

IDEAS POLITICS

Americans Are Actually More Unified on Political Issues Than We Think

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BY **GOV. SPENCER COX, GOV. WES MOORE, & WILL JOHNSON** SEPTEMBER 5, 2024 12:00 PM EDT

IDEAS

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We've been told for years that Americans are irreconcilably polarized. Neighbors, family members, and friends have grown apart based on political differences. Party affiliation signals whether you are "friend" or "foe." We live in separate echo chambers on social media. Most of us **won't even date people** who don't share our political persuasions.

But perhaps there is more common ground between us than meets the eye. **The Harris Poll**, which has tracked public opinion for over 60 years, recently reran a

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deeper dive reveals the possibility for greater unity across political parties.

Over the last two years, the number of Americans who see potential for broad agreement on kitchen table issues actually increased. People are optimistic about the possibility for consensus on a range of priorities including the economy, the environment, criminal justice, health care, education, and international relations. Many believe there is considerable space to come together and form consensus: Nearly 60% of U.S. adults claim they are receptive to new ideas, and two-in-three U.S. adults believe that political ideology is not an important part of their identity.

Further, polling by counter-polarization organization More in Common reveals a **"perception gap"**: both sides of the spectrum overestimate by about 30% the extremism of the other side. That gap warps our views and leads both sides to violate norms in the mistaken belief that the other side is going to do it so we must do it first. It turns out that reducing that gap, by talking with and perhaps serving alongside people with whom we may disagree, both humanizes our political opponents and helps us see we may not be as far apart as we thought.



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With this knowledge at our fingertips, it is our job to narrow the gap between the divisions we see and the hunger for unity we all privately share.

That's why the three of us—who each hail from different corners of the political spectrum—are joining forces to help Americans get to know each other again, so we can rediscover our shared commitment to basic values and find common-sense solutions to the challenges we face. Our combined push for unity isn't designed to promote “universal consensus.” Democracy thrives on disagreement, debate, and dissent—and that will not change. But our great American experiment requires universal commitment to the process of healthy disagreement, competition, and bargaining. As Constitutional scholar Yuval Levin wrote recently, “unity does not mean thinking alike; unity means acting together.”

While most Americans feel confident in their moral compass, fewer feel confident in expressing opinions with those they disagree with. Four in five (79%) agree that they trust themselves to do the right thing, yet only half (51%) feel confident respectfully expressing their beliefs to someone with whom they disagree. But a majority of Americans (58%) also think democracy is stronger when citizens can have respectful discussions with each other about topics on which they disagree.

By working together, we can rediscover how to disagree without being disagreeable. A host of bipartisan and nonpartisan organizations have emerged in recent years aiming to cool the political temperature and foster national unity. Initiatives like [Disagree Better](#), [Listen First Project](#), and [Starts With Us](#)

promote civil engagement and respectful dialogue—left, right, and center. These programs, and others, are helping Americans to unite in mending the cracks in our national political community. More people are listening first and disagreeing better— and that’s a start.

The three of us aren’t naive about the challenge of the work ahead. It is exponentially more difficult to build than to break. Strengthening institutions and civic bonds doesn’t come easy. But destroying them does.

While progress isn’t pre-ordained, progress is possible. Change starts with individuals stepping up to make a difference. We are calling on everyone to help us heal the divisions within our communities—from reconnecting with that friend you wrote off because of political differences, to running for office in a way that helps unite instead of divide. It also takes everyone recognizing that we are on the same team, as Americans, and sharing a commitment to respect and accommodation where we agree and civil disagreement where we differ.

If public opinion is any indication, there are more of “us” than we once thought. Let’s not miss this opportunity to bring our country together again.

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