

Depolarizing America: Promising Paths Forward

Executive Summary

Constructive engagement across political divides is a precondition for democracy. If we can't talk with each other, we can't govern ourselves as a nation – it's that simple.

America is trapped in a damaging cycle of toxic political polarization and negative partisanship. Undoing the damage requires identifying, funding, and promoting initiatives with demonstrated potential to reduce polarization and improve civic health.

Current research indicates four promising avenues: *expose* Americans to diverse perspectives, *engage* us across differences, *educate* us about how and why we're polarized, and *elevate* how we see ourselves and others beyond confining, partisan identities.

Civic Health Project is committed to advancing applied academic research and measurable practitioner efforts through our own grantmaking, while also inspiring other funders to accelerate this important work.

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Introduction



01

Introduction

After a 12-year political career as a political party operative, David Leaverton left the world of politics in a state of discouragement and disillusionment. A committed Republican, David's hard work had been fueled by a conviction that his party — his "team" — was right on all the issues, and therefore had to win at any cost.

Towards the last few years of his political career, however, Leaverton began to question whether his work in public service was actually accomplishing goals that would best serve the American people. Notably, he witnessed his own party turning against his boss - Republican Senator Bob Corker - for sometimes putting the good of the country above the good of the party.

When he finally left politics in 2012, he remembers feeling that the system was hopelessly broken. The problem wasn't that he and his colleagues weren't well-meaning. Rather, he opined, "a bad system beats a good person every day ... we focused so much as a party on making the other side look bad."

Having transitioned to the private sector, it was not until the aftermath of the 2016 election that he and his wife Erin Leaverton decided that they wanted to help bring unity to a deeply divided country. In 2018, Erin, David, and their three children exchanged their house and belongings for an RV, and embarked on a year-long journey around the country. Their goal was to visit each of the 50 states, and find out what was causing so much division between partisans across the nation.

The Leavertons have since been working to amplify the many voices they heard on their travels through their project, [The Undivided](#)

[Nation](#), and their own story has been told by [The Reunited States](#)², a documentary spotlighting efforts to help partisans come together to solve America's biggest problems.

At Civic Health Project, we support organizations and individuals who are committed to identifying and addressing the root causes of America's partisan divisions. We firmly believe that our country's ability to address a broad range of societal challenges — from climate change to health care to the national debt — hinges on replacing the current atmosphere of political and cultural brinkmanship with a renewed commitment to civility, collaborative problem-solving, and seeking common ground.

Achieving this societal shift won't be easy, but our work has identified several potential paths forward. In this paper, we define the problem of toxic political polarization, which is referred to in social science as "affective polarization." We explain the broader implications of affective polarization on American society, and we outline our "Four E's" framework for identifying, funding, and promoting the most promising solutions.

A bad system
beats a good
person every
day.

*- David Leaverton,
Undivided Nation¹*

What is Affective Polarization?



02

What Is Affective Polarization?

Regardless of where they stand on the issues, Americans increasingly dislike, distrust, and do not want to interact with those from the other party, a tendency known as affective polarization.

— Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012³

The ideological divide between the average Democrat and Republican has been expanding for years. Up to a point, **polarization on issues** is constructive in producing healthy debate, which can lead to more robust policy solutions. Further, clear distinctions between party positions can be helpful in clarifying electoral choices and mobilizing voter participation.

Polarization becomes destructive, however, when individuals develop strong negative emotions towards the people who hold differing political or ideological views. This is known as “**affective polarization**.” Examples of affective polarization include:

- 40% of partisans would be upset if their child married the other side.
- 42% of partisans view the other side as evil.
- 20% of survey participants think that the country would be better off if a large number of the opposition died.

In fact, this highly emotional and personal form of polarization appears to be more prevalent today than is partisan division on actual issues.

When levels of affective polarization are high, we as citizens and our elected politicians are less inclined to associate or engage with those on the other side. With that, not only do we lose the communities, common spaces, and conversations in which our shared identities as neighbours, friends, and citizens could otherwise flourish, but we lose our ability as a society to solve problems.

OUR TAKE

1. Issue polarization — i.e. the measured gap on policy positions — has been widening steadily between Democrats and Republicans for years.
2. Affective polarization — i.e. negative feelings towards other people based on political affiliation — has been rising even more sharply in recent years.
3. As affective polarization increases, Americans’ willingness to engage and solve problems together decreases, with worrying implications for democracy.

Why Does Affective Polarization Matter?

03



Why Does Affective Polarization Matter?

Why do we need to worry about intensifying levels of affective polarization in America? Our current, rancorous political climate may provide enough of an answer. For deeper insight, let's look at current academic research that delineates harmful societal outcomes ranging from poor policy-making to outright collapse of our democratic system of governance.

The psychology of polarization becomes fundamental as mechanisms of dehumanization, depersonalization, and stereotyping all contribute to the emotional loathing, fear, and distrust of the out-partisans.

McCoy and Somer, 2018⁴

Disengagement

Increased resentment and hatred towards people with opposing political views is shown to reduce social engagement with them. According to one recent study, "individuals use partisan perceptions as a means of 'othering' out-group members, which reduces interest and desire in interacting with out-party members."

This hardening into "in-groups" and "out-groups" can also lead us to harbor negative feelings, use harsh words, and engage in prejudicial action against perceived political "others." Compounding the problem, this prejudice and social segregation extends to "people who hold moderate opinions and maintain interests and identities that cut across the dividing line, diminishing any chance of dialogue between opposing groups."⁵ In other words, people with a higher propensity to bridge across divides may be shunned as equivocators or sellouts for failing to hold extreme positions, which undermines their potential to serve as translators between people who hold more extreme views.

The essence of the U.S. Constitution is to require compromise as a condition of governing. In rejecting compromise, Americans are rejecting governance. The United States and other countries have been down this road in the past, and the results are never good.

— *Rausch, 2020*⁷

We make our first judgments rapidly, and we are dreadful at seeking out evidence that might disconfirm those initial judgments. Yet friends can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves: they can challenge us, giving us reasons and arguments.

— *Haidt, 2012*⁸

Worse, an affectively polarized citizenry tends to reward similarly polarizing attitudes and behaviors from our elected politicians. A poll by the Pew Research center indicated that only 46% and 44% of Democrats and Republicans respectively professed to “like elected officials who make compromises with people they disagree with.”⁶

OUR TAKE

- To be affectively polarized means to harbor strongly negative feelings towards those who hold different political views from us.
- This prejudice leads us (at best) to dislike and even (at worst) to wish harm upon those with different views.
- An affectively polarized citizenry also tends to reward obstructive — rather than collaborative — behavior by elected officials.

Distortion

Why does it matter if partisans are not engaging with those with opposing views? Because failure to engage means that our personal biases, which are built in part through our experiences and social circles, are never challenged. This leads to an incomplete understanding of issues, and a distortion in our ability to perceive and reason about issues.

Failure to engage exacerbates “confirmation bias,” i.e. our common tendency to only seek out and acknowledge evidence that supports what we already believe. If we don’t engage with people who hold different beliefs from us, we are likely to overlook significant evidence that might contradict our beliefs, leading to a distortion of our understanding of important issues.

Evidence is mounting, for example, that affective polarization distorts economic decision-making and even our ability to understand economics. “A seminal finding in political behavior research is that people tend to believe that economic outcomes (e.g., GDP growth, unemployment rate) are more favorable (unfavorable) when their party is in (out of) the White House.”⁹

Further, psychological research indicates that we are susceptible to “pluralistic ignorance,” i.e. we may all privately hold the same belief, but because we collectively perceive others to hold a different belief, we suppress our own true beliefs to protect against the judgment or disapproval of others. When this pattern occurs, we no

longer have an accurate picture of the experiences and concerns that are held by a diverse range of members of society.

Both a recent, [groundbreaking study](#)¹⁰ by Beyond Conflict and a forthcoming [Columbia University study](#)¹¹ found that not only do we as partisans think that the other side *disagrees* with us on issues more than they actually do, but we also mistakenly assume that the other side dislikes us more than they really do. Additionally, when we ourselves hold strongly partisan views, we tend to believe that members of the other party are more extreme than they actually are, and we also believe that they are asymmetrically more extreme than we are.¹²

So what happens when we disengage from one another and nurture increasingly distorted perceptions of both people and issues?

OUR TAKE

- Affective polarization causes us to hold inaccurate perceptions about people who hold different views from us.
- It also impacts how we reason and draw conclusions about issues on which there is disagreement.

Dysfunction

“It’s like a giraffe and a flamingo...That’s our bills. They’re unable to mate,” said Democratic House majority leader Nancy Pelosi. She was referring to the HEROES act, passed by the Democrat controlled House, and the HEALS act endorsed by Senate Republicans. It was two days before the Covid-19 response unemployment benefits provided under the CARES were set to expire, and no compromise on its future had been reached by Congress.

In the United States, affective polarization weakens our ability to function as a democracy. In a 2018 survey, over 70% of foreign policy opinion leaders who participated indicated that they considered political polarization to be a “critical threat” to the United States. In fact, responders flagged partisanship more than any other threat, including both Iran’s and North Korea’s nuclear programs.¹³ The Economist’s Democracy Index recently downgraded the U.S. from a “full democracy” to a “flawed democracy,” based partially on affective polarization and its downstream consequences.

Extreme opposition seems to have entered the playbook of leaders in every category. In this worldview, it's all or nothing, good or evil, the best or worst. Nuance and complexity, meanwhile, are nowhere to be found. And our extreme challenges remain extremely unsolved.

— *Walker, 2019*¹⁵

When both voters and politicians are caught in the grip of toxic political polarization – when we eye each other with fear, suspicion, and loathing from across the political aisle – gridlock inevitably ensues. Republicans and Democrats make it their mission to obstruct and undo the other party's work.¹⁴ Political compromise, required to achieve most enduring policy gains, is reframed as appeasement towards an enemy. The gears of government grind to a halt as hyper-partisan politicians assiduously steer clear of common ground.

The real tragedy of our current, uncompromising stances towards one another is that policy outcomes we collectively favor lie maddeningly beyond reach. [Recent research](#)¹⁶ by the University of Maryland's Program for Public Consultation indicates that — perhaps somewhat surprisingly — majorities of self-identified Democrats and Republicans largely agree on at least [150 public policy issues](#), yet forward action on these is minimal or nonexistent in our current polarized climate.

OUR TAKE

- When both citizens and elected politicians are affectively polarized, political gridlock and dysfunction ensue.
- This gridlock stymies meaningful action even though self-identified Democrats and Republicans broadly agree on many policy issues.

How Did We Get Here?



04

How Did We Get Here?

The political landscape in the US is characterized by policy impasses and animosity between rival political groups. Research finds that these divisions are fueled in part by disparate moral concerns and convictions, which undermine communication and understanding between liberals and conservatives.

— *Feinberg and Willer, 2019*¹⁷

As Americans, why have we become so bitterly divided over politics? Did we choose this?

The answer is complicated. Social scientists point to innate human characteristics — rooted in psychology, sociology, and perhaps even biology — that cause us to be “groupish” or “tribal.” Historically, our ability to form cohesive in-groups has helped us to protect and defend ourselves against the uncertainties and risks posed by opposing out-groups.

In our relentless, evolutionary zeal to distinguish “us” from “them”, we have sorted, categorized, and combined multiple identifying characteristics — race, gender, faith, geography, etc — into simplifying political “super identities” that subsume all other salient identifiers and affiliations.

But there’s more to the story, because these modern, tribal tendencies of ours are also being exploited and weaponized by bad actors who stand to gain from our deepening divisions. Politicians, media publications, and social media platforms have powerful incentives to divide and enrage us. Angry voters show up to vote, outraged cable viewers tune in 24 / 7 to MSNBC or Fox, and “triggered” social media users of all political stripes click, share, like, and follow vigorously.

In business terms, we are caught up in an unhealthy supply-and-demand pattern. Our tribal identification with political parties leads us to demand reassurance that we’ve correctly identified both the *righteous* nature of our “in group” and the *threatening* nature of the opposing “out group.” Meanwhile, our political elites and media outlets are more than happy to supply the polarizing fodder that leads us further and further down our partisan rabbit holes.

Can We Depolarize Ourselves?

05



Can We Depolarize Ourselves?

America is trapped in a damaging cycle of toxic political polarization and negative partisanship. Can we undo the damage? Yes, we can.

Current research indicates four promising avenues, which we call our Four E's Framework:

Four E's Framework



Expose

Expose Americans to diverse information and perspectives.



Engage

Engage with one another — *especially* across differences.



Educate

Educate Americans directly about how and why we've become so polarized.



Elevate

Elevate how we see ourselves and others beyond confining partisan identities.

At Civic Health Project, we are committed to identifying, funding, and promoting initiatives across the "Four E's" with demonstrated potential to reduce affective polarization and improve our overall civic health.

Expose



Expose Americans to diverse information and perspectives.

Experimental studies find that attitude-consistent exposure strengthens attitudes toward parties and issues, and that attitude-discrepant exposure weakens them ... The opportunity is that we may be able to stem political divides and promote greater empathy for opponents if we can find ways to limit partisan news consumption and facilitate cross-cutting exposure.

— *Garrett et al, 2014*¹⁸

Why let social media algorithms tell you which information and news you get to read or watch? Exposure to a wider range of pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal information sources helps modulate our own beliefs, while also mitigating our tendency to view those with differing views as immoral or irrational.

EXAMPLES OF PROMISING INTERVENTIONS

- [AllSides](#) provides balanced news coverage, media bias ratings, civil dialogue opportunities, and innovative technology that expose people to information and ideas from all sides of the political spectrum, so they can better understand the world — and each other.
- [The Flip Side](#), [TheFactual](#), [Gnomi](#), [RealClearPolitics](#), and [The Thread](#) provide consumers with access to news feeds curated from diverse sources and perspectives.
- [Gell](#), [Ceasefire](#), and [The Conversationalist](#) are online, moderated conversation forums in which people of all political stripes can come together to discuss and debate topics respectfully.
- [ProCon](#) offers deeply-researched analyses of controversial topics from various perspectives, empowering Americans to shape more informed electoral and policy opinions.

Engage



Engage with one another — especially across differences.

The ‘contact hypothesis’ suggests that getting to know each other can reduce prejudice between groups Perhaps one of the most important aspects of [intergroup] contact is that it might enable one to see things from another’s perspective.

— *De Wit, Van Der Linden, and Brick, 2019*¹⁹

While difficult and uncomfortable, engaging directly in respectful civil discourse with people who see things differently is what makes a democracy successful. Intergroup contact theory explains the critical role that constructive dialogue can play in reducing conflict, prejudice, and animosity – while increasing tolerance, empathy, and connection – between individuals and groups who might otherwise be prone to demonizing, dehumanizing, or even harming each other.

Popular entertainment has also shown promise as a depolarizing vehicle, as viewers engage “vicariously” with sympathetic characters and bias-busting narratives.

EXAMPLES OF PROMISING INTERVENTIONS

- [AllSides Connect](#) is a realtime video platform that connects individuals, civic groups, and classrooms “across distance and divides” to engage in respectful dialogue.
- [Better Arguments](#) is a national civic initiative created to help bridge divides – not by papering over those divides but by helping Americans have better arguments.
- [Braver Angels](#) hosts conversations and workshops across explicit political, racial, ideological, and geographic divides to engage in structured dialogue on challenging topics.
- [BridgeUSA](#) champions ideological diversity, solutions-oriented politics, and responsible discourse among college students on campuses across America.
- [The Center for Deliberative Democracy](#) orchestrates deliberative polling events as an active, citizen-centric form of democratic engagement.
- [Civi](#) provides an app-based, online space where people can constructively engage with and learn from people with different perspectives than their own.
- [Hands Across the Hills](#) pairs rural communities in different parts of the country to engage in dialogue and shared projects, to build relationships and forge empathy for different perspectives and life experiences.
- [Living Room Conversations](#) facilitates respectful civic dialogue among Americans with diverse perspectives, in homes, public spaces, and online.
- [National Conversation Project](#) and the [ListenFirst Coalition](#) promote listening, conversing, and respecting one another’s perspectives.

Educate



Educate Americans directly about how and why we've become so polarized.

If we are to address polarization, we need to think not just about political solutions, but also solutions that are grounded in our understanding of social psychology the farther that modern politics sinks into a self-fulfilling cycle of identity-based polarization, the more we'll need new insights from social science.

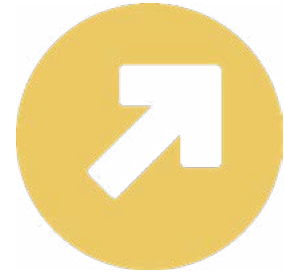
— *De Wit, Van Der Linden, and Brick, 2019*²⁰

Historically, most organized efforts to encourage healthier social behavior among Americans (such as quitting smoking, wearing a seatbelt, and not driving drunk) have conducted extensive public education and outreach to shore up support. Similarly, Americans of all ages need to be directly educated about why we are so polarized, why this is unhealthy for us, and how we can reverse course. Empowered with these new insights, we also need to build skills and form healthier habits to reduce our cognitive biases, cultivate intellectual humility, strengthen listening, and practice civil discourse.

EXAMPLES OF PROMISING INTERVENTIONS

- [AllSides for Schools](#) offers curricular programs and tools to help educators impart integrated skills in news literacy, critical thinking, and civil discourse.
- [American Exchange Project](#) takes the model of “study abroad” and applies it to high school students in towns and cities across the United States. The aim is to build enduring respect and understanding across economic, political, and geographic divides.
- [American Pals](#) revives the traditional penpal model in modern form, connecting American students from different backgrounds to practice writing skills while learning about each other.
- [Center for Humane Technology](#) educates American adults and youth about the polarizing role of technology and social media.
- [Close Up Foundation](#) provides hands-on student programs and engaging classroom resources to foster civic engagement, civil discourse skills, and domestic cultural exchange opportunities among American middle and high school students.
- [News Literacy Project](#), [Civic Online Reasoning](#), and [Bites Media](#) teach students and adult citizens how to discern among fact, fiction, and bias when consuming news and information.
- [OpenMind Platform](#) offers an online curriculum in intellectual humility and open mindedness.

Elevate



Elevate how we see ourselves and others beyond confining partisan identities.

Evidence suggests that making partisanship and politics less salient—and emphasizing other factors—can potentially change behavior as well ... In an era of affective polarization, downplaying politics can help to mitigate partisan divisions.

— *Iyengar et al, 2018*²¹

As America contorts itself into politically-defined tribes, social identity theory has come to the foreground to explain why we are tribal, and how we might make this human instinct work for us rather than against us. Part of the answer lies in reaffirming cross-cutting identities that pierce the tent walls of our political tribes and enable us to connect with a broader range of people and perspectives. Looking upward together — towards a more elevated and common identity (“we are all Americans”) — can also help dampen partisan fervor. Finally, reframing contentious issues and policy proposals in terms that resonate better with our political “others” may help yield positive, enduring political and social outcomes.

EXAMPLES OF PROMISING INTERVENTIONS

- [Golden Rule 2020](#) connects church congregations across America in dialogue about how to revive the principle of “treating others as we wish to be treated.”
- [Local Voices Network](#) aims to increase “community powered understanding” by bringing under-heard community voices, perspectives and stories to the center of a healthier public dialogue.
- [More In Common](#) aims to understand the forces driving Americans apart, to find common ground, and help to bring people together to tackle shared challenges.
- [One America Movement](#) works across diverse civic groups and faith communities to identify areas of common ground and collective social impact.
- [Pathos Labs](#) is a non-profit laboratory exploring ways that media and technology can be used to accelerate understanding and compassion across lines of difference, as well as dismantle bias, prejudice, and hatred.
- [Urban Rural Action](#) brings together people across the urban/rural divide to build relationships and jointly tackle issues that impact all communities.
- [Weave: The Social Fabric Project](#) is working across America to end social loneliness and isolation and to weave more inclusive communities.
- [Welcoming America](#) encourages all Americans to build a sense of inclusion and belonging within their communities, including new immigrants, recent transplants, and multi-generation residents.

Our Approach



006

Our Approach

Building bridges in today's polarized climate takes courage, dedication, and patience. Strong incentives exist to fuel — rather than alleviate — toxic political polarization. Much of the wealth and influence lies on the side of those who wilfully spread misinformation and stoke division.

The researchers and organizations we have highlighted, as well as many others, are overcoming the odds by identifying and implementing promising interventions that can help reduce affective polarization and restore our civic health.

Civic Health Project is committed to advancing applied academic research and measurable practitioner efforts through our own grantmaking, while also inspiring other funders to accelerate this important work.

Funding

We award social “seed grants” to academics and practitioners promoting healthier discourse, collaboration, and problem-solving across partisan divides. In doing so, we also aim to attract supplemental funding from individual, institutional, and corporate co-funders who are similarly inspired by the important work of our grantees and related organizations.

Advocacy

We showcase and promote a broad range of organizations with high potential to create and apply successful interventions. We leverage multiple promotional channels to help define and shine a spotlight on the collective efforts of hundreds of academics and thousands of practitioners tackling the problem of affective polarization. Our [online clinic](#) showcases many of these highly accessible interventions.

Networking

Through extensive networking and field research, we identify and connect “fellow travelers” in order to accelerate academic and practitioner collaboration. In doing so, we aim to break down theoretical silos and practical barriers that otherwise inhibit fast and comprehensive action on the problem of affective polarization.

Measurement

To help ensure that our philanthropic resources — and others' resources — are invested wisely, we are currently underwriting [academic lab work](#) that will yield systematic approaches for measuring the direction, magnitude, and persistence of a specific intervention (or combination of interventions) on affective polarization.

How You Can Help!



07

How You can Help!

Reducing toxic political polarization in America will take time, effort, and funding. Across the country, a new “political philanthropy” movement²² is emerging in recognition of the fact that the deep fissures and growing dysfunction afflicting our system of governance can only be addressed through a rapid infusion of philanthropic support.

Currently, philanthropic foundations spend only 1.5% of their grantmaking dollars on efforts to improve and reform democracy, and they allocate only a sliver...to supporting civic leaders.

— *Unite America, July 2020*²²

Feeling inspired to support the growing movement to reduce toxic political polarization in America? Please join our mission by helping to fund the academic research and practical interventions we support.

Civic Health Project maximizes the impact of your charitable contributions as follows:

Due Diligence — We conduct the exhaustive research and vetting required to make impactful grants.

Grant accountability — We work with our grantees to measure and report on the impact of their work.

Strategic leverage — We connect grantees with our expert network of practitioners and academic researchers, creating an expanded support system in which grantees’ work can accelerate and flourish.

Philanthropic status — Civic Health Project is a fiscal project of Mediators Foundation, a 501c3 charitable organization. All contributions to Civic Health Project and our nonprofit grantees are fully tax-deductible and DAF-eligible. One hundred percent of contributions go directly to our portfolio projects.

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