**FINDING 1:** OVERWHELMINGLY, AMERICANS SAY DIVISIVENESS AND GRIDLOCK ARE BIG PROBLEMS FACING THE NATION. ALMOST A THIRD REPORT THAT DIVISIVENESS HAS AFFECTED THEM PERSONALLY, CITING DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND SADNESS AS EXAMPLES OF THIS. BUT AMERICANS ALSO BELIEVE THAT THERE IS MORE COMMON GROUND AMONG THE PUBLIC THAN LEADERS AND THE MEDIA TYPICALLY PORTRAY.

The inaugural Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground survey finds that a large majority of Americans (83 percent) think divisiveness and gridlock in America is a big problem; see Figure 1.¹

![Figure 1. Percent of Americans who agree or disagree that divisiveness and gridlock in American politics is not a big problem, by political affiliation](image)

**DIVISIVENESS HAS DIRECTLY AFFECTED THE LIVES OF ALMOST A THIRD OF AMERICANS.**

Divisiveness does not just affect the workings of government and the tenor of public life. Almost a third of Americans say destructive partisan disagreements and divisiveness have affected their personal lives – with more Democrats (37 percent) than

¹ The Independent subgroup includes those who self-identify as Independents (N=330) or (in a small handful of cases) with another party (N=9). The “apolitical” subgroup includes those who have no preference towards political affiliation (N=210) or skipped the question (N=6), “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as...?”.

Divisiveness and Collaboration in American Public Life – December 2019
Republicans (26 percent), Independents (22 percent) or “apolitical” respondents (10 percent) saying divisiveness has affected them.

These fissures bleed into how people consume news. Approximately equal portions of Americans say that America’s divisiveness has caused them to pay more attention to political news and commentary (14 percent) or to pay less attention (12 percent). And about 1 in 10 Americans (11 percent) -- representing something like 24 million Americans -- say divisiveness in American society has caused them to experience anxiety, sadness, or depression; see Figure 2.

“Why should I get involved? What am I getting out of it? All I’m going to do is get upset. My blood pressure goes up.” – Jackson, MS; in his 50s; Black; Democrat

MOST AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT DIVISIVENESS HAS GOTTEN WORSE, BUT THERE IS NO CONSENSUS OVER WHETHER OR NOT IT WILL IMPROVE IN THE FUTURE.

Across partisan lines, 74 percent of Americans believe that over the past ten years the country has become more destructive in dealing with disagreements. But Americans have a range of opinions on whether the nation will become more constructive (22 percent), more destructive (39 percent) or stay the same over the next ten years (38 percent) -- with little difference by political affiliation in these views.

2 Focus group quotes have been minimally edited for clarity.

PUBLIC AGENDA
MOST AMERICANS SAY THERE IS MORE COMMON GROUND AMONG THE PUBLIC THAN THE MEDIA AND LEADERS PORTRAY.

One of the animating impulses behind the Hidden Common Ground Initiative is to explore the possibility that the dominant narrative of a profoundly, even hopelessly, divided America is being overstated to the point of being self-fulfilling and self-defeating. Does the general public believe there is more common ground than is typically acknowledged or leveraged? Our data show that the public largely thinks so, with three in four saying there is more common ground among the American people than the news media and political leaders typically portray; see Figure 3.

“We all have the same concerns. We care about people. We all bleed red.” – Jackson, MS; in his 60s; Black; Republican

“I personally think you have more people respecting each other than not respecting each other. We all have the same needs here. We just want to make sure that everything is taken care of.” – Cincinnati, OH; in his 50s; White; Republican

“I think we have more in common than separates us.” – Jackson, MS; in his 50s; Black; Democrat

![Figure 3](image-url)

**Figure 3.** Percent of Americans who agree or disagree that there is more common ground among the American people than the news media and political leaders portray, by political affiliation

Base: All respondents, N=1,548; Republican, N=466; Democrat, N=533; Independent, N=359; Apolitical, N=130

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

Estimates indicated with a * are not statistically significant from one another but are statistically significant from estimates indicated with a **. Estimates without a * are not statistically significant from those with a * or **. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey
FINDING 2: DIFFERENCES OF OPINION ARE LESS OF A PROBLEM THAN NOT KNOWING HOW TO DISCUSS DIFFERENCES PRODUCTIVELY, MOST AMERICANS SAY. FOR A PLURALITY OF AMERICANS, BOTH THOUGHTLESS, HURTFUL TALK AND A FEAR OF SPEAKING ONE’S MIND ARE EQUALLY BIG PROBLEMS.

Overall, 69 percent of Americans think our country deals with disagreements in a destructive way. But for the most part, Americans do not think our nation has too many irreconcilable differences. Forty-three percent worry more about Americans not knowing how to talk about their disagreements and conflicts in constructive ways, while only 10 percent worry that fundamental disagreements and conflicting values are a more pressing issue. Another 38 percent worry equally about both of those problems; see Figure 4.

“I think we need different points of view. That’s what makes our country great is that everybody is giving their opinions for everyone to listen, if everybody will listen to one another.” – Cincinnati, OH; in her 50s; Black; Independent

“I think diversity is the key to democracy [but] there’s a problem with people respecting other people’s opinions.” – Cincinnati, OH; in his 60s; Black; Republican

“People don’t know how to have a discussion without getting offended first.” – New Rochelle, NY; in her 30s; Asian; Democrat

“Certain people are ready to just argue instead of first listening to everyone’s opinions and then talking out their differences. People just don’t know how to have discussions anymore.” – New Rochelle; in her 30s; Black; Democrat
Both thoughtless, hurtful talk and a fear of speaking one’s mind are equally big problems, a plurality of Americans say.

There are many things undermining Americans’ ability to talk through our differences productively. Among them, this survey explored the tension between speaking freely and fears of offending others. Are Americans concerned that people are afraid to speak their mind honestly and say what they really mean for fear of criticism? Or do they think the bigger issue is that people speak thoughtlessly without regard for harming other people? A plurality of Americans (46 percent) think both are equal problems, with the remainder split between which is a bigger problem; see Figure 5.

“Right now anything political is being turned very negative. People are just either trying to avoid it and not stating their opinions. Or they’re voicing their opinions and then it’s just straight arguments. I think people are having a really hard time trying to say where they stand.” – Cincinnati, OH; in her 20s; Hispanic; Democrat
“A lot of people just don’t listen. They say what they want to say and if you try to voice your opinion they don’t even hear what you’re saying.” – Jackson, MS; in his 20s; White; Republican

“The way people treat each other now, people just say what’s on their mind, how they truly feel now. I guess it’s better. At least you know what you’re going up against.” – Jackson, MS; in his 50s; Black; Democrat

For a plurality of Americans, people being afraid to speak their mind for fear of criticism is as much of a problem as people speaking thoughtlessly without regard for others.

Figure 5. Percent of Americans who think each of the following is a bigger problem or that both are equal problems, by political affiliation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Afraid to speak mind</th>
<th>Thoughtlessly</th>
<th>Both problems</th>
<th>Neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>27%*</td>
<td>21%*</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>7%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>14%**</td>
<td>31%**</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>8%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>22%*</td>
<td>22%*</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>4%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apolitical</td>
<td>24%*</td>
<td>14%*</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>16%**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- People are afraid to speak their mind honestly and say what they really mean for fear of criticism
- People speak thoughtlessly without regard for harming other people
- They are equal problems
- Neither

Base: All respondents, N=1,548; Republican, N=466; Democrat, N=533; Independent, N=359; Apolitical, N=190
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1.0 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.
Estimates indicated with * are not statistically significant from one another but are statistically significant from estimates indicated with **. Estimates without * are not statistically significant from those with * or **. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey
FINDING 3: BOTH REPUBLICANS AND DEMOCRATS INDICATE THAT THEY COULD IMAGINE FINDING COMMON GROUND WITH ABOUT HALF OF THOSE WHO IDENTIFY WITH THE OPPOSING PARTY. REPUBLICANS AND DEMOCRATS ALSO SEE ABOUT A QUARTER OF THOSE IN THEIR OWN PARTY AS SO EXTREME THEY COULD NOT IMAGINE FINDING COMMON GROUND WITH THEM.

Despite the persistent portrayal of the American public as profoundly polarized, our findings suggest that Americans think they could collaborate with a significant number of people across partisan lines. On average, Republicans and Democrats alike think that about half of the people in the other party are “misguided but worth trying to find common ground with.” Independents have a similar view of people in both major parties; see Figures 6 and 7.

**Figure 6. How do Republicans and Independents view Democrats when it comes to finding common ground?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What percent of Democrats do you think are misguided but worth trying to find common ground with?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republicans say on average: 50% of Democrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents say on average: 46% of Democrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apoliticals say on average: 46% of Democrats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Base: Republican, N=466; Independent, N=359; Apolitical, N=190*

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey
Ameriicans also see about a quarter of the people in their own parties as so extreme they could not imagine finding common ground with them.

Notably, both Republicans and Democrats say that a little over a quarter of their fellow party members are "so extreme that they can't imagine finding common ground with" them. Democrats say that about 27 percent of their fellow-Democrats; Republicans say it about 27 percent of their fellow-Republicans.
**FINDING 4: A THIRD OF REPUBLICANS AND A QUARTER OF DEMOCRATS SAY THEY DO NOT HAVE A GOOD WAY TO UNDERSTAND THE VIEWS OF THE OPPOSING POLITICAL PARTY. HEAVY CONSUMPTION OF CERTAIN NEWS OUTLETS IS CORRELATED WITH VIEWING MORE MEMBERS OF THE OTHER SIDE AS EXTREME.**

Reliable sources to consume or understand the views of other political parties are few and far between, according to Americans. A third of Republicans say they do not really have a good way to understand the views of Democrats, while a quarter of Democrats say the same about the views of Republicans. For their part, around a quarter of Independents say they do not have a good way to understand the views of either of the two major parties, while around 4 in 10 people who are apolitical say the same. These findings suggest a need for constructive cross-partisan contact and dialogue.

Among those who believe they have ways to understand the opposing party, the largest share of Republicans (27 percent) say that they rely most on personal relationships to understand the views of Democrats. Twenty-one percent of Democrats rely most on personal relationships to understand the views of Republicans.

The largest share of Democrats (25 percent) say that they rely most on the news media to understand the views of Republicans. Only 15 percent of Republicans say they rely most on the news media to understand the views of Democrats; see Figure 8.

---

**Figure 8.** Percent of Americans who rely most on each of the following to understand the views of ordinary people who identify as Republicans and Democrats:

- **Knowing people who are Republicans/Democrats**:
  - How Republicans Understand Democrats: 27%
  - How Democrats Understand Republicans: 21%

- **News media**:
  - How Republicans Understand Democrats: 15%
  - How Democrats Understand Republicans: 25%

- **The views of family/friend/coworkers**:
  - How Republicans Understand Democrats: 12%
  - How Democrats Understand Republicans: 8%

- **National political leaders**:
  - How Republicans Understand Democrats: 7%
  - How Democrats Understand Republicans: 13%

- **Social media**:
  - How Republicans Understand Democrats: 4%
  - How Democrats Understand Republicans: 6%

- **Don’t really have a good way**:
  - How Republicans Understand Democrats: 31%
  - How Democrats Understand Republicans: 23%

- **Other**:
  - How Republicans Understand Democrats: 3%
  - How Democrats Understand Republicans: 4%

- **DK/SK**:
  - How Republicans Understand Democrats: 7%
  - How Democrats Understand Republicans: 2%

*Base: Republican, N=466; Democrat, N=533
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding
Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey*
THE TYPE OF TV NEWS PEOPLE WATCH CORRELATES WITH HOW PEOPLE VIEW EACH OTHER ACROSS PARTY LINES.

Viewing certain cable news channels, meanwhile, appears to be linked to extreme perceptions of the opposing party. Among Republicans, frequent viewership of Fox News is strongly correlated with viewing Democrats as extreme. Among Democrats, frequent viewership of MSNBC is correlated with viewing Republicans as extreme; see Figure 9.

“Now it depends on what channel and what station you watch. It’s like the media now has an opinion. Wasn’t the media supposed to be neutral, to report on facts? Now it seems like the media is about their agenda, what they’re for. It’s political now.” – New Rochelle, NY; in her 50s; Hispanic; Independent

**Figure 9.** Percent of Republicans and Democrats who view the other party as so extreme they can’t imagine finding common ground with them, by television news viewership

*Base: Republican, N=466; Democrat, N=533. Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey*
FINDING 5: MOST AMERICANS THINK DIVISIVENESS IS DRIVEN MORE FROM THE TOP-DOWN THAN THE BOTTOM-UP. JOURNALISM, NATIONAL POLITICAL LEADERS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA ARE THE INSTITUTIONS THAT AMERICANS THINK STAND TO GAIN FROM DIVISIVENESS, WHILE ORDINARY AMERICANS ARE VIEWED AS STANDING TO LOSE. NONE OF THE INSTITUTIONS OR ACTORS ASKED ABOUT WERE VIEWED AS MORE CONSTRUCTIVE THAN DESTRUCTIVE, SUGGESTING A “CONSTRUCTIVENESS DESERT” IN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE.

Most Americans (76 percent) say that our inability to constructively disagree is driven from the top down, i.e. that leaders set an example that people follow. Only 21 percent of Americans say that our inability to constructively disagree is driven from the bottom up, that is, leaders are just replicating behaviors that the general public already exhibits.

“We need a strong group of leaders leading us and showing the way for the country. We’re divided right now because the leaders are not setting a good example.” – Cincinnati, OH; in her 20s; Hispanic; Democrat

“The hardest thing with the climate in the government is, they can’t even sit down and have a discussion. They can’t work out anything. They storm out. It’s tit for tat. I’m going to throw this mud at you, you’re going to throw that mud back. It’s like they can’t even work on anything.” – New Rochelle, NY; in her 50s; Hispanic; Independent

The public does take some responsibility for the divisiveness of American public life: 12 percent strongly agree, and 30 percent somewhat agree that our political leaders are divided because there is not much common ground among the American people -- although 57 percent of Americans strongly or somewhat disagree with that view.

The view of this smaller proportion of Americans -- that divisions among leaders are simply a reflection of divisions among the public -- is consistent with the finding that, on average, Republicans and Democrats think over a quarter of people in their own party are so extreme that they can’t imagine finding common ground with them; see Finding 3 above. That is, they may be saying that some members of the public share responsibility with national political leaders and media for the divisiveness affecting American public life.

Across partisan affiliations, national political leaders and social media are viewed as promoting destructive forms of public debate. Opinion is split across partisan affiliations about the destructiveness or constructiveness of journalism and the news media: large majorities of Republicans (84 percent) and Independents (65 percent) view journalism as promoting mostly destructive debate, compared to only 38 percent of Democrats; see Figure 10.
None of the institutions or actors that this survey asked about were viewed as more constructive than destructive, suggesting a “constructiveness desert” in American public life.

Of the eight institutions or actors that this survey asked about (see Figure 10, above) there is none that a majority of Americans rate as more constructive than destructive, suggesting Americans perceive a “constructiveness desert” in civic and political life.

“The saying used to be that sex sells. Now it’s just negativity sells. That’s the only message that we’re given. That’s all the country is seeing. I think we have a negative space right now.” – Jackson, MS; in his 30s; Black; Independent
Journalism, National Political Leaders, and Social Media Are the Institutions That Americans Are Most Likely to Say Stand to Gain From Divisiveness, While Ordinary Americans Are Viewed as Standing to Lose.

Not surprisingly, people believe that some of the same actors driving divisiveness in public life also standing to gain from divisiveness. Forty-four percent of Americans say that journalism and the news media have more to gain than to lose from partisan disagreements and divisiveness -- including 41 percent of Democrats and 50 percent of Republicans. Thirty-eight percent of Americans say social media has more to gain from divisiveness, including similar percentages across political affiliations; see Figure 11.

Americans who are the most familiar with social media, such as those who use Twitter at least daily, are more likely to say social media is destructive, with 46 percent of them thinking social media has more to gain from destructive debate.

Americans are almost evenly divided over whether national political leaders have more to gain (39 percent) or more to lose (40 percent) from divisiveness, with little variation across political affiliation in these views.

“I think they [politicians] divide us with their rhetoric. Because if we ever come together, we’ll kick their butts out.” – Jackson, MS; in his 60s; Black; Republican

Who do Americans think stands to lose from partisan disagreements and divisiveness? Of the eight institutions and actors that we asked about and across partisan affiliations, most agree that “ordinary people" have the most to lose.
Most Americans say ordinary people have the most to lose from divisiveness while the media has the most to gain from it.

**Figure 11.** Percent who think each of the following has more to gain or more to lose from partisan disagreements and divisiveness in America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>More to Gain</th>
<th>More to Lose</th>
<th>Makes no Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journalism and news media</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National political leaders</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local political leaders</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business leaders</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious leaders</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized labor</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary people</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Base:** All respondents, N=1,548

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1-7 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos-Harvard Common Ground Survey
FINDING 6: AMERICANS ACROSS THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM AGREE ON SEVERAL APPROACHES TO REDUCING DIVISIVENESS, INCLUDING TEACHING CONFLICT RESOLUTION, MAKING IT EASIER FOR THIRD-PARTY AND INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES TO RUN FOR OFFICE, AND SHIFTING MORE DECISIONS FROM THE FEDERAL TO THE LOCAL LEVEL.

An overwhelming ninety-two percent of Americans say it is important to reduce divisiveness in the United States, including 65 percent who say it is a very important measure. Independents feel somewhat more strongly in their view on this question while “apolitical” respondents feel somewhat less strongly, but overall this is a consensus view in America; see Figure 12.

When asked about specific ideas or policies for reducing divisiveness or destructive disagreements, 64 percent of Americans strongly support, and another 21 percent somewhat support teaching children to resolve conflict constructively. Almost half strongly support teaching adults to resolve conflict constructively and another third somewhat support doing so; see Figure 13.

“There seems to be a lot of divisiveness in Mississippi. So as long as you can find common ground and then raise awareness however that may be, I think that it is one way to at least make progress.” – Jackson, MS; in his 20s; White; Republican
In addition to such behavioral and skills-based approaches, many Americans also support changes to our political system to reduce divisiveness or destructive division. For example, two-thirds support making it easier for third-party and Independent candidates to run for office, with Independents supporting this more than other respondents. Just over half of Americans strongly or somewhat support shifting more decisions from the federal to the local level where politics are less partisan, with Republicans and Independents more likely than others to strongly support this; see Figure 13.

Economic inequality, however, is one issue where significant partisan differences surface. Whereas 55 percent of Americans overall support diminishing economic inequality as a way to reduce divisiveness, more than twice as many Democrats (76 percent) than Republicans (33 percent) agree, with Independents in the middle (55 percent).
FINDING 7: **Most Americans across the political spectrum say it is important for the candidate they vote for to unify the country and reduce divisiveness. Four in ten Republicans and Democrats would be tempted to cross party lines to vote for a candidate who could unify the country.**

While many factors combine in determining who people vote for, this survey’s findings suggest that it is deeply important to most Americans that their candidate unifies the country rather than divide it. With only minor partisan differences, 89 percent of Americans say it is important that the candidate they vote for works toward unifying the country, including 56 percent who say it is very important and another 33 percent who say it is somewhat important.

Tellingly, a full 55 percent of Republicans and 51 percent of Democrats do not know whether they would still vote for their own party’s candidate if he or she were running a divisive campaign. Even more dramatically, 38 percent of Republicans and 47 percent of Democrats would be very or somewhat tempted to vote for the opposing party’s presidential candidate if they thought he or she had the best shot at unifying the country. This includes 17 percent of both Republicans and Democrats who say they would be very tempted to cross party lines for a more unifying candidate; see Figure 14.

“If both parties work together, maybe they can focus on the everyday problems and stop saying ‘I believe this and I believe that’ and just get to the problem, make solutions and keep going.” – Jackson, MS; in her 20s; Black; Democrat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four in ten Republicans and Democrats would be tempted to vote across party lines for a candidate who could unify the country.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14. Percent of Republicans and Democrats who say they would be very or somewhat tempted to vote for the opposing party’s presidential candidate if they thought he or she had the best shot at unifying the country, by political affiliation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very tempted</th>
<th>Somewhat tempted</th>
<th>A little tempted</th>
<th>Not at all tempted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: Total, N=999; Republicans, N=466; Democrats, N=533
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos-Hidden Common Ground survey