RENEWING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY:
NAVIGATING A CHANGING NATION

A Report of Beyond Conflict's America's Divided Mind Initiative

BEYOND CONFLICT

About Beyond Conflict

Beyond Conflict is a global nonprofit organization that combines three decades of experience in conflict resolution with brain and behavioral science to strengthen peacebuilding processes around the world. Over the past several years we have been deploying research to address some of the most intractable challenges—from deepening identity-based polarization to preempting racism. In partnership with leading universities and using a science-based approach, we seek to better understand the social, psychological, and political factors that shape human behavior, consciously and unconsciously. In partnership with affected communities, we then develop evidence-based tools and resources that are measurable and deployable to address these challenges.

About the America's Divided Mind Initiative

The *America's Divided Mind* initiative seeks to understand the causes of social division and provide insights that will strengthen social cohesion and strengthen American democracy. Following release of the first America's Divided Mind report, Understanding the Psychology of What Drives Us Apart, Beyond Conflict expanded its focus on identity-based polarization into a multi-pronged initiative to explore the range of psychological drivers of social division that threaten American democracy. This initiative includes support for a robust program of applied social scientific research designed to inform practical approaches to cultivating an enabling environment for transformational social change and democratic renewal in the US.

In 2021, Beyond Conflict convened an academic US Policy Advisory Group, co-chaired by nationally renowned scholar and researcher, Dr. Linda R. Tropp, and composed of eminent social psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists. The following prominent scholars comprise the membership of the US Policy Advisory Group: Dr. Larry Bobo, Dr. Maureen Craig, Dr. Ashley Jardina, Dr. Eric Knowles, Dr. Lilliana Mason, Dr. Jonathan Metzl, Dr. Diana Mutz, Dr. Sam Perry, Dr. Jennifer Richeson, and Dr. Clara Wilkins. The US Policy Advisory Group is Co-Chaired by Tim Phillips and Dr. Linda Tropp:

Tim Phillips
CEO & Founder, Beyond Conflict

Tim Phillips is a pioneer in the field of conflict resolution and reconciliation and is globally recognized for his contributions to peace and reconciliation in several countries including Northern Ireland, South Africa and El Salvador. Phillips' work is credited with catalyzing the field of transitional justice in the early 1990's and helped facilitate the conversations that led to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. More recently, under his leadership, Beyond Conflict has led efforts to bring insights and research from brain and behavioral science to issues of social conflict and social change. Phillips has taught at several universities, advised the US State Department and the United Nations, and received an honorary doctorate from Suffolk University in 2018.

Dr. Linda R. Tropp
Professor of Social Psychology, UMass Amherst

Tropp studies how members of different social groups experience contact with each other, and how group differences in status affect cross-group relations. For more than two decades, she has sought to promote the dual goals of fostering positive relations between groups while achieving ever-greater social equality and justice. Tropp has worked with national organizations to promote racial integration and equity, and with nongovernmental organizations to evaluate programs that bridge group differences in divided societies. She is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and has received distinguished research and teaching awards from several other professional societies. Dr. Tropp is coauthor of *When Groups Meet: The Dynamics of Intergroup Contact* (2011) and editor of books including the *Oxford Handbook of Intergroup Conflict* (2012) and *Making Research Matter* (2018).

Acknowledgements

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Table of Contents

Letter from the CEO

Dear Reader,

As the United States and the global community of democracies confront profound challenges from authoritarian governments abroad and growing populism at home, it's important to remind ourselves that democracy is strengthened and renewed when citizens come together to solve the most pressing challenges facing them. History shows us that the most resilient democracies are those that recognize that cooperation and dialogue—among people from different backgrounds, representing different points of view—are the most effective approaches to solve common problems and build the foundations of trust and understanding that are essential for democracy to succeed and be sustained.

As we face these crises and more, it's important to remind ourselves that **the American people have come together many times—often in the midst of deep division—to address shared and urgent challenges**. When the US could no longer ignore the threat of fascism in Europe and Asia in the twentieth century, Americans across divides of race, religion, ethnicity, class, and gender, served at home and abroad to protect the nation and defend the values of democracy and freedom. When natural disasters ravage communities across the nation, volunteers and officials from local, state, and federal government join forces with people from every walk of life to respond, recover, and seek to rebuild what was lost.

These examples of shared effort and common cause are not isolated or rare moments in American history. They reflect a long tradition of Americans coming together and recognizing that there is strength in unity and power in the recognition of mutual interest and shared purpose. This is one of our finest legacies as a people. Maintaining this tradition, nurturing it, and expanding it, is our collective responsibility as Americans.

Our success in this common effort is not inevitable. **Americans increasingly fear that we are growing further apart from each other and that we are losing the capacity to find common ground and solve our shared problems.** We see ourselves divided into competing camps, with Americans growing more segregated by race, religion, income, education, and political party, in almost every dimension of our lives. We align ourselves under rigid partisan identities, tune in to different media sources, and socialize with like-minded friends and neighbors, and believe we have little in common with those we may read or hear about, but with whom we have little interaction on a regular basis.

The first step to overcoming our divisions is to understand them. And while our current divides may seem immense, it turns out that we actually have much more in common than we realize.

We tend to greatly overestimate how divided we are as Americans on major issues and attitudes about each other. We think the other side of the political divide dislikes us and

disagrees with us much more than they actually do. Across political parties, most Americans desire equity and fairness, and strongly support and value democratic norms. Even more telling, we share hopes for a better future for our families and we share real anxieties about the state of our changing nation and our place within it.

Yet, while we would like to believe that our shared hopes and fears would lead us to a shared purpose—our concerns about the state of the nation and how our minds work can get in the way. The human brain evolved to protect us against threats, both real and imagined, and we find protection and meaning in groups, often leading us to perceive and act in ways that may, at times, actually undermine us rather than serve our best interests. When our brains perceive threats, the fear that is elicited deepens our group bonds, drives us further into an us-versus-them mindset, and erodes our capacity to solve problems that can be addressed only through cooperation. And while our capacity to perceive threats has served humankind for generations, the fear that is generated can be exploited, manufactured, and weaponized in ways that tear our country apart and weaken the foundations of democracy when democracies are under threat around the world.

As Americans seek to renew their democracy and make it more reflective of the nation we live in, we need to better understand how our brain shapes how we think and act as humans. Much of *how we think* is below the level of conscious awareness and we do ourselves a great injustice when we ignore what science tells us about what it is to be human. Everything we experience, every emotion we feel, every thought we have, is processed in the brain in ways that can help us build a more resilient democracy—or fall under the grip of fear and uncertainty that only serves to drive us further apart.

The United States is changing at the same time that democracy is under threat by autocracy and the politics of fear. Beyond Conflict has spent the past few years seeking to understand how our psychology is impacted by deepening polarization and how we can be reunited as Americans. We have the capacity as a nation to come together, to find common cause, and renew democracy for generations to come.

By having a better understanding of how we think as humans, we will be better equipped to recognize that fear and uncertainty are natural human emotions that are no more powerful than feelings of hope, which can be harnessed and deployed to help us shape a vision for a shared and more inclusive nation.

Respectfully,

Tim Phillips
Founder & CEO

Executive Summary

Hyperpartisanship—and the social divisions that drive it—are undermining Americans' ability to come together across lines of differences to devise solutions to common problems. From a stalemated Congress, to local school boards embroiled in conflict, to families and friends torn apart, these dynamics touch every part of our lives and threaten the very core of our democracy.

Threats to the health and function of democracy in the United States (US) have individual, collective, and systemic causes. Yet, organized responses tend to be concentrated at the individual and institutional levels. What is often missing from this analysis is critical attention to motivations and drivers borne of social identity. Launched in 2018, Beyond Conflict's *America's Divided Mind* initiative, seeks to address this gap by expanding understanding of the psychological drivers of social division in the US and identifying science-informed approaches for intervention.

Renewing American Democracy: Navigating A Changing Nation builds on Beyond Conflict's earlier research on partisan divides and its *Understanding the Psychology that Drives us Apart* report, by expanding the focus beyond polarization to explore a broader range of psychological processes that drive social division and threaten American democracy. To inform this current study, Beyond Conflict convened an academic US Policy Advisory Group, co-chaired by nationally renowned scholar and researcher, Dr. Linda R. Tropp, and composed of eminent social psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists, to develop an interdisciplinary diagnosis of the factors driving deepening social division. To translate the scientific diagnoses identified into viable recommendations for policy and practice, Beyond Conflict convened and consulted with thought leaders from politics, public policy, and the media whose work contends with social divisions and democratic practices to advance a more inclusive and cohesive nation.

Overview

The US is rapidly changing in a way that heightens uncertainty, triggers perceptions of threat, and increases the impulse to protect what feels safe and familiar.[3] The nation's racial, ethnic, and religious landscape is evolving such that majority populations, which are White and Christian, are projected to have decreased demographic representation and socio-cultural influence[5] in the decades to come. Simultaneously, mobilization of the largest civil rights movement in our nation's history[6] is inviting a national reckoning on race, forcing us to confront the consequences of centuries of structural inequality,

segregation, and marginalization. Levels of economic inequality are at an unprecedented high, trending in tandem with national-level polarization.[7] At the same time, COVID-19 has disrupted any sense of normalcy, highlighting our interdependence while providing fodder for our divisions.

For majority groups, these changes could be perceived as identity threats––particularly as fear, conscious or subconscious, over losing their relative power and status. Increases in perceptions of identity threat among majority group members, can lead to greater support for populism[8] and authoritarian tactics,[9] making it more difficult to see ourselves as a unified American people and work cooperatively together to solve the pressing challenges of our time.

Investigating the psychology behind social divisions in the US reveals how identity threat, competitive victimhood, and feelings of exclusion combine to interfere with healthy democratic practice. The report begins with an overview of the psychology behind group identity and its relationship to democratic behavior. Three themes undergird the specific identity-related drivers of division suggested as focus areas for intervention:

- **Threat.** Analogous to a person's desire to feel a sense of physical safety, threats to the status or wellbeing of the social groups to which we belong can elicit defensive and self-protective responses. When individuals belong to powerful groups, they can view the influence of lower status groups as threats to their group's standing, while individuals belonging to less powerful groups can be motivated to challenge the status quo to improve their group's position.

- **Competition.** Identity threats can be inflamed by competitive victimhood––the tendency for adversarial groups to claim that their group has suffered more than the other. In this way, competitive victimhood might further underpin the zero-sum perceptions that there will be "winners" and "losers," and that one group's needs can only be met when the other side compromises or accepts defeat.

- **Exclusion.** The more we socially exclude members of other groups from dialogue and decision making, the more this undermines the other side's sense of security that allows them to feel open to differing perspectives. Social inclusion, on the other hand, particularly that which extends across groups, has been shown to reduce prejudice and correspond with greater support for equity-driven policies.

When levels of identity threat are high, they can interfere with the effectiveness of intergroup dialogue, bridge-building, and negotiation efforts. When we reduce identity threat by increasing feelings of safety and security, people can feel motivated to connect with others different from themselves and explore worldviews beyond their own.[10]

Paths for Intervention

Defining remedies for how to contend with the psychology behind America's social divides is not a clear cut exercise. There is no single response that can address all causes at once. The specific drivers of division discussed in this report were identified by academic Advisory Group members and are supported by the available social science evidence. Importantly, this analysis is not meant to supplant the critical work that identifies and remedies structural drivers of division and democratic decline. Rather, this analysis is meant to complement these efforts and enhance their chances of success.

We offer interrelated and interdependent intervention paths designed around four primary identity-related drivers of social division in the US: (1) **Factionalism and Partisan Sorting**; (2) **Residential Segregation and Declining Social Trust**; (3) **Information Echo Chambers**; and (4) **Divergent Racial Attitudes and Support for Racial Equity**. The interventions identified are intended to be illustrative rather than comprehensive in the hopes that they stimulate creative innovation and application by the many policymakers, practitioners, advocates, and philanthropists dedicated to reinvigorating American democracy—

Factionalism and Partisan Sorting

Political affiliation has become increasingly linked with other important social identities, such as race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. Republicans increasingly identify as 'White,' Christian,' and 'rural,' and Democrats as 'Black,' 'Latino,' 'Asian,' 'secular,' and 'urban.' This alignment increases political polarization and distrust across party lines.tt

Intervention Pathways:
- Increase openness toward informed and realistic intergroup engagement
- Highlight identities that include and cut across partisan differences, creating space to redefine American identity
- Normalize disagreement as central to democracy
- Increase use of electoral methods that encourage cross-party coalitions

Residential Segregation and Declining Social Trust

Identity-based concerns are compounded by geographic segregation, which allows for the acceptance of negative and exaggerated stereotypes about the other, and misinformation about their intentions or behaviors. When groups are segregated from each other, they are less likely to have first-hand experience or familiarity with other groups that may counter the influences of divisive messaging or status threat.

Intervention Pathways:

- Organize opportunities for cross-party engagement between citizens and elected officials
- Facilitate positive intergroup contact
- Increase funding for place-based civic bridging efforts
- Increase use of electoral methods that encourage cross-party coalitions

Information Echo Chambers

The divisions between partisan and other groups are further fueled by divisive partisan media coverage which exaggerate conflict narratives. The overly simplistic narratives commonplace in media, reinforce the often overstated and zero-sum positions of party leaders, which position that the other pose a dire threat to one's own party and associated social groups. This one-sided coverage can also limit the consideration of opposing viewpoints, contributing to partisans' overly negative perceptions about the other side's intentions.

Intervention Pathways:

- Correct Americans' "meta-misperceptions" or what people think others believe
- Complicate the narrative by challenging sweeping assumptions
- Engage media personalities to model new rules and norms for civil discourse
- Invest in and sustain local news ecosystems

Divergent Racial Attitudes & Support for Racial Equity

Factionalism, bolstered by geographic and virtual segregation, leads partisans to accept widely divergent beliefs about racial progress and the different causes of racial inequality in the US. Americans' racial attitudes spill over to fuel stark differences in positions on seemingly unrelated issues such as healthcare and gun control.

Intervention Pathways:

• Disrupt belief in the racial-progress narrative

• Discuss difference

• Building cross-group, multi-racial coalitions

• Open a more inclusive dialogue on US history

While a broad range of psychological processes drive social division, including perceptions of threat, competition, and exclusion, there are many actions that can be taken to increase positive exposure and engagement across group lines. Now is our time to re-rebuild our democracy, and it will take all of us, working on multi-faceted solutions at the local, state, and national levels. Only then can we re-envision a society where we don't fear and dismiss one another, but a society where we all depend on one another.

Introduction

Hyperpartisanship—and the social divisions that drive it—are undermining Americans' ability to come together across lines of differences to devise solutions to common problems. From a stalemated Congress, to local school boards embroiled in conflict, to families and friends torn apart, these dynamics touch every part of our lives and threaten the very core of our democracy.

Efforts to address these deepening divisions have rightfully focused on critical needs relating to institutional reform, accountability, rule of law, strengthening of civil society, and social cohesion. Too often, however, these efforts ignore the underlying psychological processes at play that serve to inhibit or help advance urgently needed reform. There is also a consistent tendency to misdiagnose drivers and symptoms of democratic decline by overestimating the role of mass polarization[11] and underestimating that of social identity. Technical approaches that rely exclusively on rational choice, without integrating attention to social identity, will not succeed in evolving our deeply held beliefs, restoring trust, and renewing our democracy.

> **Sometimes we lose sight of a simple truth about systems: They are made up of people."**
>
> — *The Relational Work of Systems Change*, in the Stanford Social Innovation Review[135]

Interplay of the Mind & Democracy

The human brain itself is not partisan. The brain's singular, apolitical aim is to keep us alive. It does this in part by scanning and monitoring the physical, social, and informational environment for threats and danger, then generating responses that maximize odds of survival.

In isolation, that is straightforward enough. In a rapidly changing environment, things get tricky.

One survival mechanism is our desire to join groups of others like us (i.e., *ingroups*) to help defend against potential threats. Because membership in a group is protective, we feel threatened when we perceive our groups to be vulnerable relative to those groups to which we do not belong (i.e., *outgroups*). Threats to humans' physical safety lead to relatively common and predictable defensive responses (e.g., increased heart rate, or tensed muscles that prepare us to fight or flee). Threats to our social identities can elicit a comparably predictable series of responses among group members, altering how we see the world, as well as how we act as individuals and as group members.

Belonging to social groups helps us to feel more secure about our place in the world and, importantly, we derive a portion of our self-worth from group membership. We feel good about ourselves when we believe our social groups are powerful and valued by

others, and we feel uncomfortable and less secure when we believe the groups to which we belong lack social status or are viewed negatively by others.

Threats to our social identities can take many forms, such as whether our groups are seen as moral or good, whether our groups are allowed to freely express their culture and abide by their preferred values, or whether our groups are perceived to be at risk of losing power or influence. It is easy to understand why we are attentive to these factors when we consider concrete examples of the consequences of groups being undervalued or our groups lacking power: discrimination in education and housing, segregation, denial of equality under the law. Still, the factors that contribute to our assessment of our group's status and the group's shift to and from power can be more subtle. **Subjective perceptions of a group's power and influence tend to be situation-specific and based on relative comparisons:** a given group member might be confident in their group's power and influence in some situations, while also perceiving that another group may have greater advantage in a different situation.

When individuals are satisfied that the group they belong to is dominant and powerful, they are motivated to maintain the status quo and can view change and influence from outgroup

members as threats to their status.[12] At the same time, individuals from groups with less power are motivated to change the status quo to improve their group's position.

These core psychological dynamics give rise to us-versus-them thinking and serve as the foundation for political factionalism. They can even lead us to sacrifice our absolute well-being and individual goals when doing so provides a competitive advantage to our own social groups.[13] These basic psychological processes play a critical role in driving both affective polarization—the tendency to dislike another political party based not on reasoned ideological disagreement but on party affiliation and sectarianism—and racial prejudice.[14]

As testament to how predictably we rally in defense of our ingroups, threats to social identities are actively weaponized by political actors, media conglomerates, and business leaders in ways that deepen social divisions.

THREAT

DISLIKE & DEHUMANIZATION
Increased likelihood of perceiving dislike by outgroup

PERCEIVED THREAT
Affects the salience of identity & processing of information

IN-GROUP AFFINITY
Oxytocin levels increase; out-group socialization decreases

SOCIAL NORMS
Decreased willingness to challenge ingroup social norms

These practices exacerbate the threat to our democracy: in highly polarized contexts, endorsement of positions or narratives by political parties and leaders can shape public opinion more effectively than substantive information.[15] **In other words, as polarization increases along with divisive messaging, we are quicker to adopt our ingroup's opinions and stances while becoming less likely to engage in dialogue or critical thinking.**

Threat perception is also tied to sacred values, which are typically understood as those values around which individuals are unwilling to negotiate a tradeoff or compromise, whether or not these values pertain to religious beliefs.[16] Higher levels of perceived threat have a positive correlation to sacralization—meaning, the more a value is seen to be under threat by an outgroup, the more sacred it may become, thereby increasing people's resistance to reason-based dialogue and negotiation. People are also more likely to hold a stance as inviolable and sacred if they perceive that holding the position is a contingency of ingroup belonging.

As key actors lean into us-versus-them narratives, they foster fear and promote the idea that the outgroup poses a threat and does not share sacred values. We come to believe that outgroups cannot be trusted to follow established rules, and become more willing to violate those rules ourselves. When the rules in question are democratic norms and principles, violation of those rules can look like anything from limiting freedom of speech to supporting political violence.[17]

Perceptions of heightened threat might lead us to reconsider abiding by democratic ideals that depend on equal rights. In this context, individuals and groups experience a conflict between adhering to democratic norms and risking a potential loss of status and power.

Threat, Competition, & Exclusion in the US

The threat of a changing landscape.

The US is rapidly changing in a way that heightens uncertainty, triggers perceptions of threat, and increases the impulse to protect what feels safe and familiar.[18] For the dominant majority group, these changes could consciously or unconsciously be perceived as identity threats that jeopardize their status.

The nation's racial, ethnic, and religious landscape is evolving such that majority populations, which are White and Christian, are projected to have decreased demographic representation[19] and socio-cultural influence[20] in the decades to come. Simultaneously, mobilization of the largest civil rights movement in our nation's history[21] is inviting a national reckoning on race, forcing us to confront the consequences of centuries of structural inequality, segregation, and marginalization. Levels of economic inequality are at an unprecedented high, trending in tandem with national-level polarization.[22] And COVID-19 has disrupted any sense of normalcy, highlighting our interdependence while providing fodder for our divisions.

The fact that these threat perceptions, based in partisan divisions, are undergirded by racialized attitudes[23] has critical implications for the prospects of creating a more equitable society. The rising perception of various identity threats, especially in combination, can lead threatened majority groups to entertain populist ideologies[24] and authoritarian practices[25] that privilege certain identity groups over others.

Tellingly, although increases in support for authoritarian governance in the US have been attributed to economic anxiety, evidence strongly suggests that identity threat was a primary driver.[26] Changes in economic well-being and general feelings of being "left behind" by a modernizing economy were found to have little impact on voters' candidate preferences. Instead, *"White Americans' declining numerical dominance in the United States together with the rising status of African Americans and American insecurity about whether the United States is still the dominant global economic superpower combined to prompt a classic defensive reaction among members of dominant groups." (Mutz, 2018, p.1)*

This suggests that US voter preferences for candidates who embrace authoritarian tactics are not directly tied to a single issue, such as jobs or the economy. Rather, they are driven by perceived threats to the status quo wherein dominant groups feel at risk of losing relative power and status on a national and global level.

> **Although increases in support for authoritarian governance in the US have been attributed to economic anxiety, evidence strongly suggests that identity threat was a primary driver.**

Vying for acknowledgment.

People have a fundamental psychological need to see themselves as good, moral, and competent. That sense of personal value can find a foundation in the ability to provide economically for oneself and one's family. The erosion of economic opportunities in much of the American heartland threatens people's ability to draw dignity from their employment. When people feel stigmatized for their economic conditions, they will seek alternate sources of self-worth. People become more psychologically reliant on their racial, religious, and political identities, opening the door for those who wish to exploit our basic psychological responses to sow division.

A drive for self-worth rooted in racial, religious, and/or political identities can also contribute to **competitive victimhood**, the tendency for adversarial groups to claim that their group has suffered more than the other.[27]

Social status threat and competitive victimhood, separately or combined, coincide with zero-sum narratives that reinforce the idea that there will be "winners" and "losers".[28] As one example, studies find that White Americans consistently misperceive policies designed to advance diversity and inclusion as harmful to their ingroup.[29] At their most extreme, these thought patterns can lead some Americans to embrace unsubstantiated claims and conspiracy theories that purport to explain perceived struggles, such as *The Great Replacement*.[30] Further fueling a sense of threat, some US politicians intentionally link the perceived weakening of the values, beliefs, and way of life of majority populations with concerns about the demise of the nation as a whole.[31]

Inclusion as a requisite for compromise.

The ability to come together across social divisions and engage in democratic deliberation with other groups is closely connected to our need for belonging and inclusion. **Exclusion**—whether in social or political contexts—undermines the sense of security that allows people to feel open to new information and other perspectives.[32] Social inclusion, particularly that which extends across groups, has been shown to reduce prejudice and correspond with greater support for equity-driven policies. This dynamic is illustrated in a recent study suggesting individuals who support US immigration stances that include a path to citizenship, tend to have strong ties to their community, experience high levels of social support and belonging, and have had direct experience with or exposure to discrimination.[33]

Beyond social inclusion, political inclusion—a person's opportunity to voice their opinion in political discussions with outgroup members—also plays an important role.[34] **In hyperpolarized contexts, politically excluded individuals are more likely to view leadership by the opposing political party as a threat**.

As of 2021, fewer than half of Americans (44%) report having a "great deal or fair amount of confidence in people who hold or are running for public office," nearing record lows.[35] More than half of Republicans and over forty percent of Democrats report viewing members of the other party as "enemies" rather than "political opponents".[36] In sum, us-versus-them narratives that position groups in polar opposition and draw stark lines around who is worthy of engagement undermine political inclusion and exacerbate threat. Feeling excluded from political discourse can lead people not to trust elected officials' or political leaders' promises to listen to their concerns or meaningfully represent their interests.

Paths for Intervention

Investigating the psychology behind social divisions in the US reveals how identity threat, competitive victimhood, and feelings of exclusion combine to interfere with healthy democratic practice.

These identity-related dynamics inform our tolerance for change, as well as how we behave in groups, who we elect to lead us, and how we relate to systems, structures, and institutions. The challenge is evident, and Americans on both sides of the aisle are increasingly concerned by the divisive state of the country's politics.[37] A majority believe that fundamental changes to the US government are needed in order to strengthen our democracy.[38]

Defining remedies for how to contend with the psychology behind America's social divides is not a clear cut exercise. The dynamics described above manifest within and inform specific drivers of democratic decline that have both social and structural elements.

There is no single response that can address all of these causes at once. The themes presented below are both interrelated and interdependent. We offer intervention paths designed around four primary identity-related drivers of social division in the US: (1) **Factionalism and Partisan Sorting;** (2) **Residential Segregation and Declining Social Trust**; (3) **Information Echo Chambers**; and (4) **Divergent Racial Attitudes and Support for Racial Equity**. The diagnoses and intervention options we offer have been ordered for a phased approach that frontloads attempts to reduce threat and fear in a way that enables the success of cross-group contact and exposure-focused interventions.

Attempts to address social status threat through policy and practice should be tailored in accordance with the kinds and levels of threat perceived among the target audiences. For those groups that perceive high levels of threat, we may consider approaches that are more focused on uniting people across divides to build trust rather than focusing on political exchanges. For those groups that perceive lower levels of threat but may still have fears relating to change, we may consider approaches that are more direct in addressing diverging political views when we bring people together across divides.

For each diagnosed driver, there is a brief overview of the scientific literature as well as an explanation of how psychological processes associated with identity contribute to social division. Each section also includes a summary of related interventions—both those that have been tested, as well as those that have been recommended yet remain untested. We acknowledge that the evidence

base on interventions remains thin, with many approaches not yet rigorously validated in real world settings. Nevertheless, we highlight interventions that have promise based on the social science research thus far.

Finally, the interventions suggested are illustrative, not comprehensive, but they are all premised on the human psychological need to feel heard.[39] As borne out in the evidence, social change and intergroup reconciliation can best be achieved when minority and majority group members feel as if their psychological needs are met.[40] For minority group members, chief among these needs is the desire to feel empowered to bring about social change. For majority group members, the central need is to feel reassurance of their moral integrity.

A Note on "We"

In the sections that follow, the suggested intervention areas are categorized under the subheading "What We Can Do". This, of course, raises the question "who is the 'we'?"

In the broadest sense, the "we" intended here refers to anyone invested in the effort to renew and strengthen American democracy. This can include but is not limited to: policymakers and practitioners operating at the local, state, and federal levels; journalists and media outlets; religious, traditional, and indigenous leaders; and, average citizens. While the intervention guidance outlined in this report can be applied across a range of different types of interventions across multiple sectors, the targeted examples primarily reference the work of civil society practitioners operating at the local and state levels.

Factionalism & Partisan Sorting

Conflict between political partisans is not solely based on debates over divergent policy positions. It rests upon debates about the nature and meaning of our national identity.

Political affiliation has become increasingly linked with other important social identities, such as race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. The increasing diversity of the US population correlates with a documented tendency for White Americans to view non-White Americans as a coherent social and political force, with a sub-group viewing "non-Whites" as a group that collectively colludes to challenge the social status of the White majority.[41]

"Partisan sorting"[42] refers specifically to the process through which Americans' political affiliations have become tightly aligned with **other salient group identities**, such that a substantial proportion of Republicans identify as 'White,' Christian,' and 'rural,' and Democrats as 'Black,' 'Latino,' 'Asian,' 'secular,' and 'urban.'[43] This results in fewer cross-cutting identities between political affiliations that might otherwise temper polarization and partisan animosity.

When several group identities overlap and are well-aligned, divisions between groups can all too easily widen and deepen.[44] As the parties' platforms become more aligned with the interests of these distinct groups in their ranks, the result is an acute form of political polarization or "factionalism."[45] The increased segregation of parties along identity fault lines fosters dehumanization of political opponents[46] and foments affective polarization.[47]

REPUBLICAN — WHITE, CHRISTIAN, CONSERVATIVE

DEMOCRAT — MINORITY, SECULAR, PROGRESSIVE
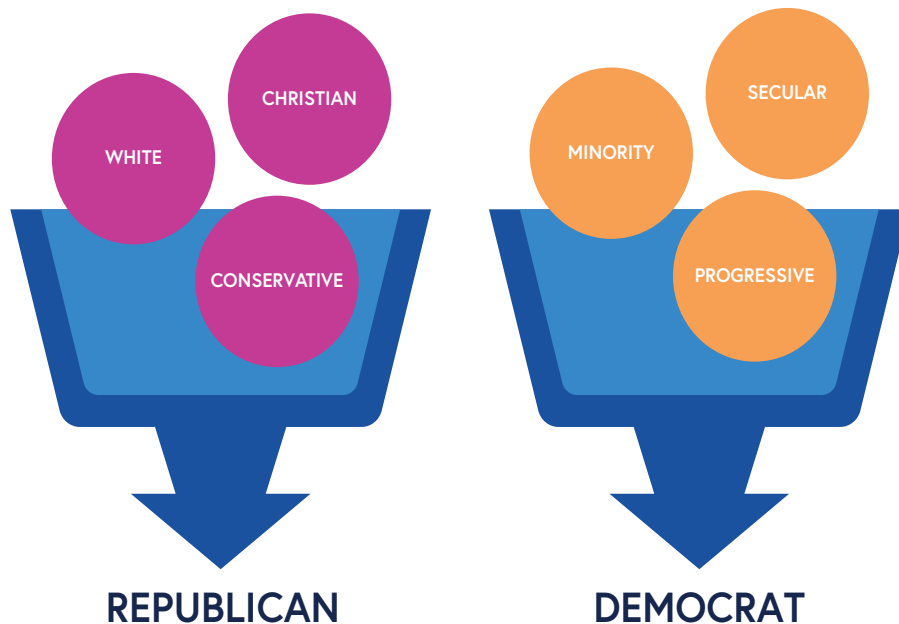
Factionalism affects communities across the nation, deepening exaggerated views of those different from their own. In the extreme, this reduces the space for party members to express views that may diverge from those of their party. The positioning of the other party as a direct threat to one's own ingroup increases the compulsion to conform, fearing that an individual's deviation from the group's norms may either weaken the group overall or lead to the exclusion of that individual from the group.

These trends are exacerbated by civic and public health crises, and strategically exploited by political leaders. Partisan sorting is inextricably linked to living in communities marked by segregation (as well as in information echo chambers—which we address on page 28). Successful interventions must

> **Every election is a fight for larger portions of our self-concept—leading to an ever-more need for victory. Not only are victories more exciting, but losses are much more painful. It is as if the outcome of the Super Bowl also determined the fate of our favorite basketball, hockey, and baseball teams."**
>
> — Dr. Lilliana Mason in *The New York Times*[136]

be able to reinvigorate attachment to identities that cross-cut partisan lines.

WHAT WE CAN DO

Set clear expectations for engaging with outgroup members.

When levels of identity threat are high, they can interfere with the effectiveness of intergroup dialogue, bridge-building, and negotiation efforts.[48] When we reduce identity threat by increasing feelings of safety and security, people can feel motivated to connect with others different from themselves and explore worldviews beyond their own.[49] People who receive resources and training on the psychology of group belonging and identity threat in advance of intergroup encounters can be primed for a more informed and discerning engagement with the outgroup. This type of training can support individuals in setting clear expectations,[50] which can help them to label and understand the origin of the discomfort and sense of threat they might feel when engaging in cross-group interaction, as well as anticipate potential responses from outgroup members.[51] Developing a structured and evidence-backed roadmap to guide cross-group interaction can not only maximize the odds of meaningful engagement, but can also instill a sense of hope for a more favorable outcome, which motivates further engagement.[52]

Highlight identities that include and cut across partisan differences.

We are more than our partisan affiliations. People from opposing parties may grow more willing to associate with each other the more they recognize each other as multifaceted and complex beings,[53] including recognition of non-political dimensions of identity that they may share.[54] Some important identities cut across partisan and racial lines—such

as being parents, growing up in similar communities or social class backgrounds, belonging to clubs together, or working in certain occupations. Highlighting these identities may help to build bridges across social and political divides.[55]

In general, perceptions of common identities are related to decreases in threat perceptions which, in turn, are associated with increases in positive feelings toward the other group.[56]

However, it is important for partisans to understand what those shared identities mean and represent for each of the groups—not every mother, for example, shares the same understanding of what motherhood can or should be. Utilizing this approach with groups that maintain starkly different understandings of those identities may backfire and drive groups even farther apart if the intervention is not structured in a way that allows for careful discussion of those differences.[57]

Where those shared experiences and cross-cutting identities do not already exist, it may be possible to create them. For example, facilitating a major expansion of voluntary public service programs that aim to attract a diverse group of Americans. Programs like this may invite individuals from different partisan groups to adopt a new common identity that they can jointly define, one that is grounded in public service and civic engagement. For example, the national service program AmeriCorps enrolls over 250,000 individuals annually to work with a range of organizations that strengthen American society. Uniting Americans through public service has the potential to bridge divides through shared experience and joint efforts to address community needs.

Create space to redefine American identity.

One special case of cross-cutting identity has the potential to curb affective polarization,[58] reduce prejudice and other forms of bias, and improve relations between groups.[59] That opportunity lies in focusing on American identity as a shared, superordinate identity that encompasses and stretches across other identities. Cultivating a common American identity by emphasizing the characteristics shared by members of different groups is one often suggested by those seeking to renew American democracy.[60]

However, if the version of American identity projected is closely associated with White, Christian norms, this approach to forging a shared American identity may not be accepted by identity groups who feel that the distinct perspectives of their own groups will be lost.[61] Rather than focusing exclusively on a singular superordinate American identity, distinct subgroup identities[62] along racial, ethnic, and religious lines should also be acknowledged in a way that allows for the preservation of racial, ethnic, and religious differences while also promoting social integration at a national level.

Importantly, although cultivating a redefined superordinate American identity would help to overcome the deepened chasms between political groups in the US, this may prove to be a difficult endeavor among those communities experiencing high levels of material and/or identity threat. Redefining American identity in a way that acknowledges the diverse races, ethnicities, and religions that comprise our nation will require buy-in from those who are likely most threatened by diversity and discussions of group differences.[63]

The preferred strategy is not to replace existing definitions of American identity, but to adopt

approaches that would allow for multiple definitions or versions of "what it means to be American." Moving beyond a single dominant American narrative leaves room for people from many backgrounds to feel included.[64] Along similar lines, the more historically privileged groups are reminded that efforts to promote diversity and multiculturalism are designed to include them as well, the more they tend to support inclusive ideologies.[65]

Normalize disagreement as central to democracy.

While sharing a common identity can facilitate cooperation, there are many real areas of disagreement between progressive, liberal, and conservative constituencies that are likely to remain. It is important to make clear via strategic communications that disagreement is a normal part of civil discourse and democratic practice, but that it need not prevent cooperation on areas of agreement or result in entrenched forms of divisiveness.

Leaders should emphasize that this political process is the true American way of addressing and navigating disagreement in a pluralistic democracy. In terms of prioritizing policy reform agendas, it may be helpful to prioritize cooperation on shared objectives, even if they are hard to identify initially. Examples might include addressing the opioid epidemic, supporting in-home family care, or certain aspects of criminal justice reform.

Publicizing, even celebrating, overcoming disagreement and successfully cooperating can help create momentum. This can be done, for example, by holding public-facing press conferences with bi-partisan groups of legislators to highlight achievements that result from cross-party cooperation. Setting new norms for a constructive

political discourse sets the stage for renewing people's faith in government as an institution that can find common ground in order to improve people's lives.

This can begin to build confidence in and commitment to democratic systems, through demonstrating the ability of different parties to work together on social problems. These efforts do not replace those designed to advance the types of systemic change where there may be less broad-based support, but they play a complementary role in helping people envisage how bi-partisan collaborations can succeed.

Increase use of electoral methods that encourage cross-party coalitions.

Factionalism may be reduced by reforming electoral methods to become less reliant on the two-party system, as the current system may reinforce zero-sum frames. Examples might include direct issue-focused referendums or ranked choice voting.

A growing number of nonpartisan organizers and emergent organizations are leading the charge to change electoral methods at the municipal, state, and federal levels, with the aim of moving from a winner-takes-all electoral approach to one of proportional representation.[66]

Worth noting is that, while a number of state legislatures across the US are passing bipartisan policies[67] to shift electoral methods to ranked choice voting, research conducted thus far is inconclusive regarding the method's efficacy in achieving desired outcomes. There is a dire need for practice-oriented research that might illuminate which electoral policy prescriptions actually correspond with reduced social division and factionalism.
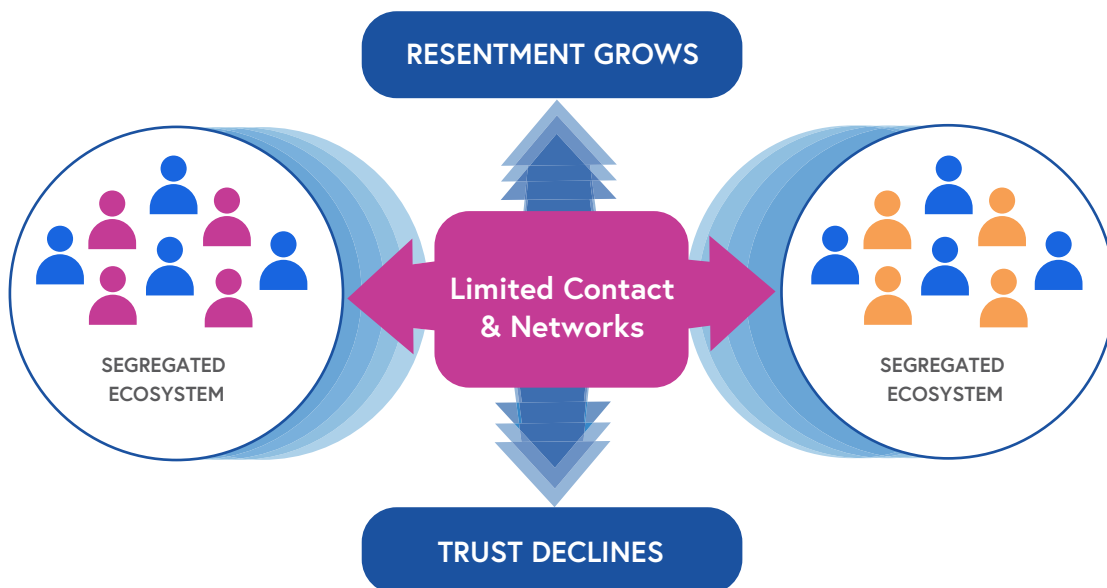
Residential Segregation & Declining Social Trust

Identity-based concerns are reinforced and widened when Americans are geographically segregated.[68] Compounded by separation into distinct information ecosystems[69] (discussed in more detail in the following section), residential segregation contributes to acceptance of exaggerated stereotypes about those who belong to different racial, ethnic, and religious groups. In almost every aspect of their lives, groups of Americans are currently segregated from each other—on the basis of race and ethnicity, education, income,[70] and political partisanship.[71]

When groups are segregated from each other, they are less likely to have first-hand experience or familiarity with other groups that may counter the influences of divisive messaging or status threat. Whether we consider segregation in the context of racial, ethnic, religious, or political divides, separation between groups makes it easier for people on different sides to demonize one another, and more challenging for them to share resources or power.[72]

Segregation limits opportunities for positive contact experiences between members of different groups, and allows for resentment to grow, increasing the potential for exacerbated group conflict.[73] Moreover, segregation reduces opportunities to build common or shared

SEGREGATED ECOSYSTEM — RESENTMENT GROWS — Limited Contact & Networks — TRUST DECLINES — SEGREGATED ECOSYSTEM

understandings of public issues and engage in cross-group dialogue, limiting the extent to which people are able to relate to outgroup members' experiences or build feelings of trust toward them through direct interaction.

Given limited direct engagement with other groups, segregation also makes it more likely that people from different groups will believe or accept misinformation about one another. People who are siloed into isolated geographic spaces are more likely to believe exaggerated and negative stereotypes about others they do not personally know.[74] Segregation and the exaggerated and negative stereotypes it produces, can have far-reaching impacts on almost every facet of life, reinforcing racial and ethnic inequality[75] across a range of health,[76] educational,[77] and economic outcomes.[78] The confluence of residential segregation and declining social trust often results in elected officials representing increasingly homogeneous groups[79] and, consequently, a reduced incentive to cater to the needs and perspectives of more diverse constituencies. There are myriad structural measures that would help to reduce residential segregation and promote integration,

such as reform of gerrymandering and single-family zoning requirements. While working toward that long-term structural change, it's essential that we construct alternative channels for individuals to engage with one another across lines of difference.

WHAT WE CAN DO
Organize opportunities for cross-party engagement between citizens and elected officials.

Political inclusion has been shown to reduce prejudice against members of different political groups,[80] yet there are many regions of the country where voters never come into contact with elected officials from opposing parties.

Particularly within districts that have low levels of political diversity, it is important to construct opportunities for residents to hear from and speak to elected representatives across party lines. Such opportunities can offer constituents a chance to recognize that those across the aisle may share some of their goals, while also reminding elected officials that they represent citizens beyond their voter base, reinforcing the obligation of public servants to listen to and serve all Americans, regardless of party affiliation.

This type of public engagement is successful only when constituents feel heard and their perspectives acknowledged. To that end, elected officials must lead with a listening posture, seeking to understand concerns and fears, both real and perceived. If elected officials instead use

> **In every metropolitan region in the United States with more than 200,000 residents, 81 percent (169 out of 209) were more segregated as of 2019 than they were in 1990."**
>
> — *The Roots of Structural Racism*, a report by The Othering and Belonging Institute[137]

forums to fire up their base or to justify their political positions, these opportunities for engagement will likely not yield the intended effect.

Facilitate positive intergroup contact.

Decades of social science research indicate that positive contact between groups can reduce prejudice and feelings of threat, bolster empathy,[81] and break down perceptions of negative intentions from other groups.[82] Partisans who are polarized along racial, ethnic, and/or religious lines could benefit from this kind of positive intergroup contact.

Ideally, contact between groups will be supported by institutional norms and authorities, and structured so that members of different groups are treated and regarded as equals while working cooperatively together toward common goals.[83] Although it is common for people to feel uncomfortable engaging with group differences at first, contact can play an important role in helping people and societies adapt[84] to social diversity over time.[85] Even after group conflict and mass violence have occurred, positive and cooperative contact between groups has helped to promote trust[86] and tolerance across group lines,[87] along with fostering greater willingness for social integration,[88] and encouraging greater support for policies that would enhance intergroup equality.[89]

More investigation of the potential farther-reaching effects of intergroup contact should be explored through including measures of contact between racial, ethnic, and partisan groups in public opinion polls, to determine how bridge-building efforts at the individual level may shape broader social attitudes and behaviors in the public sphere.

Increase funding for place-based civic bridging efforts.

The work to address US social divisions must be led locally, but implemented at sufficient scale with support over multi-year timelines. For that to happen, both governmental and philanthropic donors need to orchestrate a sizable reallocation of resources for bridging programs already being implemented at the local, state, and national levels.

Increasing funding for these efforts can shift the focus away from a national agenda, and create more space for communities to center what is unique and real for them. Localized engagement may bolster community-level agency and enable a more organic approach to reducing social division.
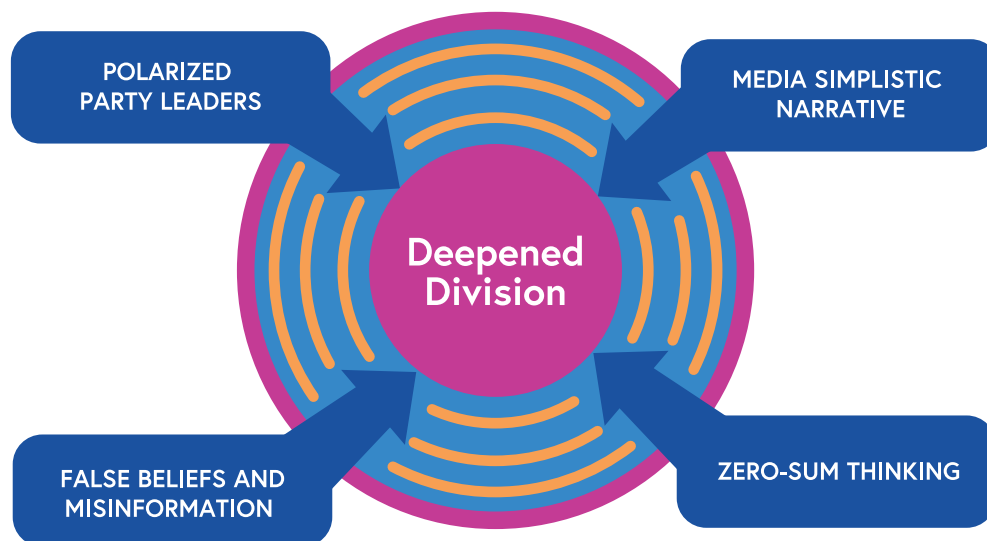
Information Echo Chambers

Deep-seated political divisions are further stoked by inherently divisive partisan media coverage,[90] which is designed to attract viewers by encouraging a narrative of conflict between political groups. In adopting a simplistic narrative, media amplify the hyperbolic rhetoric of polarized party leaders[91] who promote zero-sum thinking in which the other party—and the other social groups comprising it—are presumed to pose a dire threat to one's own party and social group. This kind of zero-sum thinking can exacerbate the false belief that various minority racial and ethnic groups are working together to deprive White Americans, a historically privileged majority, of power and resources.[92]

Divisive information ecosystems are amplified when political partisans are ensconced in social media echo chambers[93] and distance themselves from people who identify with different political or social groups. This isolation can further limit the consideration of opposing views, heighten polarization, and make people more susceptible to misinformation[94] spread by political actors.

Misinformation can also contribute to partisans' overly negative perceptions about the other side's intentions and attitudes toward them. For instance, Democrats and Republicans may dislike and even dehumanize each other, but each side thinks the other dislikes and dehumanizes them far more than is actually the case.[95] This exaggerated sense of being hated and dehumanized by the other side fosters support for using anti-democratic means to harm them. It also leads partisans to further distance from each other, which reinforces

POLARIZED PARTY LEADERS

MEDIA SIMPLISTIC NARRATIVE

Deepened Division

FALSE BELIEFS AND MISINFORMATION

ZERO-SUM THINKING

misperceptions and locks partisans into a feedback loop of increasing enmity.

Reducing the role of social and traditional media in catalyzing polarization requires: (1) increasing opportunities for exposure to partisan outgroups' perspectives, particularly as represented by members of the outgroup; (2) inoculating individuals by strengthening their ability to detect misinformation;[96] and (3) reducing exposure to misinformation, noting that exposure increases belief in the false information.[97] The latter requires regulatory reform that increases digital governance and accountability. The first two objectives can be aided by investment in local media infrastructure, a proactive commitment by influential media personalities, and a concerted effort to correct specific types of misperceptions, as explained further below.

WHAT WE CAN DO
Correct Americans' meta-misperceptions.

Despite individuals' best efforts, accurately appraising the beliefs and intentions of others can be difficult, and our misperceptions of others' motives and beliefs can have damaging consequences for our ability to successfully work together. A growing body of social scientific research[98] highlights how it is not just what we think about others that influences intergroup relations and conflict, but also what we think others think about us.

Psychologists call these second-order beliefs (what people think others believe) "meta-perceptions." These meta-perceptions affect how we interact with others, how we treat them, and how we judge their intentions. **Strategies that correct Americans' meta-misperceptions can reduce those negatively held beliefs[99] in a way that**

may break cycles of polarization and distrust.

In today's social and political climate, partisans are not merely interpreting information in different ways—they are siloed within informational ecosystems that relay different information altogether. As a result, it's common for distinct media sources to present highly divergent or exaggerated viewpoints and misinformation about the other side. Systematically measuring meta-perceptions in public opinion polling and presenting partisans with evidence of more moderate positions[100] held by the other side can correct meta-misperceptions. This process increases openness to intergroup cooperation by reducing animus and helping people from different partisan groups to see each other in less extreme ways.[101]

Complicate the narrative.

Social divisions in the US are not as simple as Democrat vs. Republican, White vs. Black, or Christian vs. secular. A majority of progressive White Democrats are, for example, to the left of Black voters on racial justice policies and related social issues.[102] And while whiteness typically places people in a privileged position in American society, identities of advantage and disadvantage often intersect, and there are many White Americans who do not experience their lives as privileged.[103]

When we identify as members of a group, we form beliefs about the group prototype or "model member" profile. With this comes a generalized—and often unrealistic—assumption that most, if not all, other group members hold the same set of attitudes and consistently engage in similar behaviors.[104] Suppose, for example, that I identify as a good citizen and, in my assessment of other people I believe to be good citizens, I form the

assumption that all good citizens wear their seat belts while in moving vehicles. It's highly likely that I will also opt to wear my seat belt, even if I personally believe it is not necessary.

The assumption that most other ingroup members think or act a certain way can limit the willingness to express views, beliefs, or ideas that diverge from those we believe the rest of the group holds. This instinct to suppress differing opinions is heightened when we feel threatened. As a result, even if certain group members think the actions, narratives, or behaviors of their own group are problematic, the response will be to hold the party line rather than present a challenge or dissenting opinion. This then limits the potential for moderation of more extreme positions within the group.

To meaningfully address this dynamic we must attempt to reduce the alignment between distinct group identities and party affiliation such that individuals—rather than groups—are perceived to differ in their political perspectives. **Invite people to 'complicate the narrative'[105] and challenge both sweeping assumptions about the other side as well as assumptions about the beliefs and expectations of their own groups**. Advancing creative and affirming communications campaigns that highlight the diversity of identities and ideological positions that exist within each of the parties can be useful tools in this effort.

Engage media personalities to model new rules and norms for civil discourse.

The broad-scale breakdown of civil discourse we now see in the US points to our need to establish new rules and norms that curb the kinds of informational ecosystems that breed divisiveness and misinformation.

Media personalities with a public platform on the left and the right should be enlisted in the effort to model productive and healthy disagreement. Lessons can be drawn from the deep canvassing approach to advancing social change and can include but are not limited to: (1) learning about the idea from that idea's proponents not opponents; (2) listening non-judgmentally to a political opponent's concerns; and (3) humanizing opponents by inviting them to speak to ideas with which the opposing group is likely to agree. This role modeling by trusted public figures may offer others the confidence and "permission" to behave in a similar fashion.

Invest in and sustain local news ecosystems.

Americans consistently maintain higher levels of trust in local media,[106] as compared to national media, at a time when local media is in freefall.[107] Local media can help to mitigate toxic polarization when stories center the cross-cutting identity of being a "local community member" in ways that may interrupt partisan sorting.

Research also shows that local news consumption correlates to an increased likelihood of split-ticket voting. When local news sources disappear, Americans tend to turn to national sources where market incentives drive large media conglomerates to produce simplistic and divisive political coverage.[108] A concerted effort to invest in and sustain locally-owned and -operated news ecosystems, which are not as closely tied to partisan identities, may yield a positive impact on easing social divisions.

The Basics of Deep Canvassing:

1. Asking for the voter's opinion on a certain issue and exploring it.

2. Asking for the voter's personal story or experience pertaining to the issue.

3. Connecting a personal story to the voter's initial opinion.

4. Engaging with their initial concerns and opinions and giving them time to ponder.

5. Getting back to the original issue and seeking their opinion.

Excerpt from: Somaiah, J. (2022, March 25). Everything you need to know about Deep Canvassing. CallHub. https://callhub.io/deep-canvassing/

Divergent Racial Attitudes & Support for Racial Equity

Factionalism, bolstered by information echo chambers and residential segregation, drives widely divergent views on racial inequality in America.[109] Although race has long represented a major fault line in political conflict, beliefs about racial progress and who is responsible for racial inequality serve increasingly as points of division.

Findings from public opinion polling paint a stark portrait of competitive victimhood and dueling narratives, with many White Americans believing that they face more discrimination than racial minorities in the US. While these claims may not be supported

by material measures of discrimination,[110] for many Americans victimhood narratives can be fused with group identity in a way that leads people to believe they are true.[111] Americans' divergent racial attitudes spill over to fuel stark differences in positions on seemingly unrelated issues such as healthcare and gun control.[112]

Research has found that White Americans also tend to perceive that more progress toward racial equality has been made compared to what is perceived by minority racial groups.[113] Over the past decade, relative to White Republicans, White Democrats have shown sharper reductions in racial resentment—the
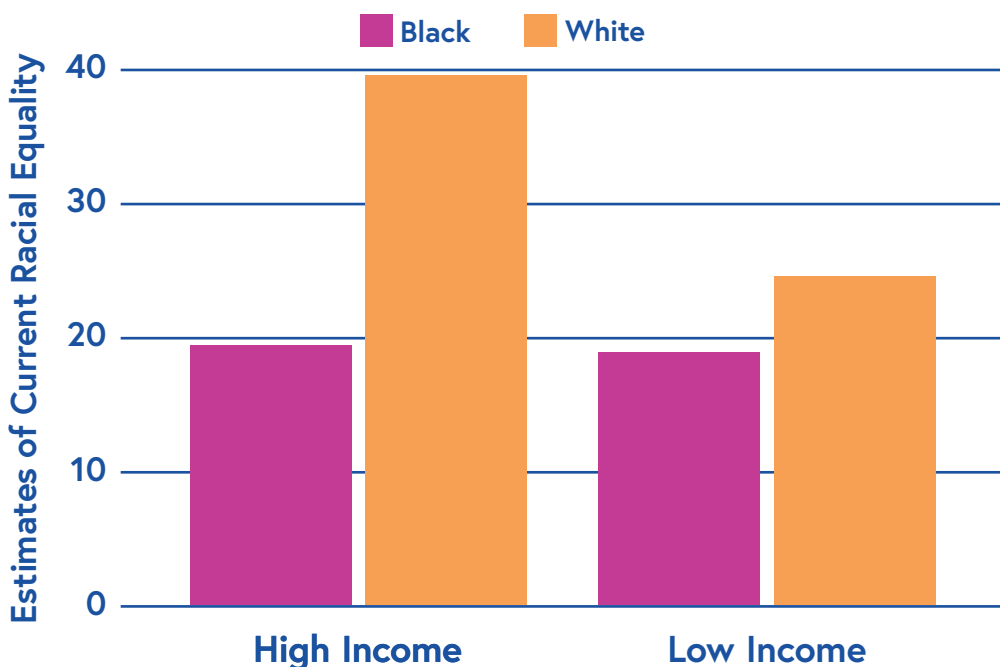
Errors in Estimates of Current Racial Equality: Overestimates of current racial economic equality by participant race and income group. Average values from three studies (Kraus, Rucker & Richeson, 2017). Higher values indicate higher overestimation.[139]

belief that racial inequality is the fault of Black Americans as individuals rather than resulting from the structural challenges they may face. In contrast, White Republicans' attitudes have remained largely unchanged.[114]

For instance, while White Republicans may interpret lower voter turnout among racial minorities voters as the fault of Black Americans as individuals, White Democrats tend to focus more on the negative impact of laws that create strict identification requirements to vote on racial minority and lower socioeconomic status voters. In turn, while White Democrats are much more likely to see racial inequality as the consequence of enduring structures like slavery and discrimination, White Republicans are much more likely to believe Black Americans are responsible for the enduring racial inequality we see in the US today.

Addressing the psychology behind divergent racial attitudes can contribute to an enabling environment for the types of systemic and structural reform necessary to secure racial justice.

WHAT WE CAN DO
Disrupt belief in the racial-progress narrative.

It is important to help people connect structural disadvantage from the past to inequality in the present. We must also disrupt belief in the narrative that the US has made substantial progress toward racial equity, in spite of data suggesting otherwise.

To be effective, different methods should be used based on the level of identity threat perceived by the target audience. For those experiencing lower levels of threat,

communications that illustrate the need for racial equity policies should include information about how racial discrimination and other factors at the societal level create disparities. For these populations, research shows that increased exposure to incidents of racial discrimination (for example, through media or intergroup contact programming) can also increase willingness to engage in collective action for reform.[115]

For those perceiving higher levels of threat, it may prove more effective to stay focused on reducing feelings of threat and highlighting ways that majority populations are included in societal definitions of diversity. Research suggests that White people may become more supportive of racial diversity efforts and multicultural ideologies when they are expressly included in definitions of diversity and see themselves reflected in the discourse.[116]

This finding can inform communications strategies that both counter essentialism[117] and dominant narratives on the mythology of racial progress.[118] To build a better understanding of systemic racism, utilizing tested communications interventions that enable White Americans to put themselves in the discriminatory scenarios with which non-White Americans contend may be an effective approach.

Discuss differences.

Although contact can help to build positive relations between groups,[119] this approach may be limited in achieving social change or encouraging democratic accountability unless real differences in experience and perspective are eventually discussed.[120] Without explicitly addressing social inequalities, positive contact experiences with dominant groups has also, in

some cases, led members of minority groups to become less interested in working for social change.[121]

In order for contact between groups to promote social change, it must ensure that members of minority groups are empowered to advocate for their interests, and members of dominant groups are recognized as partners in this effort.[122] When minority racial groups have contact with dominant groups who acknowledge that inequalities between groups are not fair, contact does not undermine minority groups' collective efforts to promote social change.[123]

Moreover, when minority and dominant groups communicate openly about differences in power that exist between their groups, historically dominant groups can become more willing to act for social change in solidarity with minority groups.[124]

The underlying reality or perception of threat has a significant impact on the effectiveness of these interactions. These efforts are likely to backfire with groups actively perceiving or contending with high levels of threat. In cases where high levels of threat exist between groups, it is better to phase this work in after concerted efforts to reduce threat[125] and build baseline levels of trust.[126]

Build cross-group, multiracial coalitions.

Breaking down group-based boundaries reinforced by geographic segregation through intergroup contact may help to promote coalitions across groups. Meaningful intergroup contact improves attitudes between groups, in part because it changes how people think about their own group in relation to other groups.[127]

Contact can lead people to become more willing to think about their own and other groups through the lens of a common, shared identity, making it possible to foster solidarity. This process occurs when shared experiences of hardship lead members of different disadvantaged groups to form coalitional bonds.[128] For example, although working-class Whites appear to be most vulnerable to exclusionary rhetoric,[129] it may be possible to transform their experience of economic disadvantage from *resentment toward*—to *solidarity with*—racial groups who face similar challenges.[130] By emphasizing the mutual gain and shared interests that exist across group lines, leaders and policymakers can work to foster solidarity between groups in ways that disincentivize divisive rhetoric and garner support for redistributive economic policies that would be of benefit to many groups.

As noted earlier, psychological research highlights how people have a fundamental need to see themselves as good, moral, and competent, and that our self definition relies on feeling a basic sense of dignity.[131] Communication and outreach efforts should consider the human desire to elevate narratives of honor over shame and appeal to an individual's desire to do good—or, rather, be perceived by others to be doing good. This framing may compel otherwise ambivalent individuals to join coalitions dedicated to advancing social change.

Open a more inclusive dialogue on US history.

The inability to think expansively about history, understand the complexity of the process of historical interpretation, and create space for different historical perspectives is fueling social division in the US. Rather than structuring a debate to determine an objective "truth," it can be more impactful to focus on learning about different perspectives and how those accounts are fused with the way people conceive of themselves and their identity groups, and to invite critical thinking on how the past impacts the present.[132]

As the Reframing History project notes, "By shifting the focus from who is right to how learning from the past can move us toward justice, the strategy can help people understand why history should matter to them."[133]

Evidence-informed framing can prime dialogue participants for a more productive exchange. For those dialogues addressing the memorialization of contested histories in public spaces, international and domestic processes that have succeeded in minimizing conflict consistently have two things in common. First, they are context-specific, meaning final decisions made are unique and authentic to the realities, histories, and experiences of a particular community and its constituencies. Second, they are strategically inclusive of all stakeholders' stories, ideas, and concerns.[134]

The outcome is ultimately less about a binary approach—to remove or to keep public memorials—and more about supporting communities to get to the root cause of a particular conflict through building shared understanding, even if identity groups do not reach consensus. Because contested histories often entail a myriad of social inequities, if the underlying social tensions and grievances remain unaddressed, the conflict will likely worsen and leave any decisions made on a contested memorial unsustainable.

> **By shifting the focus from who is right to how learning from the past can move us toward justice, the strategy can help people understand why history should matter to them."**
>
> – *Making History Matter*, a report by the Reframing History Project[138]

Conclusion

Americans are polarized along identity-based fault lines. We have divided ourselves into camps, now segregated by race and ethnicity, education, income, and political partisanship, in almost every dimension of our lives. We have aligned ourselves under rigid partisan identities, limiting the space for ideological diversity and dialogue about our differences.

At the same time, many members of traditionally advantaged groups perceive an equitable and diversifying America as a threat to their political power and social status. For them, maintaining this segregation and discounting democratic principles can be embraced as ways to maintain their group's dominant position.

The psychological processes underlying these behaviors are exacerbated by a divisive and largely unregulated information ecosystem that is leveraged by political and media leaders to sow division and guided by algorithms that place profit over social and civic health.

These social chasms have placed the very shape and future of American democracy at risk, and its recovery depends on finding a way to work with both urgency and care. Although surefire solutions remain elusive, this interdisciplinary diagnosis reveals several promising points of intervention.

Promoting intergroup contact between partisans can dampen anxiety and promote trust, empathy, and solidarity across group lines. Specifically, contact that highlights the common interests among economically disadvantaged groups could replace resentment and hostilities with interracial solidarity. Leveraging the common, distinctive, and multiple cross-cutting identities across groups could mitigate stereotyping and bolster identification with others across group lines. And correcting exaggerated meta-perceptions about other groups and stemming the spread of misinformation may reduce animosity and mitigate the possibility of social media platforms being used to incite violence.

Ultimately, to renew American democracy and strengthen the capacity of Americans to address the fundamental challenges confronting the nation, it is essential to understand the psychology behind the fear and anxiety that drives us apart. Without understanding how growing identity-based polarization shapes our psychology, we will be stymied in addressing the endemic and systemic problems that jeopardize the wellbeing of all Americans and the future of our country. Only together will we be able to build a more inclusive and representative democracy for the American people.

These social chasms have placed the very shape and future of American democracy at risk, and its recovery depends on finding ways to work together with both urgency and care.

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