



What Can We Do About Political Polarization?

Vassar Lifelong Learning Institute
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The slide features a white background with vertical stripes. In the top right corner, a portion of the American flag is visible, showing red and white stripes and a blue field with white stars. On the left side, there are three stars: a small red star at the top, a medium-sized blue star with a white outline and dots in the middle, and a large white star with a red and white striped outline at the bottom. On the right side, there are two small stars: a blue one and a white one, both with soft shadows.

Survey Results



Survey responses – 22 submitted (34 registered)



Which choice best describes your political views?

Liberal – 8

Lean left – 7

Centrist/Independent – 4

Lean right – 1

Very Conservative – 1

None of the above – 1

Where do you get most of your news?

Mostly liberal sources – 6

Mostly conservative sources – 0

Mixture of liberal and conservative – 11

Social media – 2

None of these answers fit for me – 3

Do you have family members or friends who strongly disagree with your political views?

Yes – 14

No – 7

Unsure – 1





Survey responses – sample comments



What are you expecting from this course?

- Challenges to my thinking
- I hope to learn how to talk to Maga people about my politics
- A way to discuss politics without ending up in a fight
- Best ways to deal with opposing views and how to come to common ground
- An objective, productive approach to open discourse without antagonism or hostility
- To understand why there is so much distrust on the two sides.
- Interesting discussions and also to challenge my own world view to be sure that I am not leaning only into my own biases.
- Ways to engage civilly with those who have very different views.
- I think we are just TOO POLARIZED in this country. I suppose I am looking for how to have an actual discussion about subjects without BS from both sides
- Understanding the other side and learn to work with people that have other points of view
- I'd like a better understanding of how right wing and right-leaning folks reconcile choices that I view as immoral and inhumane.





Survey responses – sample comments

How do you think we can improve America's political climate?

- Toning down the political rhetoric
- Get rid of social media.
- Add more civics classes and teach how to identify fake news in high school
- Elect members of Congress who can negotiate with their peers
- Democrats & Republicans need to listen to one another with open minds
- Get rid of gerrymandering, dark money, establish term limits, etc.
- Learn to listen without judging and name-calling and understand that there's almost always a middle ground that can work for everyone.
- I think that the media promotes and even embraces polarization, and most of our elected officials are too focused on party lines and destruction of "the other guys" to truly work in the best interests of their constituents.
- I think a free press that does [not?] succumb to political and advertiser pressure.
- Humble ourselves and listen to each other. And not be so aggressive.
- ... be respectful towards people. Find what unites us, rather than divides us.
- Mandate 50% participation in primaries
- Start talking with the other side and reduce the impact of both the extreme left and right
- Damned if I know.



Defining political polarization

“Political polarization is the movement of political views and actions away from the center and toward more extreme views and policies.” – www.facinghistory.org

Wikipedia defines it as “the divergence of political attitudes away from the center, towards [ideological extremes](#).^{[1][2][3]} Scholars distinguish between **ideological polarization** (differences between the policy positions) and **affective polarization** (an **emotional dislike and distrust** of political out-groups).”





Interesting footnote

“Fernbach, Rogers, Fox and Sloman (2013) argue that it is a result of people having an exaggerated faith in their understanding of complex issues. Asking people to explain their policy preferences in detail typically resulted in more moderate views. Simply asking them to list the reasons for their preferences did not result in any such moderation.[57]”

[Link](#) to the paper cited above





Recommended viewing



How did things get this bad? A few ideas

THE TYRANNY OF MERIT



WHAT'S BECOME OF
THE COMMON GOOD?

MICHAEL J.
SANDEL

“Meritocracy is corrosive of the common good. It leads to hubris among the winners and humiliation among those who lose out.” - Michael Sandel

Colleges and Universities have been accused of being very liberal. Some have admitted this. Heterodox Academy is trying to fix it.

During the 2024 election, the Democrats appeared to be hiding Biden's senility.

Most voters don't trust either party.





If you think you're too small to make a difference,
you haven't spent the night with a mosquito.

– African proverb





Is it abnormal to be this divided?

Presidential Election Margin of Victory
From UC Santa Barbara





Main themes for this course

- ❖ There *are* things we can do to counteract political polarization.
- ❖ Support candidates and organizations in the center.
- ❖ Be careful who you listen to – use critical thinking.





Topics for this course

1. Some organizations working to fix polarization
2. My experience with contacting members of Congress
3. Teaching Civics and Virtue
4. Who's Influencing Who?
5. What is our vision for the future?





Part 1

Organizations working to depolarize.

Maybe you'll join one.





Braver Angels

Braver Angels.org (about 15,000 members and 70,000 workshop participants)

One on one conversation topics:

- The Golden Rule
- Red/Blue
- Rural/Urban
- Race, Ethnicity, and Culture
- Conversation Across Generations
- Immigration
- Israeli-Palestinian Relations



Which conversation would you try?
(I've tried Red/Blue, Golden Rule, and Generations.)





Braver Angels

Things my “red” Braver Angel partner and I agree on.

- The country is polarized, and we should work to reduce polarization.
- We should teach children (and adults) **critical thinking**, **civics**, and **ethics**.
- Environmental regulations are needed to protect against air and water pollution.
- Some regulations go too far.
- Fiscal responsibility (reducing the federal debt) is important.
- The government should focus more on preventing the need for abortions and less on making it legal or illegal.
- We both like comedian Nate Bargatze.
- Gun regulations: She is concerned about protecting hunters' rights but concedes that gun ownership loopholes should be filled.





Braver Angels

The conversation doesn't always go well – here are some topics where we disagreed.

- “Climate alarmism”
- How COVID was handled
- The Maryland man deported to El Salvador
- Voter turnout in 2020 is proof of voter fraud





Braver Angels

Note that Braver Angels has more “Blues” than “Reds” but you can get a match for the Red/Blue conversation.

Braver Angels also has courses about how to have difficult political discussions. The LLI course, Courageous Citizenship, will focus on this.

They have interesting email newsletters, too. Sign up!

Related – [Story Corps One Small Step Conversations](#)
[Derate the Hate](#) podcast





Here are some thoughts on stating your opinions

The only way to tell the truth is to speak with kindness.
Only the words of a loving man can be heard.
– Thoreau

For a truth to be heard, it must be spoken with kindness...
the manifestations of truth telling are humility and simplicity.
– Tolstoy





More thoughts on stating your opinions

Reacting in anger or annoyance will not advance one's ability to persuade.
— Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates.
At the first gate, ask yourself, "Is it true?"
At the second gate ask, "Is it necessary?"
At the third gate ask, "Is it kind?"
— Rumi



"The authors are model bridge builders with no-consensus tools.
They've walked the walk, and this book's the map."
—Monica Guerin, author of *I Never Thought of It That Way*

BEYOND *THE* POLITICS *OF* CONTEMPT

Practical Steps to
Build Positive Relationships
in Divided Times



DOUG TESCHNER

BETH MALOW

BECKY ROBINSON

Book written by some Braver Angels

This book includes many things covered in this course
and lots of references.



No Labels



[No Labels.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Labels.org) (Wikipedia [article](#))

"Political leaders need to listen more to the middle and less to the extremes on the far left and right."





Problem Solvers Caucus



Caucus members, Wikipedia article

"The Problem Solvers Caucus is a group of Members of Congress — split between Republicans and Democrats — committed to advancing common-sense solutions to key issues facing our nation. Our Members sit down together every week to debate, exchange ideas, and find common ground. "





More In Common works in United Kingdom, Poland, Germany, France, Spain, Brazil and the United States.

Their mission: “to understand the forces driving us apart, find common ground and bring people together to tackle shared challenges.”

Connection Opportunity – Insights for Bringing Americans Together Across Difference

America’s Environmental Blind Spot – Democrats and Republicans Underestimate Support for Environmental Issues





The Hidden Tribes of America

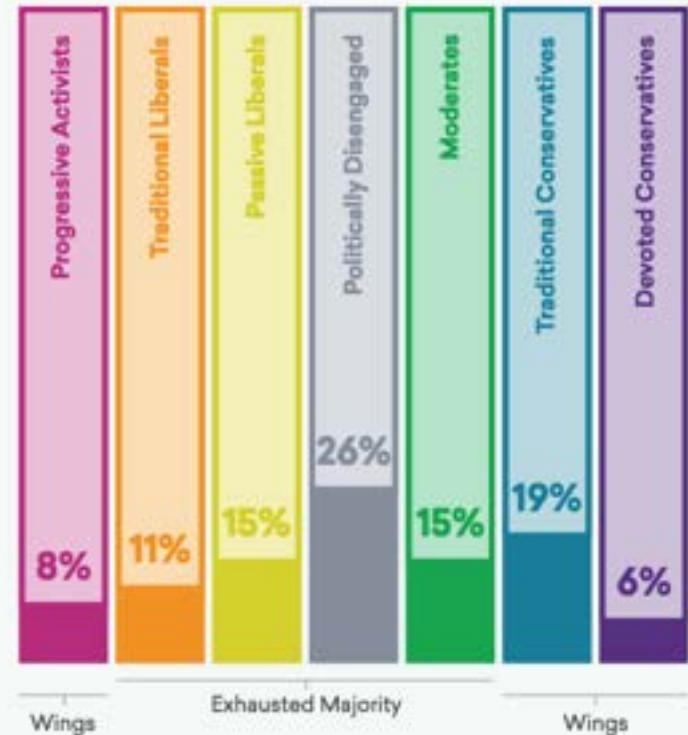
One of their well-known reports from 2018 is called “Hidden Tribes”.

Why is this significant?

It shows that 2/3 of Americans do NOT support extreme politics. They call them the “exhausted majority”.

More details here:

<https://hiddentribes.us/>





More In Common met with my LLI class on Zoom last fall to discuss the Perception Gap study.

The Perception Gap

- Democrats and Republicans imagine that almost twice as many people on the other side hold extreme views than really do.
- On average, Democrats and Republicans believe that 55 percent of their opponents' views are extreme, but in reality only about 30 percent are.

[Link](#) to the report





Common Sense American

Common Sense American is one of several programs that are part of the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona.

Common Sense American website

Results of Common Sense America bipartisan issues survey. These are being discussed with some members of Congress to guide their priorities. This year they are working on Immigration Reform.





Did you notice that both **Braver Angels** and **National Institute for Civil Discourse** have things focused on the Golden Rule?

There are many versions:

- Do unto others as you want them to do unto you. – Jesus (Matt. 7:12)
- Silver rule: Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.
- What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. – Hillel
- ...never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself. – Confucius
- Do not do to others that which angers you when they do it to you. – Isocrates (436–338 BC)





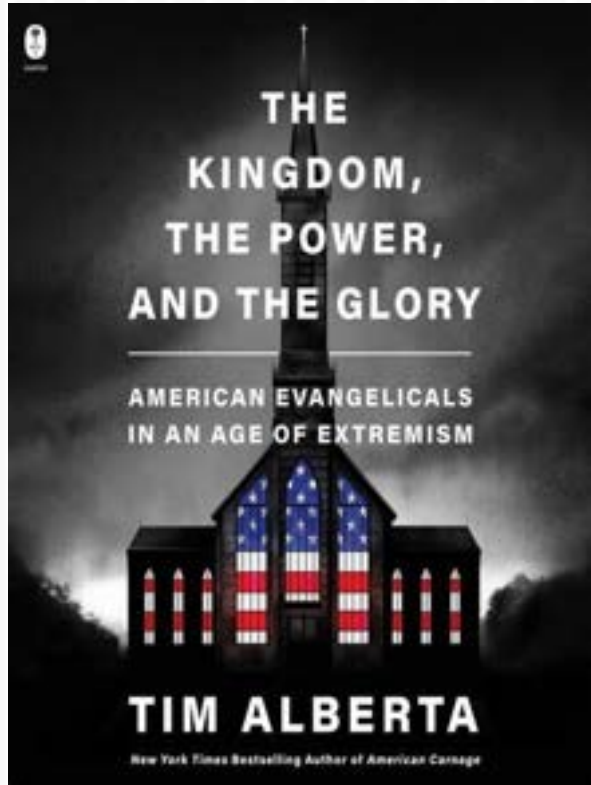
Other organizations focused on reducing polarization

- The Free Thinker Institute (I attended once)
- Crossing Party Lines (I attended twice)
Talking about facts handout
- Disagree Better Initiative (National Governors Association)
- America in One Room ("civic engagement")
- The Civic Health Project (tech projects designed to "address the root causes of polarization, foster social cohesion, and strengthen civic norms.")
- Make America Dinner Again



This one is encouraging

Christian Nationalism



For a wide-ranging look into Evangelical churches and how many of them became overtly political, see Tim Alberta's book *The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory*.

An important influencer is Charlie Kirk's organization called "Turning Point USA".

Religious groups working to counter Christian Nationalism

- Vote Common Good “inspiring, energizing, and mobilizing people of faith to make the common good their voting criteria”.
- BJC (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty) “defending the separation of church and state”.
- One America Movement “mission is to work with faith leaders and faith communities to build a united American society by eliminating toxic polarization.”



Others working to counter Christian Nationalism

- Americans United for the Separation of Church and State
<https://www.au.org/>
- James Talarico (D – Texas House of Representatives) Interview on Ezra Klein podcast
- Military Religious Freedom Foundation
(Wikipedia article)
- Megen Phelps-Roper, who grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church
TED talk





Homework for next week

A few years ago, the US Census Bureau predicted that whites will no longer be in the majority by 2045. This Brookings Institute [article](#) describes the event. The Census report generated a lot of reaction and fear, especially amongst conservatives. What would you say to someone to alleviate their fear of losing white majority status?





THANKS!

End of first deck



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Other Organizations

OK, there are a lot...

List of 50+ pro-democracy organizations.

Indivisible
Swing Left

Independent Center (recommended by Tim)
Builders Movement (recommended by Denise)
For The Many (some local people are involved)

Top 10 Conservative Advocacy groups



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