



White Paper:

Measuring and Evaluating the Impact of Bridge-Building Work In the United States

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Measuring and Evaluating the Impact of Bridge-Building Work In the United States

Executive Summary

Scientific inquiry into the causes and consequences of America's political, ideological, and social divisions extends back decades. Since about 2012, however, the pace and volume of research investigating the causes of our sharply increasing divisions has simply exploded.

Over the past few years – faced with the undeniable urgency of the problem being studied – many leading researchers have pivoted from research that is exclusively intended to describe the *problem*, towards applied efforts to propose, test, measure, and validate potential *solutions*.

Aided by social media and other connective platforms and forums, social science researchers concerned with extreme polarization and division – both inside and beyond the U.S. – have gradually found one another, citing and building upon each others' findings.

Think tanks, survey firms, and research houses have gotten in on the act too, conducting surveys, publishing reports, and hosting convenings to spotlight their conclusions and recommendations.

America's sharpening political and social divisions since 2012 haven't just sparked a frenzy of research inquiry. They have also catalyzed a grassroots movement that was populated initially by only a handful – but today by *hundreds* – of local, regional, national, and global bridge-building organizations.

Recognizing the need to observe, evaluate, measure, and refine their impact, many bridge-building organizations have implemented evaluative frameworks. Individually and collectively, these organizations are leveraging increasingly sophisticated methods and tools to demonstrate that bridge-building interventions deliver outcomes that are meaningful and durable.

The good news emanating from evaluative approaches including the Strengthening Democracy Challenge, the Social Cohesion Impact Measure (SCIM), field-level RCTs, and *many* other rigorous studies is that bridge-building interventions can be measured and - when evaluative frameworks are applied - can be shown to deliver statistically significant outcomes.

Research Foundations of Bridge-Building Approaches

Bridge-building work in the U.S. is guided by half a century of research; four decades of data and evaluation from international peace-building, conflict management and post-trauma interventions; and three decades of experience by smaller U.S. domestic organizations and initiatives centered on bridge-building, deliberation, and collaboration across differences.

A growing, interdisciplinary body of social science research explains how and why people and societies can become dangerously divided, and offers evidence-based recommendations for how to reverse these trends. Social science theories underpinning bridge-building interventions include - but are not limited to - [intergroup contact theory](#), [social identity theory](#), and [moral foundations theory](#).

Naming the Problem

Scientific inquiry into the causes and consequences of America's political, ideological, and social divisions extends back decades. Since about 2012, however, the pace and volume of research investigating the causes of our sharply increasing divisions has simply exploded.

An important study published by Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes in 2012, entitled "[Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization](#)," has been cited in many subsequent studies that aim to describe America's extreme levels of partisan animosity, i.e. "affective polarization." The study set out to identify and apply a set of social science methods for discerning the presence and magnitude of "affective polarization," methods that have subsequently been applied by other researchers and practitioners.

Also in 2012, Jonathan Haidt's [The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion](#) offered [Moral Foundations Theory](#) as a compelling explanatory framework for how and why fellow Americans can be wired so differently. Many other scholars in the U.S. and worldwide have subsequently applied, tested, critiqued, and built upon Moral Foundations Theory to scrutinize the specific ways that individuals' moral underpinnings can predict sharply diverging political and ideological attitudes, preferences, and behaviors.

Donald Trump's ascent to the U.S. presidency in 2016, and the societal rifts his victory and presidency subsequently exposed, only amplified the level of inquiry. Across academic fields including - but not limited to - political science, political economy, psychology, social psychology, sociology, communications, and economics, countless studies, academic courses, and applied research labs have emerged to explain why Americans report and exhibit disliking and distrusting each other so much more than in prior time periods.

Testing and Measuring Interventions

Over the past few years – faced with the undeniable urgency of the problem being studied – many leading academics have pivoted from research that is exclusively intended to describe the *problem*, towards applied efforts to propose, test, measure, and validate potential *solutions*.

Multiple academic centers and labs have cropped up or expanded focus in recent years to study extreme division and polarization in an applied context, including but not limited to:

- [Center for Media Engagement](#) (UT Austin)
- [Center for the Science of Moral Understanding](#) (UNC Chapel Hill)
- [Center for Social Norms and Behavioral Dynamics](#) (UPenn)
- [Deepest Beliefs Lab](#) (UNC Chapel Hill)
- [Difficult Conversations Lab](#) (Columbia)
- [Democracy and Polarization Lab](#) (Stanford)
- [Greater Good Science Center's Bridging Divides Initiative](#) (UC Berkeley)
- [Othering and Belonging Institute](#) (UC Berkeley)
- [Peace and Conflict Neuroscience Lab](#) (UPenn)
- [Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab](#) (American University)
- [Polarization Lab](#) (Duke)
- [Polarization Research Lab](#) (Dartmouth, UPenn, Stanford)
- [Polarization and Social Change Lab](#) (Stanford)
- [Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy](#) (Vanderbilt)

A group of ten scholars, many of them housed within one of these labs, co-published in *Nature* the February 2022 study, [“Interventions to Reduce Partisan Animosity,”](#) which introduced the “TRI” framework (referring to Thoughts, Feelings, and Institutions) to describe layered categories of interventions that can be effective in reducing extreme division and polarization. This publication collated and cited multiple prior studies, to provide strong evidentiary support for the efficacy of specific types of interventions across all three categories.

Collaborating Across Academic Disciplines and Institutions

Aided by social media and other connective platforms and forums, social science researchers concerned with extreme polarization and division – both inside and beyond the U.S. – have gradually found one another, citing and building upon each others' findings. Some have conducted “meta-analyses” of existing research, while others have launched collaborative, multi-disciplinary research projects and convenings to understand the problem more holistically.

Today, thanks to multiple years of intensive focus and increasing collaboration, the academic literature is fairly exhaustive in explaining the multiple, intersecting dimensions of our political and social divisions.

A powerful example of collaborative scholarship is Jennifer McCoy's and Murat Somers' 2019 anthology, [*"Towards a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies."*](#) comparing and analyzing 11 global case studies contributed by various scholars.

Another outstanding example of a collaborative, interdisciplinary paper by 15 leading academics (and citing many others) is [*"Political Sectarianism in America,"*](#) published in *Science Magazine* in October 2020. A harrowing read for anyone concerned with America's political future, the paper provides a unified framework for understanding the dimensions of our toxic divisions, and also offers aligned recommendations from some of the most highly cited scholars studying extreme polarization.

Important Contributions from Non-Academic Institutions

Think tanks, survey firms, and research houses have gotten in on the act too, conducting surveys, publishing reports, and hosting convenings to spotlight their conclusions and recommendations. Organizations that routinely survey and report on America's political and social divisions include, but are not limited to:

- [*Beyond Conflict*](#) (see [*Renewing American Democracy*](#) and [*America's Divided Mind*](#))
- [*Brookings Institution*](#) (see [*Ways to Reconcile and Heal America*](#))
- [*FixUs*](#) (see [*Root Causes Perspectives: How Did We Get Here?*](#))
- [*Ipsos*](#) (see [*Our Age of Uncertainty*](#))
- [*More in Common*](#) (see all [*Publications*](#))
- [*Over Zero*](#) (see [*Violence-Proofing U.S. Democracy*](#))
- [*Pew Research*](#) (see [*As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration with the Two-Party System*](#))
- [*Public Agenda*](#) (see [*Putting Partisan Animosity in Perspective*](#))
- [*Public Religion Research Institute*](#) (see [*Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack?*](#))
- [*Weber Shandwick*](#) (see [*Civility in America: Solutions for Tomorrow*](#))

Evaluating the Impact of Bridge-Building Organizations

America's sharpening political divisions since 2012 haven't just sparked a frenzy of research inquiry. They have also catalyzed a social movement that was populated initially by only a handful – but today by *hundreds* – of local, regional, national, and global bridge-building organizations.

These organizations work on bridging across Americans' political identities and related societal fault lines including -- but not limited to -- race, religion, economic status, and geographic location. They might describe the focus of their work as "bridging" or use other adjacent terms such as peace building, violence prevention, civil discourse, dialogue and deliberation, identifying common ground, or undertaking common action.

What connects them all - the "throughline" of bridging work - is the shared aspiration to help Americans of all ages, backgrounds, and beliefs to engage constructively with perspectives that challenge and differ from their own.

Recognizing the need to observe, evaluate, measure, and refine their impact, many bridge-building organizations have implemented evaluative frameworks. Individually and collectively, these organizations are leveraging increasingly sophisticated methods and tools to demonstrate that bridge-building interventions deliver outcomes that are meaningful and durable.

Below are three notable dimensions of how the bridge-building field is holding itself accountable to deliver evidence-based outcomes, including partnering with leading researchers, developing common tools and sharing best practices, and implementing a collective goals and measures framework.

Partnering With Leading Researchers

Many bridge-building organizations develop and implement evaluative frameworks in direct consultation and partnership with leading scholars. [American Exchange Project](#), for example, partners with Prof. Julia Minson at Harvard Kennedy School to implement and refine its program survey instrument. [Constructive Dialogue Institute](#) recently conducted a [randomized controlled trial](#) (RCT), in consultation with leading academics, to demonstrate the impact of its work. [Living Room Conversations](#) engaged [outside researchers](#) to conduct interviews and surveys on program effectiveness. [Braver Angels'](#) impact has been studied by [multiple academic research teams](#). [One America Movement](#) has similarly partnered with [multiple research teams](#) to measure and publish its impact.

The [Strengthening Democracy Challenge](#), a massive, tournament-style academic study spearheaded by Stanford's Polarization and Social Change Lab, was implemented both to identify promising interventions and to foster collaborations between bridge-building practitioners and leading researchers. Using a combination of social science instruments - including "feeling thermometers" and behavioral games - the Challenge measured the impact of various interventions on participants' self-reported levels of partisan animosity, anti-democratic attitudes, and tolerance for political violence. Having identified a number of promising approaches, the Challenge is [awarding financial grants](#) to teams of practitioners

and researchers to implement, scale, and measure interventions that leverage the study's insights.

Developing Common Tools and Sharing Best Practices

Some bridge-building organizations may lack the relationships, skills, scale, and / or funding to implement rigorous, standalone evaluative frameworks. Fortunately, these organizations can tap the collective wisdom of the bridge-building field, accessing shared tools, platforms, concepts, and best practices to kickstart their evaluative capabilities.

The white paper *"Outcomes That Matter to Bridging Organizations"* summarizes, categorizes, and prioritizes the specific pro-social outcomes that bridge-builders aim to achieve, based on input from more than 25 organizational leaders. These findings, in turn, informed the development of a free, open-source platform called the Social Cohesion Impact Measure (SCIM).

SCIM is a pre- and post-survey platform being deployed by many bridge-building practitioners, including [BridgeUSA](#), [The Village Square](#), and dozens of others to evaluate the impact of diverse interventions on participants' expressed levels of affective polarization, tolerance for political diversity, open mindedness, intellectual humility, desire to "bridge" across divides, etc. Organizations leveraging SCIM can use and adapt the tool to emphasize certain outcome variables over others, to compare single events and / or evaluate their overall programming, and to assess the statistical significance, direction, and durability of outcomes.

Implementing a Goals and Measures Framework

Collaborative work to define bridge-building goals, measures, platforms, and tools (such as SCIM) emerged initially from a voluntary working group composed of 20 member organizations. More recently, this work has been formalized, centralized, and funded through a Goals & Measures Program housed at Listen First Project and overseen by members of the Bridging Movement Alignment Council (BMAC) steering group.

The Goals & Measures Program team is responsible for housing and maintaining shared evaluation resources on behalf of the bridge-building field, and for implementing an overall Goals & Measures Framework that emerged from the working group's efforts. This three-layer framework articulates a collective model of change for how the bridge-building field's efforts will achieve the shifting of American societal norms towards "bridging divides" effectively, rapidly, and at sufficient scale to repair relationships, strengthen communities, sustain peace, and preserve democracy.

The three interdependent layers are:

- **Strengthen the bridge-building field.** Increase and measure the staffing capacity, staffing diversity, evaluation rigor, knowledge and skill base, and aggregate funding of the bridge-building field.
- **Mobilize target sectors and audiences.** Drive and measure broad adoption of evidence-based bridge-building skills, programs, and practices via (1) civic sectors, with specific focus on faith communities, business and workplaces, higher education, and state / federal legislative bodies; (2) geographically-based work conducted in local communities, and (3) individuals, i.e., Americans who access and participate in bridge-building interventions.
- **Shift social norms at scale.** By expanding our field's capacity and by mobilizing more sectors, communities, and individuals to adopt and practice bridge-building, drive discernible, positive shifts in Americans' reported feelings, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors related to the country and each other. Specifically, measure changes in reported levels of affective polarization, reported levels of social cohesion, reduction in hate-fueled violence, and reported levels of agency and belonging.

This framework, in turn, rolls up into a broader endeavor, called the [More Perfect](#) campaign, to define and measure democracy-strengthening goals across multiple cross-partisan reform fields or "pillars," with Bridging Divides as one of the identified pillars. The More Perfect campaign will track and report progress across these pillars in the coming years.

ROI Case Studies: How Our Grantees Measure Impact

The good news emanating from evaluative approaches such as the Strengthening Democracy Challenge, the Social Cohesion Impact Measure, field-level RCTs, and many other rigorous studies is that bridge-building interventions can be measured and shown to deliver statistically significant outcomes.

Each of the examples below describes how Civic Health Project grantees are rigorously measuring and reporting on the qualitative impact of their work. As our portfolio grows, so too our commitment to supporting grantees in their effort to measure, refine, and maximize their ability to address divisions, foster social cohesion, and improve civil discourse.

Strengthening Democracy Challenge

The [Strengthening Democracy Challenge](#), noteworthy both for the breadth of interventions submitted (more than 250) and the number of participants tested (more than 32,000) identified several promising intervention approaches. In the Challenge, 23 of 25 tested interventions delivered [statistically meaningful reductions](#) in partisan animosity, anti-democratic attitudes, and / or tolerance for political violence. The findings indicate that applying one or more of these approaches will yield positive outcomes:

- Correcting inaccurate partisan stereotypes
- Role modeling positive contact between partisans
- Appealing to common identities
- Leveraging cues from political leaders
- Highlighting the threat of democratic collapse

America Talks

[America Talks](#), a Civic Health Project strategic project, is one of the largest bridging interventions tested to date using the Social Impact Cohesion Measure (SCIM). America Talks 2021, the inaugural event, paired left-leaning and right-leaning adults from across the country in one-hour, guided, online conversations designed to reduce animosity and foster cohesion across differences.

Data from nearly 900 respondents to the post-event survey yielded the following findings:

- 97% of respondents reported "feeling heard" by others in their conversations
- 97% reported that they would like to repeat the experience
- 84% reported feeling more interested in having conversations across differences
- 79% reported learning something new from their conversation partner
- 75% reported that they would have talked longer with their partner if they could

More than 125 participants in the 2021 event also spent time - immediately following their one-hour conversations - to submit video, audio, or written testimonials about the event.

America Talks 2022 used the newly-developed Social Cohesion Impact Measure (SCIM) platform to develop rigorous metrics on how the intervention impacted participants. More than 600 event participants responded to the pre- and post-event SCIM survey, and aggregate survey results showed a statistically significant, aggregate reduction in "affective polarization", i.e. political animosity. Specifically, survey respondents reported a 7 percentage point reduction in feelings of animosity towards people with different political perspectives.

Capturing demographic data on America Talks 2022 participants also allowed event organizers to observe that Democrats reported somewhat steeper reductions in partisan animosity than Republicans, and that African-Americans reported the steepest aggregate reductions across all racial groups. Fine-grained demographic insights like these enable program leaders to tune invitations, messaging, and conversation prompts to elevate results across all social groups.

Meeting of America

[Meeting of America](#) applied SCIM to its Fall 2021 pilot and again to a larger programming rollout in Central and Eastern Kentucky in Summer and Fall 2022. An active program that is continuing to roll out across the country, Meeting of America's results to date show a smaller

- yet statistically significant - three percentage point decrease in animosity between self-described liberals and conservatives.

Data from the Fall 2021 pilot also yielded these post-event survey findings:

- 100% of respondents reported "feeling heard" by others in their conversations
- 97% reported feeling inspired to invite others to participate
- 95% reported wanted to be part of an ongoing community
- 85% reported feeling more hopeful about the future of the country
- 82% reported feeling more interested in having conversations across differences

Read [here](#) for more about Meeting of America's impact.

BridgeUSA

BridgeUSA, a student-led organization that manages chapters and hosts dialogues on college campuses about controversial political issues, uses SCIM across nine universities (so far) to measure the impact of their interventions on college students.

Results obtained at their events demonstrate that their chapters had a statistically significant impact on understanding and trust dimensions of cross-partisan interactions, with participants showing a four percentage point aggregate improvement in reported respect and understanding for others with opposing viewpoints. BridgeUSA's staff recently informed Civic Health Project that they plan to implement learnings from the nine-campus SCIM pilot directly into their 2023 national programming.

Constructive Dialogue Institute

[Constructive Dialogue Institute](#) (CDI), formerly OpenMind Platform, recently conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to compare outcomes between a control group and recipients of CDI's educational programming. Testing thousands (N=29,766) of users of their Perspectives 1.0 online learning platform, CDI observed significant aggregate reductions in affective polarization, as well as significant increases in intellectual humility, in the treatment group before and after the learning intervention.

More granular analysis showed that results were strongest for self-defined progressives and self-defined conservatives, when compared to both self-defined moderates and to the control group. The study also found that reported outcomes were durable; i.e. one month later, the affective polarization and intellectual humility outcomes still largely held up, with affective polarization decreasing approximately ten percentage points.

Read [here](#) for more about CDI's impact.

Deliberations.US

[Deliberations.US](#), a project of [The People](#), crafts engaging, online deliberations on American political issues, for college students as well as the general adult population. College students who participated in a Fall 2021 Deliberative Poll on the electoral college, ranked choice voting, and other voting-related mechanisms felt the deliberations were valuable and helped them clarify their opinions on the issues at hand. Data aggregated from more than 400 post-deliberation survey responses yielded these findings:

- 81% of participants rated the event as valuable
- 78% of the participants reported that the small group discussions were valuable
- 69% felt the briefing materials helped them clarify their positions on the issues
- 61% thought the plenary sessions with experts helped them better understand their positions on the issues

Deliberation participants were also asked to rate the quality of the experience using an online, purpose-built conversation and deliberation platform. According to the post-deliberation survey:

- 89% of the participants felt the platform "provided the opportunity for everyone to participate in the discussion."
- 82% of the participants thought "the importance of the issues were covered in the group discussions."
- 76% also expressed that "the discussion platform tried to make sure that opposing arguments were considered."
- 62% of the participants felt they "learned a lot about people very different from me - about what they and their lives are like."

Resetting the Table

[Resetting the Table](#) (RTT), collects written evaluations - including both qualitative and quantitative data - for every program for which it is logistically possible. More than 80% of participants regularly report increased desire, confidence, and skill to engage productively across differences, and more than 80% of trained leaders report learning new tools and skills that they plan to use in their work. Participants regularly use words like "transformative," "mind-blowing" and "essential" to describe RTT's impact on their leadership and lens.



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