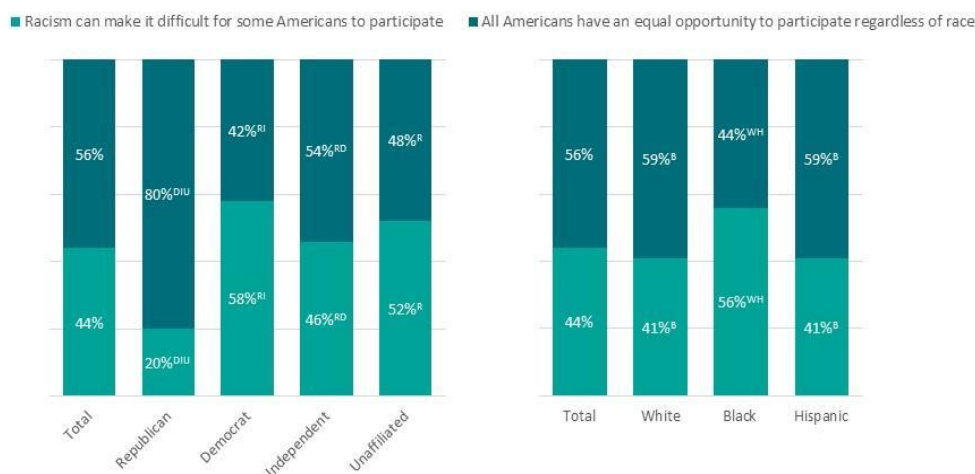
Estimates indicated with a <sup>R</sup> are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>D</sup> are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>I</sup> are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>U</sup> are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>W</sup> are statistically significant from the white estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>B</sup> are statistically significant from the Black estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>H</sup> are statistically significant from the Hispanic estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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## Fewer Republicans than people of other political affiliations think racism is a barrier to political participation.

**Figure 15.** Percent of Americans who say the following statements comes closer to their view about civic and political life in the United States today, by political affiliation and by race:



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,260; Republican, N=306; Democrat, N=405; Independent, N=307; Politically Unaffiliated, N=242; White, N= 903; Black, N=121; Hispanic, N=151

Estimates indicated with a <sup>R</sup> are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>D</sup> are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>I</sup> are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>U</sup> are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>W</sup> are statistically significant from the white estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>B</sup> are statistically significant from the Black estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>H</sup> are statistically significant from the Hispanic estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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## A SUPERMAJORITY OF DEMOCRATS, ALONG WITH SMALLER MAJORITIES OF INDEPENDENTS AND UNAFFILIATED AMERICANS, AGREE THAT ADDRESSING RACISM REQUIRES SYSTEMIC CHANGE. REPUBLICANS ARE SPLIT ON THE QUESTION.

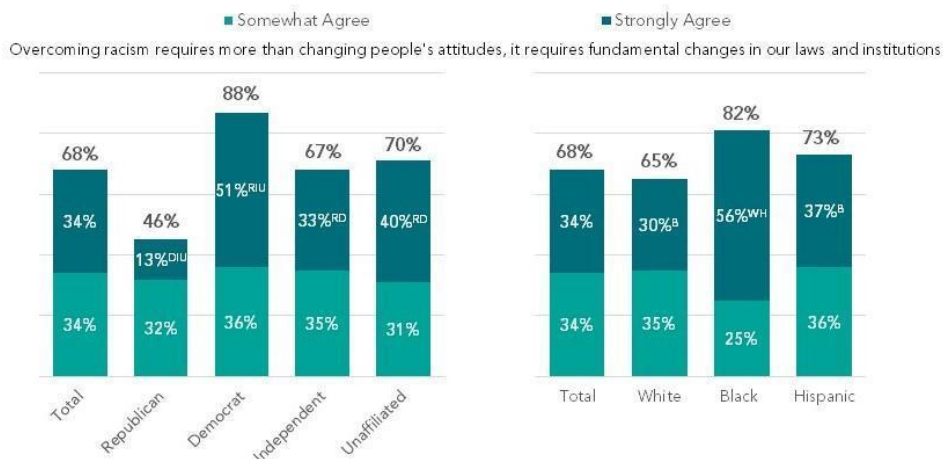
On the question of whether systemic change is needed to address racism, differences by political affiliation are once again more substantial than differences by race. A super-majority of Democrats (88 percent) strongly or somewhat agree with the proposition that “overcoming racism requires more than changing people’s attitudes, it requires fundamental changes in our laws and institutions.” Democrats are joined in this view by strong majorities of Independents (67 percent) and of politically unaffiliated Americans (70 percent). This contrasts with the just under half of Republicans (46 percent) who believe this to be the case. This 42-percentage point difference between Republicans and Democrats on this question is one of the largest partisan gaps in our survey; see Figure 16.

Once again, differences by race on this question are relatively modest, with majorities of Black, white and Latino Americans in agreement. Specifically, 82 percent of Black Americans agree that “overcoming racism requires more than changing people’s attitudes, it requires

fundamental changes to our laws and institutions,” compared with 65 percent of white Americans and 73 percent of Latino Americans; see Figure 16.

Far fewer Republicans than Democrats, Independents or politically unaffiliated people say that addressing racism requires systemic change. Only modestly more Black Americans than white or Latino Americans say that addressing racism requires systemic change.

**Figure 16.** Percent of Americans who agree with the following statement, by political affiliation and by race:



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,260; Republican, N=306; Democrat, N=405; Independent, N=307; Politically Unaffiliated, N=242; White, N=903; Black, N=121; Hispanic, N=151

Estimates indicated with a <sup>a</sup> are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>b</sup> are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>c</sup> are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>d</sup> are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>e</sup> are statistically significant from the white estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>f</sup> are statistically significant from the Black estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>g</sup> are statistically significant from the Hispanic estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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## REPUBLICANS ARE DISTINCT IN THEIR VIEWS ON RACISM, BUT THE PICTURE IS NOT ONE OF MIRROR-IMAGE POLARIZATION.

Republicans' views are distinct on some fundamental questions at the intersection of democracy and racism in America. However, we are generally not seeing mirror-image polarization, in which Democrats are at one extreme and Republicans are at another, with Independents or politically unaffiliated people in the middle.

For example, on the question of whether racism poses an obstacle to political participation, we find 20 percent of Republicans saying that it does. But only a modest 58 percent majority of Democrats view racism as an obstacle. This is also about the same percentage of Black Americans who say that racism is an obstacle. Similarly, on the question of whether systemic change in our institutions and laws is necessary to combat racism, almost nine in ten Democrats (88 percent) call for systemic change. The Republican position is not the obverse, with nine in ten opposing that view. Instead, Republicans are split, with nearly half (46 percent) agreeing

that systemic change is needed. The partisan differences are substantial but are not mirror-image extremes.

### RACE REMAINS A CHALLENGING ISSUE FOR AMERICANS TO DISCUSS.

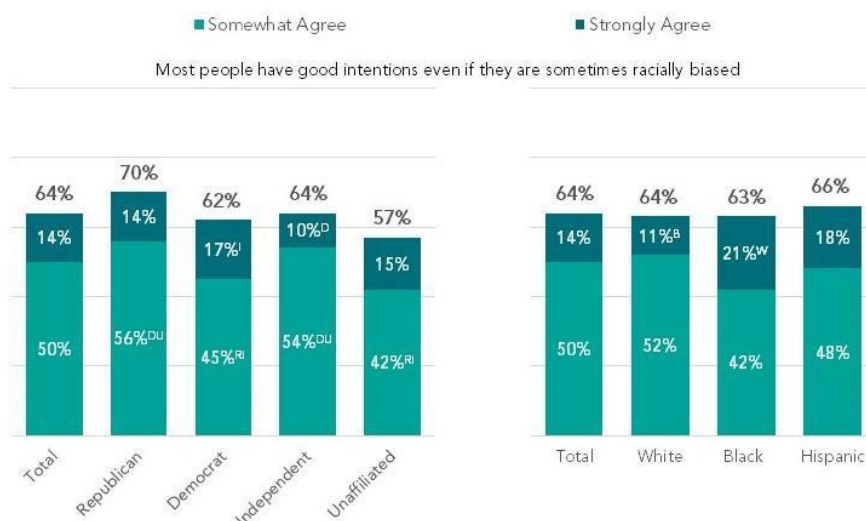
Americans are wary of engaging with the topic of race. Just over half (56 percent) say that “sometimes it is best to ignore race altogether because it is too divisive.” While four in ten Democrats (44 percent) say this, a significantly greater share of Republicans (65 percent) feel this way, as do statistically identical shares of Black (52 percent), white (55 percent) and Latino Americans (57 percent).

Moreover, 61 percent of Americans feel that “accusing people of racism is often a way to silence debate.” While more white Americans (63 percent) and Latino Americans (67 percent) say this, over four in ten Black Americans (44 percent) agree. More Republicans (73 percent) than Democrats (51 percent) say that “accusing people of racism is often a way to silence debate,” with Independents (61 percent) and the unaffiliated (60 percent) falling in between.

More hopeful for the prospects of productively addressing racism is that just under two-thirds of Americans believe that “most people have good intentions even if they are sometimes racially biased.” This includes statistically identical shares of Black, white and Latino Americans, as well as statistically identical shares of Republicans, Democrats and Independents; see Figure 17.

A majority of Americans say that most people have good intentions even if they are sometimes racially biased.

**Figure 17.** Percent of Americans who agree with the following statement, by political affiliation and by race:



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,260; Republican, N=306; Democrat, N=405; Independent, N=307; Politically Unaffiliated, N=242; White, N=903; Black, N=121; Hispanic, N=151

Estimates indicated with a <sup>R</sup> are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>D</sup> are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>I</sup> are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>U</sup> are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>W</sup> are statistically significant from the white estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>B</sup> are statistically significant from the Black estimate. Estimates indicated with a <sup>H</sup> are statistically significant from the Hispanic estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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## REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS: TOWARD WISER PUBLIC JUDGMENT ON RENEWING DEMOCRACY

Since Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by Cyrus Vance and Dan Yankelovich, it has been informed by Yankelovich's lifetime of research on how the American public can, and sometimes does, come to sound judgments on difficult public issues. By sound judgment, he meant that most people have decided an issue is of significant importance, have wrestled with conflicting values in relation to it, and have considered the consequences of different choices related to it, leading to a new working consensus on how to address it. As an example, Yankelovich pointed to the evolution of public opinion about women in the workplace that developed over decades in mid-twentieth century America. In recent years, we've seen shifts in public judgment on such issues as same-sex marriage and marijuana legalization, and what could prove to be new public judgments on incarceration reform for nonviolent offenses and a more generous minimum wage.

The Hidden Common Ground initiative elevates areas where the public has developed -- or appears to be moving toward -- shared judgement on critical issues facing their communities and the nation. The purpose is to counter the self-defeating narrative of hopeless division that has come to dominate so much news coverage in recent years, to help Americans recognize common interests and work together to bring the nation forward, and to clarify areas of authentic disagreement in ways that help the country grapple with them more productively.

In this current study on public attitudes toward renewing democracy, we find powerful majorities across partisan affiliation and racial identity calling for responsive public institutions that put the interests of regular people above those of wealthy and powerful special interests; less divisive, more unifying leadership; accurate news and information; and fair, secure and accessible elections.

In addition to such general priorities and principles, we also find a great deal of agreement on a number of specific policies and practices. On elections, for example, most of the American public, across partisan and racial lines, rejects the proposition that we have to sacrifice voter access in order to have voter security or vice versa -- people believe we can and should have both. Moreover, they believe that the federal government should ensure that this is the case in every state.

We also find growing numbers gravitating toward more participatory forms of democratic decision-making between elections, including participatory budgeting, well-organized opportunities for public deliberation, and more collaborative relationships between communities and public officials. People's interest in these forms of decision-making make

sense in light of the emphasis people place on achieving a democracy that is responsive to the needs of ordinary people.

The most pronounced partisan differences among the American public uncovered in this research lie at the intersection of racism and democracy. While majorities of Democrats, Independents and unaffiliated Americans agree that racism is currently an obstacle to political participation for people of color, the vast majority of Republicans (80 percent) disagree. And whereas nearly nine in ten Democrats (88 percent), along with strong majorities of Independents and politically unaffiliated people, agree that “overcoming racism requires more than changing attitudes, it requires fundamental changes in our laws and institutions,” less than half of Republicans (46 percent) believe this to be the case.<sup>9</sup>

The struggle to reconcile the ideal of a just and effective democracy with a history of racism, exploitation and exclusion has bedeviled America’s democratic experiment from its earliest days. From Yankelovich’s “coming to public judgment” perspective, it appears that much of the country believes that racism continues to be an obstacle to full participation in public life and are concluding that it will require systemic change to overcome it. While Republicans are in a minority position on these questions so far as public opinion is concerned, they hold a great deal of political power. How we navigate and work through these tensions in the coming months and years will surely play a large role in shaping our democratic future.

Looking at public opinion on these questions makes the possibility for productive public conversation that helps the country make progress on addressing racism in democracy at least appear possible. While Republicans’ views are different from those of other partisan affiliations, we do not see the kind of hardened, mirror-image positioning that one would expect from so much of our news coverage. That is to say, there is no powerhouse majority of Republicans strongly opposing the consensus we find among Democrats, Independents and unaffiliated Americans -- and across racial lines as well -- that overcoming racism’s pernicious effects requires systemic change in our institutions and laws. Rather, we find Republicans split on the question, with 46 percent agreeing and 54 percent disagreeing that systemic change is needed. Moreover, about two-thirds of Americans, across both racial and partisan lines, are willing to give people the benefit of the doubt in day to day life, saying most people have good intentions even if they are sometimes racially biased.

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<sup>9</sup> Public Agenda’s previous Hidden Common Ground research and Yankelovich Democracy Monitor surveys have reached similar findings about partisan differences in views on systemic racism. See <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/overcoming-divisiveness-charting-a-path-forward/>; <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/americas-hidden-common-ground-on-economic-opportunity-and-inequality/>; <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/greater-voice-greater-impact/>

Unfortunately, the state of public opinion is not the only factor here, especially for an issue that Americans find difficult to discuss in the best of circumstances. America's capacity for productive conversation on complex, emotionally charged issues has degraded in recent years.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the current research found strong cross-partisan support for "creating well-organized opportunities for people to get together and discuss different ideas for addressing problems." Can we, as a people, create those opportunities despite the challenges of our divisive times?

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<sup>10</sup> Will Friedman, 2019 "The Problem Of Public Judgment in a Digital and Divisive Age," Public Agenda [https://www.publicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PA-Paper-DigitalAge-v5\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.publicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PA-Paper-DigitalAge-v5_FINAL.pdf)

AMERICA'S HIDDEN COMMON GROUND ON RENEWING DEMOCRACY

A Hidden Common Ground® Report from Public Agenda

By David Schleifer, Will Friedman and Erin McNally

2021

Available online at: <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/renewing-democracy/>

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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](http://PublicAgenda.org), on Facebook at [facebook.com/PublicAgenda](https://facebook.com/PublicAgenda) and on Twitter at @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.

#### ABOUT AMERICA TALKS

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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