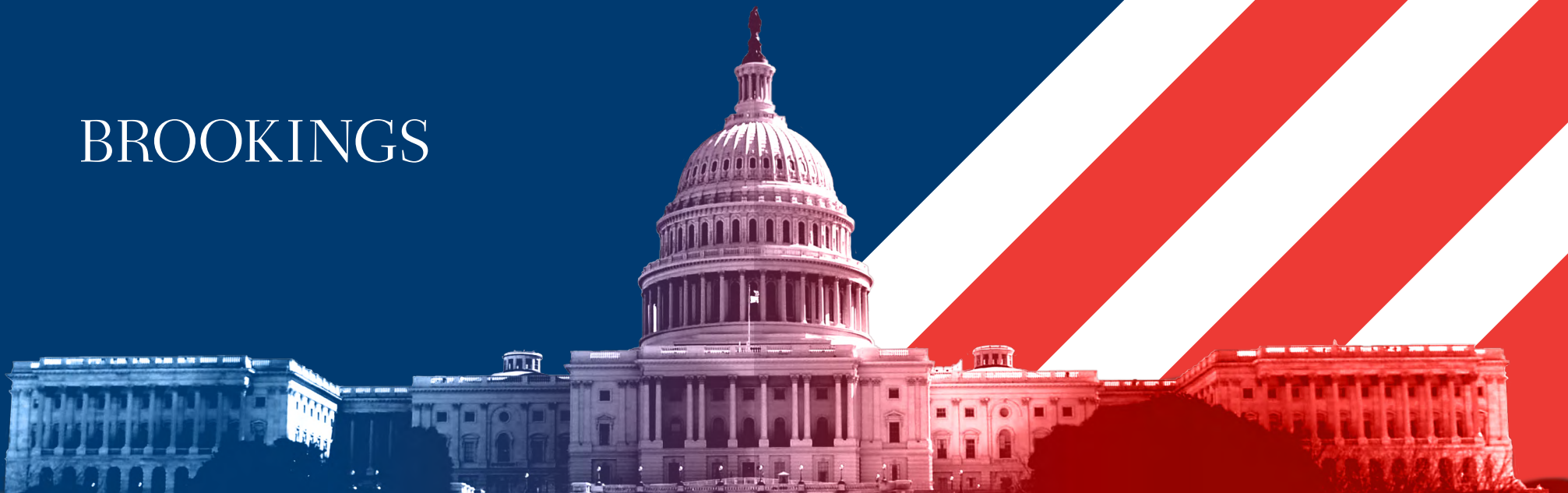


WAYS TO  
**RECONCILE**  
**AND HEAL**  
AMERICA

BROOKINGS






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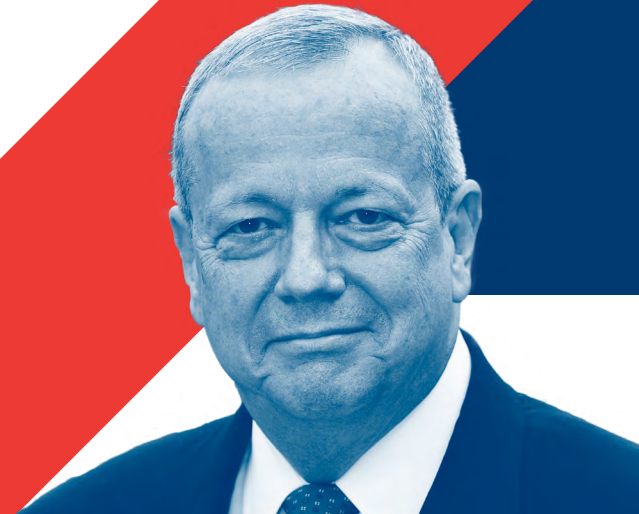
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INTRODUCTION

# NATIONAL RECONCILIATION IN AMERICA



BY JOHN R. ALLEN  
PRESIDENT, BROOKINGS

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# **In our history, certain events— inflection points—carry such a weight of significance that we'll always remember where we were when they occurred.**

For my parents, they could tell me exactly where they were when they learned Pearl Harbor had been bombed. My first inflection point was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and later, in horribly quick succession, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. For my daughters, it was the attack on America on September 11, 2001. These incidents are not just historically memorable; they are watershed moments as well. Everything that followed was different. Thus it was on January 6, 2021, our most recent national inflection point. A reckless call to action from the president of the United States, Donald J. Trump, resulted in the invasion of the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to prevent the Congress from declaring the results of the 2020 presidential election. In the immediate aftermath, the president was impeached; the capital of the United States became a fortified, armed camp; and the inauguration of the 46th president occurred amidst the greatest domestic security threat in modern American history.

While others will record and analyze the minute details of this dark moment in our history, suffice to say that every aspect of it pointed to a condition of national division suspected by many, leveraged by some, and weaponized by a few; not the least being the president of the United States. For the briefest of moments, the executive branch of the U.S. government forcibly and violently unseated the legislative branch, engaged in fulfilling its constitutional duty to certify the winner of the recent presidential election. Members of the U.S. Congress fled or feared for their lives as groups of Trump's supporters, many sporting the trappings of the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, the Confederacy, and other white supremacists, forcibly breached our center of government. For hours they rampaged through the U.S. Capitol building, epicenter of American democracy, searching for the vice president and certain members of Congress to do them harm—or worse—and seeking to prevent certification of the election of Joseph R. Biden in support of Trump's lie that the election had been stolen from him.

How could we have come to this moment? What possible convergence of deep-seated grievance, frustration, and anger could produce this moment of blinding fury? Questions with complex answers, to be sure, but what remains clear is that this was indeed an inflection point in American history. We will all remember where we were on January 6, 2021, for everything that follows will be different.

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## HOW WE GOT HERE

In truth, the events of the last year or so have accelerated the frustrations of enormous segments of the electorate, long suffering from the effects of economic disenfranchisement and political irrelevance. Years in the making, these frustrations have intensely polarized discussions around race, ethnicity, religion, immigration, gender, and many other sources of difference in a massively diverse society. As time progressed, the mainstream media—the usual source of unbiased reporting—was demonized and declared the “enemy of the people.” Meanwhile, social media enabled sometimes bizarre conspiracy theories; and sensational, breathless cable news cycles fanned the flames of dissatisfaction into red-hot conflagrations. The sides became radicalized; a little at first, but becoming dangerously polarized over time. Mutual respect was quickly replaced by mutual suspicion, and with the loss of respect there quickly followed the loss of civility and an alarming growth of a genuine sense of enmity; one side for the other.

Facts, too, became unmoored from truth, and the basis for constructive dialogue was lost. Political

parties further ossified the differences as fewer and fewer politicians were elected based on a willingness to participate in bipartisan legislation than they were elected to defend the identity politics of their particular side—seemingly at all costs. Partisan politics produced extremists and they, in turn, birthed violent extremists. And while violent white supremacists in particular had been a threat to the American population, especially to Black Americans, from the post-Civil War period onward, during the Trump administration their numbers exploded, for they had the capacity to organize, the motivation to do so, and an outspoken president whom they believed was sympathetic to their cause.

The year 2020 was thus the year the match was thrown on the fuel. This most recent breakdown began first with the COVID-19 pandemic, which in turn fostered the near collapse of the U.S. and global economies. These twin disasters accelerated and exacerbated the misery of many Americans, already badly beset by their socio-economic conditions. The president who failed to deal with the pandemic sought then to deflect blame by

politicizing the response, and in so doing politically polarized the American pandemic response. What followed was the alienation of a major segment of Americans from actively participating in relief efforts and from trusting whatsoever in their government. This resulted in an ongoing yet truly unimaginable outcome: hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions infected, and an economy on the edge and more unequal and unfair than ever, especially for frontline workers, many of whom are persons of color, women, or lower-wage individuals. And yet the stark reality is that tens of millions of Americans have a very different perspective on these seemingly shared events and challenges when compared to their counterparts on the other side of the political spectrum.

Those years of pent-up differences finally played out during the campaign and in the 2020 presidential election conducted during the darkness of a lethal global pandemic. The election saw more Americans vote than ever before, and both candidates surpassed the previous record for the most votes ever received in the history of American elections. But in the end, President Trump lost, and immediately began the lie of a rigged, fraudulent, and stolen election that culminated

**Years in the making, these frustrations have intensely polarized discussions around race, ethnicity, religion, immigration, gender, and many other sources of difference in a massively diverse society.**

directly, and at his behest, with the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6. On that day, Americans stared into the abyss of a failed state. And while no one will forget where he or she might have been at the moment of the near failure of the American experiment, most Americans are concerned with how we as a people, and the United States as a nation, can step back from the edge of the abyss and begin the national reconciliation vital to the future of America.



# NATIONAL RECONCILIATION—NOW

Vitally, we, as fellow Americans, must begin to chart a path toward national reconciliation and reunification—and we must do so now. We have to arrest the downward spiral of the loss of respect and civility, and the immobilizing polarization of American politics. Efforts will have to begin first with the intentional public embrace of true healing and reconciliation by the new president and the U.S. Congress, to include announcement of a national summit on reconciliation and an open and honest discussion about what reconciliation objectives can actually entail and achieve. Words like “respect” and “civility” need to again become a part of the daily lexicon, just as bipartisanship must again become a political objective, not a sign of appeasement or shame. There’s no hope for the American experiment otherwise. And, while it may well be the most patriotic thing one can do to call out your national government when it is going astray, that’s a very different argument than actively undermining its success by confusing nationalism with patriotism. The immense responsibility placed upon our elected officials to take up the mantle of responsible leadership—to hold to our higher principles, not our worst

impulses—cannot be overstated. At the same time, we must also be clear-eyed about the multifaceted and diverse nature of American society and culture, and thus the intricacies and nuance that will be required for true reconciliation. And we need to be honest about our past failures as well.

Historically, it should come as no surprise that American narratives of reconciliation and national unity are often tied back to the American Civil War and the post-war period of Reconstruction. Never were we so divided—literally or figuratively—and many efforts were made in the post-conflict era to mend the profound divisions and the great damage that was done to the country. Yet even then, those efforts focused almost exclusively on healing the white segments of the American society. Black Americans were, yet again, left nearly entirely out of the equation. Indeed, as one poignant example illustrates, on the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1913, a “festival of national reconciliation,” was held where Union and Confederate soldiers met and embraced; while Black Union veterans were not invited or

held separate events. And, indeed, Black Americans across the South remained in bondage, bound by the figurative chains of Jim Crow laws. Given the tragic death of George Floyd and others in the summer of 2020, and the renewed national reckoning that followed, reconciliation going forward is necessarily and inextricably linked to the interests and the critical voices of Black, Brown, and Native communities. It's worth repeating: these communities must be central to any viable and enduring notion of national reconciliation. No true healing can proceed without embracing this reality.

Here, we see the vast complexity of this issue, and the deep historical context of an America that has perhaps never been as united, or even as democratic, as we hoped to believe. And in this way, there will be those in society who will have no interest in reconciliation at all. Their wounds are too fresh or their hatreds and their toxic doctrines run too deep for a process of healing to truly begin. Yet for so many more, reconciliation is an entirely logical and essential sequel to the summation of their personal American experience. With that in mind, we must do what many nations and peoples around the world have already done before: listen. Listen first to the

**And, while it may well be the most patriotic thing one can do to call out your national government when it is going astray, that's a very different argument than actively undermining its success by confusing nationalism with patriotism.**

pains and struggles of those on the "other side," and identify pathways for shared understanding and national reconciliation with those who are willing. There are, potentially, lessons from abroad that may hold some meaningful hints toward an eventual solution for American society, though the evolution of social media and a lightning-fast 24-hour news cycle certainly compound the difficulties in building trust and good faith.

Indeed, some invested in reconciliation have pointed toward the need for an official “truth and reconciliation” commission, as has been created in other countries around the world. This is a complex issue and far from a cure-all. As well, the intensity of political polarization in America makes bipartisan support for this kind of commission nearly impossible at the moment, at least one chartered by the legislature. Alternatively, commissions based outside the writ of government have sometimes worked well because they’re not as bound up in the partisan politics that often strangle bipartisanship in elected bodies. But regardless, even if a commission of some form is not established, those abroad, seeking to heal intense and painful divisions in their own countries, still have lessons from which we can learn. This is not the moment for foolish pride, for the crisis is too great and the time is too short.

Our national pain was long in the building, and so it cannot be remedied in a short time. Just being openly and publicly committed to reconciliation, and intentionally beginning the effort, is itself a tonic, but it will be a hard, emotional journey.

This will require the combined efforts of national, state, municipal, and local leadership, committed first and foremost to the goodwill to see the imperative of national reconciliation, and able to lead their respective segments of society in a genuine effort. Second, it will require patience, persistence, endurance, and the vision to see that even with the seemingly insurmountable differences at work in American society there still remains far more that unites us than divides us, and that capitalizing on these common interests and values is the best way to find a means of addressing those painful and divisive matters. And third, there must be a clear-eyed will for justice. As evidenced from the 2019 House Judiciary Committee hearings for instance, when hundreds of Black Americans gathered in the halls of the Capitol to hear of slavery reparations, there is a keen necessity to address and answer historic wrongs. More, while the term “social justice” has become politicized, its intentions offer critical pathways for accountability by dismantling structural inequities and systemic racism. We must not forget the importance of accountability on the road toward reconciliation.

# WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE—FOR GOOD OR FOR ILL

In closing, on matters of reconciliation, President Abraham Lincoln is quoted frequently these days, and well he should be. A thread runs throughout his writings and his speeches that clearly pointed to his intent to engage in an effort of national reconciliation after the Civil War that would both recover our fractured Union, but also would once and for all enfranchise Black Americans, enslaved in horrendous servile labor for hundreds of years. Tragically, while shot and shell took the lives of hundreds of thousands in the Americans Civil War, the cruelest single bullet fired in the entire conflict took the life of President Lincoln, and in that moment the nation, and its people, were robbed of what might have been a new era of true national reconciliation. In his all too brief second inaugural address, we not only gain a glimpse into the mind of this great healer, but we can also find the basis to live the resolute dedication reflected in his words, even as we

embark on our own journey of national healing and reconciliation:

*Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said that the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.*


*With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wound, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphans; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.*

For the sake of those who have come before, and for those fellow Americans searching for a better future today, national reconciliation is the only way we can safeguard this nation—both as an idea and as a country—for all of us to enjoy as one people dedicated to the sacred proposition that all individuals are created equal.

# OUR NATIONAL CRISIS



DARRELL M. WEST,  
VICE PRESIDENT, GOVERNANCE STUDIES

The page features large, abstract geometric shapes in red and blue that create a sense of movement and depth. These shapes are layered, with some appearing to be in the foreground and others receding into the background, framing the central text.

# **The United States faces extraordinary problems of polarization, radicalization, and extremism that make it difficult to address pressing policy issues.**

There have been precipitous declines of public confidence in government, a rise in institutional dysfunction, and an increase in racial and ethnic violence. Taken together, these developments pose systemic risks and threaten the very fabric of our society, economy, and political processes.

Many of these issues were highlighted during and after the 2020 election. Boasting the highest voter turnout in nearly one hundred years, the election revealed sharp divisions, frayed civility, and a widespread mistrust of political opponents. The results in both the presidential and congressional elections showed a polarization and radicalization that permeated many parts of the country and likely will reverberate for the foreseeable future. Our national divisions reached a crescendo on

January 6, 2021, when an angry mob attacked the U.S. Capitol, assaulted police, temporarily stopped Joe Biden's election certification, and caused death and injury. That violence was so extraordinary it led to Donald Trump's impeachment a week later.

A number of developments have intensified America's political conflict.<sup>1</sup> As an example, the near-extinction of moderates in Congress has had detrimental consequences for governance and problem solving. Bargaining, compromise, and negotiation used to be the guiding principles for American politicians. Legislators sought to resolve conflict and forge winning coalitions that cut across a variety of perspectives.

But changes in the news media, the rise of social media platforms, and the incentives political leaders have to keep their supporters angry have eliminated voices of reason. Politicians fight with everything they have and policymaking has become more a matter of might than right. The information ecosystem rewards those who are angry with one another by amplifying their messages and expanding their popularity. As noted by Indiana University political scientist Steven Webster, "politicians seek to make their support-

ers angry because angry voters are loyal voters."<sup>2</sup> They give money as well, which funds election campaigns and advocacy efforts.

Over a period of several years, America has seen a rise of radicalization, extremism, and domestic terrorism.<sup>3</sup> As Brookings President John R. Allen has noted, all extremists are radicalized at some point, but not all radicals become extremists. A radicalized person may be convinced that government can't or won't do anything to solve their problems. Yet an extremist, having passed through the condition of radicalization, may decide the only solution is to bring down the government. Even more problematic is the next condition, that of the violent extremist who actually tries to take it down.

As an illustration of the challenge, the Anti-Defamation League found that nationally the "distribution of racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic fliers, stickers, banners and posters" more than doubled to 2,713 cases in 2019 from 1,214 in 2018.<sup>4</sup> Among the most common perpetrators were members of white supremacy groups such as the Patriot Front, American Identity Movement, and the New Jersey European Heritage Association. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has documented that hate crime violence rose to a two

decade high in 2019 and included sharp rises in physical assaults, shootings, and other forms of violence targeting religious and racial minorities.<sup>5</sup>

The country furthermore suffers from a form of mass trauma associated with intense divisions and violations of long held norms. In conjunction with COVID-19, an economic recession, police violence, and public discontent, many citizens feel anxious about the future and worry that society, government, and the economy are careening off a cliff. In its most recent survey, Mental Health America found that “the number of people looking for help with anxiety and depression has skyrocketed” in 2020.<sup>6</sup> Anxiety is not spread evenly across the population; according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, it is concentrated among vulnerable populations. For example, a CDC analysis showed that “younger adults, racial/ethnic minorities, essential workers, and unpaid adult caregivers reported experiencing disproportionately worse mental health outcomes, increased substance abuse, and elevated suicidal ideation” in 2020.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to say this increase is in part a result of COVID-19 hitting these populations

hard, as prior to COVID-19 the highest levels of reported stress, worry, and despair were among low income whites, compared to much higher levels of hope and optimism among poor minorities. So, while the increases are higher for the above groups, they are starting from a lower level of ill-being pre-coronavirus. Research by Brookings scholar Carol Graham, Sergio Pinto, and John Juneau suggests that in the aggregate even during COVID-19, Blacks (and to some extent Hispanics) have higher levels of hope/optimism than whites, with the gaps largest across low income minority groups. They note that this toxic and long-lasting despair, particularly among prime aged white males out of the labor force, may underlie some of the extremist trends seen today.<sup>8</sup>

In this situation, it is clear that the status quo is not sustainable either in domestic or global affairs. We must diagnose the system-wide problems that have plagued the U.S. long before COVID-19 arrived and develop concrete measures to improve economic opportunity, societal injustices, and basic governance. Failure to make these vital changes could result in a cataclysmic future that ruins the country and impoverishes American leadership in the world as a whole.



# THE IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEM-SOLVING, JUSTICE, AND RECONCILIATION

The current moment requires meaningful steps to address fundamental problems and societal injustices. One aspect is at the **leadership level** where it is important for those in government, business, academia, and nonprofits to restore civility to public discourse, facilitate high quality discussions of public policy, and undertake actions that address major problems. They can do this by making evidence-based arguments, respecting facts, and having substantive discussions about policy issues. National reconciliation doesn't mean the absence of justice or the disappearance of conflict. Indeed, some degree of tension or even conflict can be constructive in clarifying differences and improving the quality of the ultimate decision. Rather, reconciliation refers to the ability to address problems based on the facts as opposed to appealing to people's fears or emotions and being effective about problem-solving.

Another aspect is at the level of the **general public**. Bringing people together doesn't mean

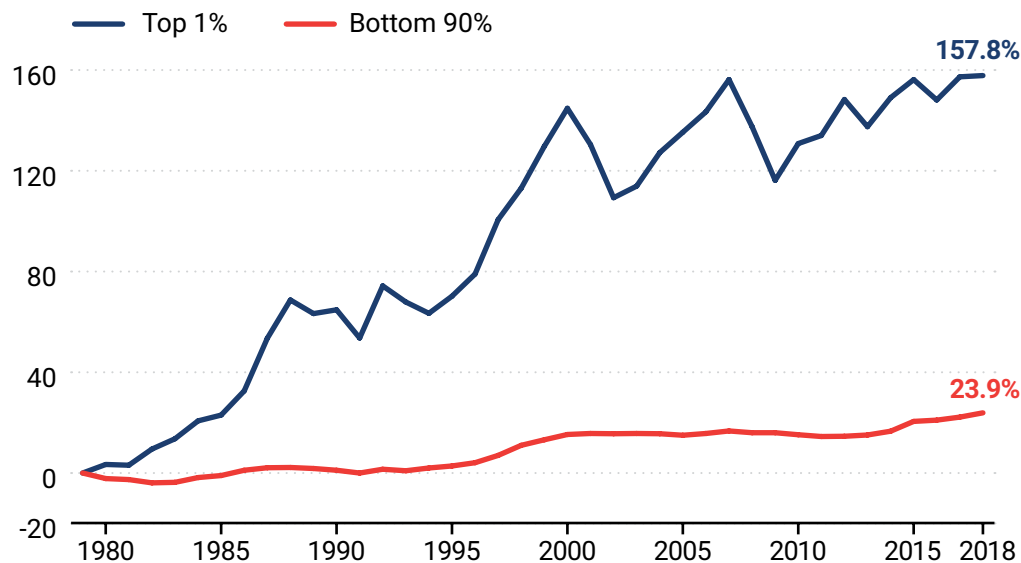
that everyone has the same view. In the current period, there are those who do not trust science or accept basic facts or who have views that are well outside the political mainstream and who may endorse violence. It will be nearly impossible to bring those with extreme views into the mainstream and we shouldn't delay progress by allowing them to stop needed policy reforms or institutional improvements.

A final dimension is "**civic peacemaking**," which incorporates tone-setting and confidence-building measures in society as a whole. Government action alone is not likely to solve the issues of polarization and extremism. Local community groups, religious institutions, business groups, and nonprofits have a positive role because they have the ability to initiate dialogues and address problems in the broader society. Through personal example and inter-organizational collaborations, they can show political leaders that action is possible and civility can be restored.

# ROOT CAUSES OF NATIONAL DIVISIONS

To approach U.S. problems, we need to understand the root causes of polarization, radicalization, and extremism. These problems did not materialize recently but unfolded over several decades, though the internet and digital tools have made their emergence more problematic. A combination of income inequality, geographic disparities, systemic racism, and digital technologies has harmed economic prosperity and basic governance.

## Cumulative percent change in real annual wages, 1979–2018



**Source:** Economic Policy Institute analysis by Kopczuk, Saez, and Song (2010, Table A3) and recent Social Security Administration wage statistics.

## Income Inequality

Income inequality in the United States is at a height not seen in the country since the 1920s and 1930s. The wage gap here has more than doubled in recent decades, making income inequality higher in the U.S. than in any other G-7 nation.<sup>9</sup> As shown in the chart on the left, real annual wages between 1979 and 2018 have risen 157.8 percent for the top 1 percent and only 23.9 percent for the bottom 90 percent. These inequities create anger over the loss of the American Dream and barriers to personal advancement.

Part of the polarization challenge is that people disagree on the causes of inequality and, in some cases, are open to extreme views about who is to blame and what should be done about the problem. Historically, widespread income stagnation has been a breeding ground for extremism, violence, and scapegoating.

America saw this dynamic play out over a decade ago during the Great Recession of 2007-09. With its high unemployment and widespread economic devastation, the Great Recession had a dramatic impact on people's views about the economy, government, and future well-being. Indeed, a 2010 Pew Research Center survey found that more people (50 percent) were pessimistic about future business conditions during the Great Recession than Gallup surveys had revealed during the Great Depression in 1936 and 1937. At that time, only 35 percent indicated they were pessimistic about upcoming business conditions.<sup>10</sup> Feelings such as these helped fuel the populist backlash against government that have made it difficult to address structural inequalities.

Recent spurts in joblessness associated with COVID-19 and globalization have rekindled workers' fears about their future. Although unemployment has dropped from its double-digit levels, remain large pockets remain where people are suffering economically.<sup>11</sup> They are out of work, lining up at food banks, and unable to pay their rents or mortgages. Unemployment, foreclosures, and evictions have risen and put many in situations that are quite dire. These are the kinds of conditions that radicalize swaths of the population and create deep anger at those in charge.

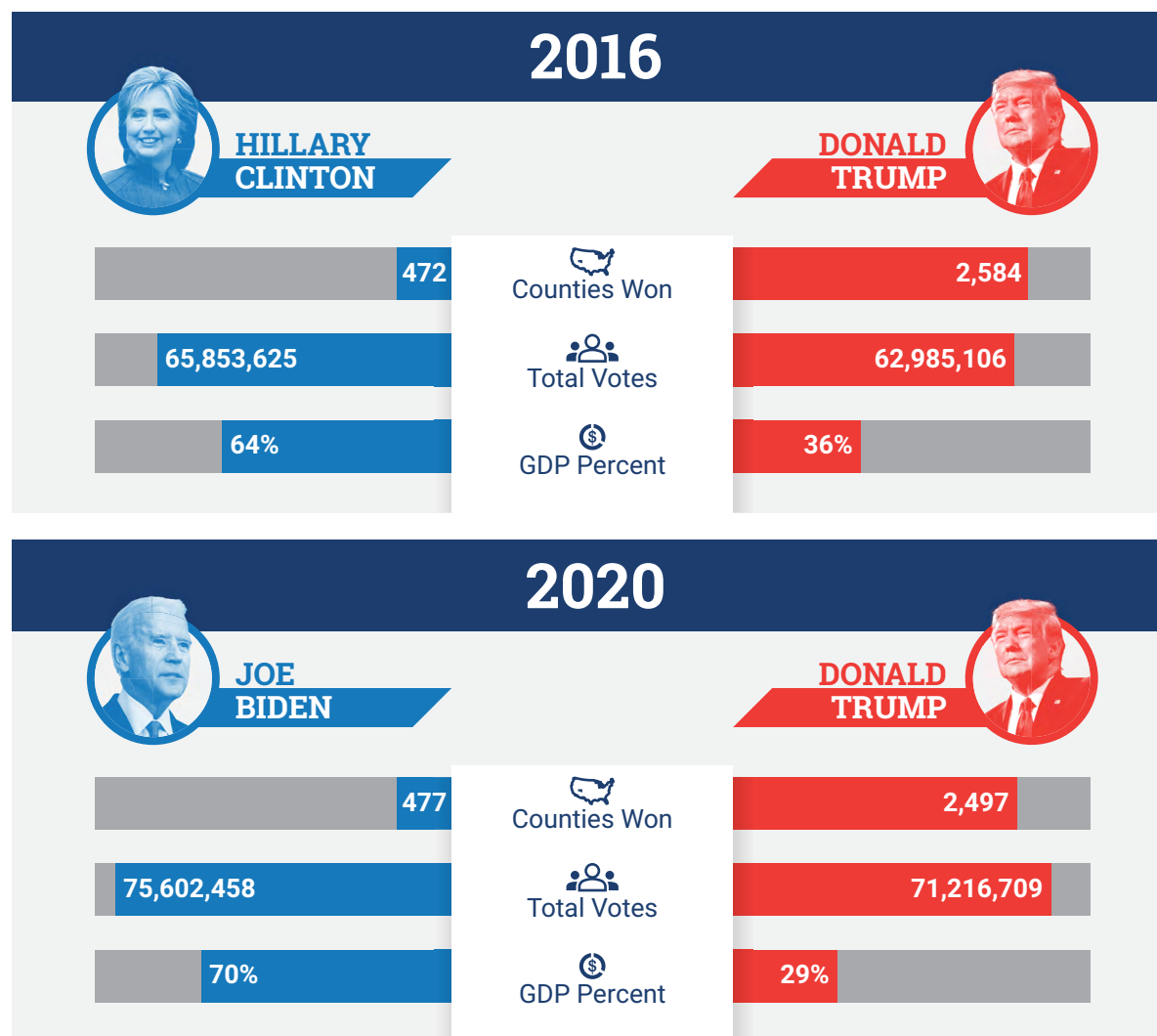
**Part of the polarization challenge is that people disagree on the causes of inequality and, in some cases, are open to extreme views about who is to blame and what should be done about the problem.**

## Geographic Disparities

There are profound economic disparities between the coasts and heartland based on globalization-induced disruptions, education differences, and investment patterns. In 2016, an analysis by Brookings scholars Mark Muro and Sifan Liu found that 15 percent of American counties generated 64 percent of the country's gross domestic product.<sup>12</sup> Following the 2020 election, Muro and his colleagues updated this analysis to show that about the same number of counties that backed candidate Joe Biden was responsible for 70 percent of the nation's GDP, meaning that the regional disparities are getting worse.<sup>13</sup>

Most of the U.S. economic activity is on the East Coast, West Coast, and a few metropolitan places in between. As a result, much of America has few jobs, little economic opportunity, and scant hope that things will get better.<sup>14</sup> This is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future since three-quar-

### GDP Percent in Counties Won By Presidential Candidates, 2016 and 2020



**Source:** Mark Muro, Eli Byerly Duke, Yang You, and Robert Maxim, "Biden-Voting Counties Equal 70% of America's Economy," Brookings The Avenue, November 10, 2020

ters of venture capital investment now goes to just three states: California, New York, and Massachusetts.<sup>15</sup> The perpetuation of this trend means these disparities in investment and overall opportunities will probably get worse before they get better, and will continue to stoke voter fears and generate scapegoating and intolerance.<sup>16</sup>

Geography plays a critical role at another level as well. With the income inequality and geographical disparities outlined above, a geography of despair and desperation divides the country. A greater optimism regarding the future prevails in the urban and prosperous parts of America while in other places many see little hope. As documented by Graham, Pinto, and Juneau, those who live in rural areas have few job opportunities and are experiencing tragic increases in suicide, substance abuse, domestic violence, and opioid overdoses. Indeed, 20 percent of prime-age males are out of the labor force and vulnerable to a range of mental health issues.<sup>17</sup> The increased incidence rates of many social problems lead people to anxiety, depression, and despair.

Others worry about the personal and societal destruction unleashed by these developments.

Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton chart mortality and morbidity rates among non-Hispanic whites and find increasing rates of “deaths of despair,” which they define as mortality due to “drugs, alcohol and suicide.”<sup>18</sup> This trend is especially pronounced among those with just a high school education and people living in less prosperous areas. In conjunction with these developments, they see a drop in labor force participation and marriage.

## Systemic racism

Systemic racism plagues our national institutions, political processes, and societal relations. From slavery and the Civil War up to the current period, widespread inequities and institutionalized unfairness have denied African Americans a fair chance for a good education, fair housing, equal employment, and wealth creation.

Dramatic wealth inequities between whites and African Americans illustrate the depth of these problems. According to Brookings scholars Rashawn Ray and Andre Perry, “the average white family has roughly 10 times the amount of wealth as the average Black family” and this gap has widened over the past few decades.<sup>19</sup> Many reasons

underly this disparity, but systemic racism and fundamental policy choices are major reasons for this inequality.

Figuring out how to deal with this and other issues is a vital part of addressing fundamental problems. Since these matters have been so intractable over such a long period of time, it will require decisive leadership, determined action, and creative mechanisms to address the centuries of abuse. It is impossible to imagine the country being able to move forward without concrete progress in this area.

## The loss of respect

Part of the problem with today's lack of civility is a concomitant loss of respect. A number of individuals feel their activities are not respected by other people and, in turn, people lose respect for themselves. Brookings scholar Richard Reeves shows that as inequality has increased and opportunities have been lost, people are experiencing a "respect gap" that is problematic in social, political, and economic terms.<sup>20</sup> People feel badly for themselves, and those on the receiving end of disrespect feel powerlessness and believe the system is rigged against them. It

then becomes easy for political leaders to pitch "us versus them" solutions and appeal to tribal instincts. Left unchecked and unmediated, the country polarizes between winners and losers as well as those whose work brings them power and status versus others whose jobs (or not having a job) do not.

## Partisan sorting

People today live in cloistered enclaves with like-minded neighbors. Gated communities, segregated neighborhoods, and tribal enclaves limit exposure to individuals with different backgrounds, life experiences, and political views. Rather than have experiences that broaden our perspectives, many people have sorted themselves into cocoons that shelter them from alternative points of view.

With these types of separated existences, it is hard to understand different perspectives and easy to question the motives of those who aren't like you. Instead, we gather in partisan cloisters that reinforce political misunderstanding and intolerance, and fuel polarization and extremism. Although this phenomenon was artfully identified more than a decade ago by journalist Bill Bishop

in his popular book, *The Big Sort*, it appears to have intensified in recent years.<sup>21</sup>

## Divisions enabled by digital technologies

Digital technologies enable polarization and extremism by allowing those with views outside the mainstream to find like-minded souls. On social media sites, locating those who are racist, anti-Semitic, or want to engage in violence is just a click away and made easy based on the algorithms that power these platforms. Technology repeals the limitations of geography and allows people to find others who share their worldviews, no matter how extreme. It is no coincidence that the rise of polarization, the process of radicalization, threats to free expression, and the trend toward extremism dovetail with the emergence of social media and digital technology, which in many cases has acted as an accelerant for those trends. Prime-age, out-of-work white males often live in their parent's homes, spend a disproportionate amount of time on social media, are absorbed in polarizing cable news, and suffer disproportionately from opioid abuse.

Another trend furthered by technology is the move of some political leaders to pursue an “other” strategy to polarize people’s views about cultural identity and solidify their political bases.<sup>22</sup> For example, Donald Trump has vilified minorities as “others” as a means of creating fear among a population that increasingly feels economically stressed and dispossessed. His supporters follow him because he gives voice to their darkest fears, and for his followers he has not only made “others” an existential threat to the white majority, but he has also created the mythology that Democratic leadership will lead the “others” in a large scale socialist plot to destroy Trump’s white America. To a marginally educated but still electorally significant and active bloc, Trump has created fear of the “others” and hatred for their leaders, and the very real possibility in their minds that they will become the racially dispossessed white minority over time. Reconciling these people to a future coexistence with the “others” demands we change minds that there is an existential threat to their future and show that there are paths forward that will help them. Resolving those kinds of differences can occur only if there is leadership that makes meaningful changes.

# THE 2020 ELECTION AND ITS DANGEROUS AFTERMATH

The 2020 election and its aftermath tested America like no other recent campaign. It was a divisive contest that stoked fears as social media platforms became echo chambers of false and misleading candidate claims. The assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, pushed polarization to a boiling point that temporarily stopped Biden's election certification, led to a Trump impeachment, and put American democracy at tremendous risk. It shocked bystanders that those unhappy with the election result and stoked by false charges of massive election fraud would break into Congress and assault police officers—killing one and injuring dozens of other law enforcement personnel.

The nation's conflict is multifaceted in nature. For example, there are differences within the Republican party based on differing views about Trump and Trumpism. Some voted for him because he leads the Republican Party. Others voted for him because they could not vote for Democrats and think that party has moved too far to the left. Still others agree with Trump's extreme views on race and immigration.

There are some tensions within the Democratic party as well. Progressives believe fundamental structural reforms are necessary to address long-term problems. They want to abolish the Electoral College, end the Senate filibuster, address systemic racism, and make major reforms of health care and the social safety net. Moderates agree there are important problems such as income inequality and climate change and want to move the country toward effective remedies but prefer to do so on a longer-term time horizon based on less far-reaching policy shifts.

Yet the current crisis represents a potential learning moment with the potential to bring together various elements of the population. The trauma of recent events creates an opportunity to recalibrate the political situation, lower the political temperature, and address the fundamental conditions that undergird polarization, extremism, and radicalization. A 2021 Quinnipiac University national survey found that 74 percent of Americans believe democracy is under threat—the large size of that number creates an opportunity to take meaningful actions.<sup>23</sup>



# **WAYS TO ADDRESS MAJOR PROBLEMS**

After years of rising polarization, the United States has reached a point where the political and social status quo is untenable. Our situation has moved perilously close to a point where democracy is at risk, fundamental problems are not being addressed, and political mistrust has risen to dangerous levels.

But the good news is there are a number of concrete, operational measures that national, state, and local leaders can undertake to improve the environment. These include both top-down and bottom-up activities. The remainder of this report outlines a path for moving forward in the United States.

## **A National Summit**

We need to be bold in identifying a framework for implementing reforms and addressing basic problems. One way to start the process is to convene a national summit designed to generate ideas for addressing major issues. Attendees would be national leaders, governors, mayors, educators, civil society representatives, private

sector executives, community representatives, and faith leaders.

The purpose of this gathering would be to address problems and bind up the nation's wounds in the way past leaders have done. This flagship event would include plenary sessions and working groups, and make recommendations designed to improve the country's capacity for problem solving. The event should be telecast and live-streamed so that anyone interested in these issues could watch the proceedings and interact with participants via social media platforms and online discussion forums.

There are examples from both Republican and Democratic presidents of these types of high-level conferences being successful. As an illustration, President Barack Obama convened a high-level forum to counter violent extremism. Held in 2015 at the White House, it brought together leaders from a number of different areas (including those outside the United States) and led them in a series of discussions about the sources of violent extremism and how to

address those issues. The chief executive spoke of the need “to confront squarely and honestly the twisted ideologies that these terrorist groups use to incite people to violence.” Continuing, President Obama argued that “we need to find new ways to amplify the voices of peace and tolerance and inclusion, and we especially need to do it online.” Among the specific actions the leaders proposed were toughening defenses, utilizing social media, addressing corruption, promoting growth, and improving educational opportunities for women.<sup>24</sup>

President George W. Bush convened conferences in regard to youth, the economy, and innovation. For example, in 2002 he hosted a forum at Baylor University on ways to increase economic growth. It featured leaders from government, business, education, labor, and academia to discuss obstacles to growth and ways to overcome them.<sup>25</sup> At a time of weak economic performance, he cited the need for actions that would improve opportunity and security.<sup>26</sup>

Conferences such as these are valuable because they can set the agenda, engage leaders from various sectors, and shape the national narrative on important problems. Through discussion and

deliberation, they represent a way to develop new ideas, promote them publicly, and generate news coverage that takes the reform message to the rest of the country.

## State and city summits

Following the national summit, there should be follow-up gatherings at the state and city levels. These would be similar to the national event but focused on state and city issues. Every jurisdiction has particular issues in regard to polarization, extremism, and radicalization and such forums should be tailored to local and regional considerations. In various areas, racial injustice and law enforcement abuses demand special attention, as do problems such as the lack of economic opportunity and voting rights barriers that limit electoral participation.

The virtue of state and local convenings is that they can focus on the substantive and governance challenges in particular areas and develop reform agendas geared to those specific issues. Their summits could be attended by subnational government, business, and civic leaders dedicated to improving civility and discussing how to address key problems. While many of the under-

lying sources of polarization and extremism are national in scope, particular geographic areas have unique problems.

At the local level, reconciliation needs to be furthered through actions that address community-based political, social, and economic problems. Developing place-based policies that invest in “left behind” areas, creating interfaith community programs, and establishing high school curricula that combat misinformation represent constructive moves. And in regard to law enforcement, local authorities should take actions such as improv-

ing community policing, adding diversity training for police officers, first responders, and service providers, and requiring that civil settlements in police brutality cases be paid from law enforcement as opposed to city budgets.

Beyond these gatherings, we need to put the subject of reconciliation on the agenda for discussion at a wide range of existing conferences, association meetings, and leadership gatherings. That should include entities such as Congress, the courts, executive agencies, the National Governors Association, the National Conference

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of State Legislators, the National League of Cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National Association of County Executives, associations of police chiefs, the national sheriff's association, national teacher's associations, universities, high schools, faith organizations, and the like. There has to be a "whole of society" approach to solving problems as big and complicated as political polarization and radicalization.

## Lessons from American history

Contemporary America is not alone in experiencing widespread polarization and extremism. In looking at historical eras, there are several ways the country has recovered from periods of extensive polarization. One technique is through large electoral majorities that facilitate political and policy reforms. During the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt gained substantial and persistent majorities in the U.S. House and Senate that allowed him to pass large-scale reforms that altered the status quo and allowed major parts of the country to come together and address important problems.

However, this is not likely to be a vehicle for breakthroughs right now because neither party

has gained a decisive advantage and political power may be likely to alternate between Republicans and Democrats. A polarized news media and an information system that feature echo chambers is not likely to produce big majorities for either party in the foreseeable future. Instead, we are likely to see continued political infighting and piecemeal steps to address particular problems.

At other times, external events have intervened in ways that enabled political change and brought the country back together. That was the case following the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. That surprise move galvanized the country and provided the sentiment that enabled Roosevelt to take America into the war effort against Japan and Germany. A major galvanization also took place in 1957 after Russia successfully launched the Sputnik satellite into orbit. That shocked Americans and led to bipartisan legislation to increase education funding, government support for research and development, infrastructure development, and military spending. More recently, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., unified the nation and led to a strengthening of counterterrorism efforts.

It is hard to anticipate contemporary actions that could unite political leaders, but the January 2021 insurrection and Russia's hacking of major U.S. government and business systems in 2020 create possible opportunities. The insurrection violence and the disruption of the electoral certification tore the scab off America's wounds and revealed fundamental problems that require immediate action.

And in regard to the Russian hack, it is possible that this attack, which has been dubbed a "cyber Pearl Harbor," could lead national leaders to overcome partisan differences on security grounds and take actions that protect critical infrastructure, invest in education, and provide additional resources for infrastructure investment. Similar to the Sputnik moment, each of those actions would address problems facing the country and thereby help address national divisions.

At still other points in time, the gridlock and political inaction associated with polarization generated such high frustration that the status quo became untenable and leaders found ways to work together. This was the case in regard to tax reform in 1986, immigration reform in 1986, Medi-

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care prescription drug benefits in 2003, pay equity in 2009, and COVID-19 relief in 2020. The inability to address fundamental problems such as taxes, immigration, and drug costs generated dissatisfaction that eventually formed a basis for action. At some point, issues become so problematic that they provoke action and lead to meaningful steps to address those problems.

## An Action Agenda

Any plan to address current problems requires proposals that are meaningful, effective, and operational. That is not an easy task because there are steps that would be meaningful that are not implementable right now given current political realities. There also are actions that could be adopted but that won't seriously mitigate the underlying sources of polarization and radicalization. They fall into the category of ineffective platitudes that would not be effective.

In thinking about the underlying sources of polarization and current areas of public agreement, there are several concrete policy and governance actions that would be helpful in addressing root causes. These include: adopting fairer tax and social policies that reduce geographic disparities; investing in infrastructure; instituting a racial reconciliation commission to address systemic racism and the resulting economic inequities; adopting voting and institutional reforms that would improve system performance; improving ethics and rebuilding government capacity so as to improve conflict resolution and problem solving; and encouraging digital literacy.

## ■ Equitable tax and social policies

It is crucial to have fair tax and social policies because inequality is a key source of popular discontent, geographic disparities, and racial injustice. As Brookings experts Isabel Sawhill and Richard Reeves have noted, dramatic inequities have built up over the past several decades and generated political frustration, resentment, and anger.<sup>27</sup> Rashawn Ray and Andre Perry also have noted the pernicious racial disparities in wealth that hold African Americans back.<sup>28</sup> In contemporary America, we need more equitable tax and social policies that address barriers to economic advancement and promote opportunities for all Americans.<sup>29</sup>

The good news is that there are a number of policies that have substantial popular support. According to a 2020 American Values survey, 83 percent supported guaranteeing all Americans access to affordable childcare, 70 percent favored guaranteeing all Americans a minimum income, and 63 percent thought it was a good idea to make college tuition-free at public universities.<sup>30</sup> In addition, an October 2020 *New York Times*/Siena College national poll found significant support on key issues: 72 percent favored a new

\$2 trillion stimulus package to extend increased unemployment insurance, send stimulus checks to most Americans, and provide financial support to state and local governments; 67 percent supported a public health insurance option that would allow anyone to purchase a government-run health insurance plan; and 66 percent wanted a \$2 trillion plan to increase the use of renewable energy and build energy-efficient infrastructure.<sup>31</sup>

### ■ **Infrastructure investment**

The United States faces crumbling infrastructure that slows economic growth, limits digital innovation, and makes it difficult to create jobs. As was the case in the period following World War II, it is vital to upgrade these facilities in order to promote economic competitiveness and reduce digital disparities that prevent many people from gaining the benefits of online education, telehealth, e-commerce, and remote work. My Brookings colleague Nicol Turner Lee has a number of suggestions of how to reform the Lifeline program that provides government subsidies for low-income households as well as other state and federal programs to expand broadband access in underserved areas and make sure more can participate in the digital economy.

In general, infrastructure investment has solid public support for. As an illustration, a Value of Water survey found that 80 percent agree that “rebuilding America’s infrastructure is extremely or very important.”<sup>32</sup> Not only do people support infrastructure investment, they place a high priority on funding it. A Gallup survey has shown that 64 percent think the United States should devote \$1 trillion to improving roads, bridges, and tunnels.<sup>33</sup> With support for infrastructure improvement emerging from both major political parties, bipartisan legislation toward this goal would physically strengthen the country and meaningfully address important problems.<sup>34</sup>

### ■ **A racial reconciliation commission**

Slavery is the original American sin and, several centuries later, the country still has not come to terms with existing unfairness or taken meaningful steps to improve the situation. Having a racial reconciliation commission that compiles data, undertakes research, makes recommendations, and devises effective implementation strategies needs to be a top priority of the new administration. Figuring out how to right historic wrongs is necessary for improving America. This includes fostering equal opportunity for all, addressing

wealth inequities, making sure African Americans have equitable access to education, housing, employment, and health care, and ensuring that they are treated fairly by law enforcement and in the criminal justice system.

Furthermore, the past year has marked a time of exploded mistrust in law enforcement, with less than half of the U.S. population expressing confidence in the police.<sup>35</sup> Among competing cries of “defund the police” and “blue lives matter,” law enforcement is in desperate need of review, particularly regarding racial relations. It is hard to see the United States coming together without basic reforms and a reduction in tensions between law enforcement and the communities they serve.

One of the important innovations to emerge from police crises has been community policing councils and internal investigations units. These are mandated forums to discuss matters of police recruiting, training, curricula at police academies, equipage, and performance. Many communities had them before last summer, while others have instituted them in the aftermath of protests of George Floyd’s murder by police. Placing police oversight in the hands of a broad representative swath of the citizenry, well upstream from the

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police incident itself, provides the kind of community involvement that can go a long way toward improving the act of policing and healing the divides that have opened in many communities.

Brookings scholar Rashawn Ray, for example, argues the way to provide greater accountability is by forcing law enforcement agencies to pay for civil settlements as part of racial bias or officer



misconduct cases, rather than charging the city government as a whole. According to Ray, this would hold the police responsible for their poor performance rather than taxpayers and the entire city government.<sup>36</sup>

A Pew Research Center survey found support for this idea. Sixty-six percent of Americans think that the public should have “the power to sue police officers to hold them accountable for misconduct and excessive use of force.”<sup>37</sup> A strong majority see this reform as a way to hold law enforcement accountable and improve police performance.

Other concrete proposals for improving police accountability include mandatory training on diversity and conflict resolution as well as body cameras for law enforcement officers. These devices automatically record interactions with the public and can be used both to protect officers from unfair charges and hold them accountable for bad behavior. A University of Maryland study found that 93 percent of people supported body camera use when interacting with criminal suspects and 80 percent favored a requirement that officers intervene when they saw another officer using excessive force.<sup>38</sup>

## ■ Voting reforms

A key to reducing polarization and extremism is voting rights and institutional reforms to maintain election integrity and increase political participation and improve political representation and government performance. Having fair elections is the bedrock of democratic political systems. There is no way to sustain democratic institutions without having procedures that encourage voting and other forms of political participation. This includes reforms that address gerrymandering, voter suppression, voter registration barriers, inadequate numbers of polling places, and misinformation campaigns. Taking these issues seriously is necessary to restoring public confidence in American democracy and creating equal political opportunity for various segments of our society.

There has to be an agreement by both parties that the right to vote is a foundational principle in democracy and that steps that obstruct or suppress voting are undemocratic. Transparent and unambiguous support for fair and unbiased electoral procedures is crucial to maintaining public support for the system. Many Americans are deeply concerned about democratic processes, corrupt government, and leadership incompe-

tence. Efforts to suppress voting through citizen intimidation, closing polling places in minority neighborhoods, and imposing notary public verification of mail ballots undermine democracy. Each of these steps creates barriers to voting, especially among young people, communities of color, and immigrants and skews elections in a partisan direction.

What is needed are steps that would remove barriers to voting and improve opportunities for political representation. These reforms would include actions such as automatic voter registration, uniform “no excuse” absentee balloting, ensuring a sufficient number of polling places so voter lines are not too long, and encouraging early voting so it is more convenient for people to cast their ballots.<sup>39</sup>

These reforms would be especially helpful in regard to African Americans and Hispanics as their communities often have faced voting barriers, outright voter suppression, and a shortage of polling places that make it difficult to cast ballots. In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic created health care concerns about large gatherings, the adoption of no excuse mail balloting helped generate a record turnout and strong participation by people of color.

These improvements are popular with the general public. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that 65 percent supported automatic voter registration whereby people routinely are registered at age 18, and 65 percent favored making Election Day a national holiday, while a 2020 YouGov poll showed 65 percent liking vote-by-mail.<sup>40</sup> In general, people like the convenience of these voting reforms and believe they improve the fairness of the political process.

### ■ **Improving ethics and government capacity**

Strong ethics is a bedrock feature of democratic systems and a key to national reconciliation. Regardless of party, 94 percent of Americans think it is “very or somewhat important to have a moral and ethical president.”<sup>41</sup> The general public supports specific measures designed to increase public confidence in the integrity of government officials. This includes requiring presidential candidates to release their tax returns, having top administration officials divest financial assets, and improving government disclosure rules for officials’ income and assets. A Reuters poll showed that 68 percent believe that “Americans have a right to see each presidential

candidate's financial records before the election" and 56 percent felt the president should release his tax returns.<sup>42</sup>

Government capacity also needs to be addressed. In recent years, federal agencies have been hollowed out by retirement, terminations, job reclassifications, worker harassment, and political turmoil. A critical priority right now is to rebuild the capacity of government agencies to perform efficiently and effectively. This is true both in terms of staffing and budgeting. At the very time when we require effective action, many agencies

are ill-equipped to provide necessary services. More than a quarter of federal employees are over the age of 55 and young people express serious reservations about working for the government.<sup>43</sup> A Partnership for Public Service study found that only 6 percent of college students say they would be willing to work in state or local government, and just 2.3 percent would do so at the federal level.<sup>44</sup>

Political scientist Paul Light argues we need to attract a new generation of leaders and civil servants into agencies. Between people who have left the federal government, those who have been

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forced out for political reasons, and older bureaucrats who have retired, there is a desperate need to bring new and more diverse voices into government to address the pressing problems facing the country. We have to incentivize newcomers to enter public service and see it as a viable way to make political change. One way to do this, Light says, would be through a “public service loan forgiveness program” that forgives education loans for those entering public service.<sup>45</sup>

Another option suggested by Brookings scholar Isabel Sawhill and John Bridgeland is a national service corps that would encourage at least one period of military or civilian service.<sup>46</sup> According to their formulation, a way to reconcile societal differences would be to provide financial opportunities for people to serve their country. Such programs represent a way to “cultivate their skills and character and to become leaders,” rebuild respect, and reinvigorate civility in public discourse.

### **Confidence-building measures in business and civil society**

At a time when the American people don’t trust those with opposing political beliefs, it is vital to undertake confidence-building measures that

reduce current divisions and maintain a vital civil society. Businesses, voluntary groups, and civic organizations play a vital role in building trust and social capital. Everyone from companies and universities to nonprofits and religious organizations must be a part of needed community building.

There are a number of successful examples of these kinds of ventures. Inter-faith organizations such as Interfaith YouthCore, Religions for Peace, and Tannenbaum are working to bridge differences in religious and cultural viewpoints. They meet regularly with those of other faiths to find areas of agreement and build a community consensus. They approach these discussions with a fundamental respect for the other parties and a mutual agreement to focus on areas of commonality.

In addition, groups such as Braver Angels provide a vehicle for people of different points of view to have reasonable discussions of major issues and seek to find common ground. They identify areas in need of action, bring together individuals that have different perspectives, and provide a vehicle for discussion and deliberation within the framework of support for fundamental human rights

and respect for identities based on race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Faith-based partnerships play a vital role in political reconciliation. As noted by Brookings scholars Melissa Rogers and E.J. Dionne, Jr., such efforts have been crucial in past eras and take advantage of the fact that Americans are a nation of joiners and that churches, synagogues, mosques, and other groups can be non-government vehicles that bring people together.<sup>47</sup> Engaging these organizations is a way to build on the strength of civil society.

### **Improving media coverage and digital literacy**

One major source of disunity today is news media and social media platforms. Too many such entities enable extremism, intolerance, and hatred to flourish. They help those with views far outside the political mainstream find like-minded individuals, which then reinforces the sense of grievance that can lead to radicalization and even violence. They also have well-documented biases based on race and gender that create unfairness in employment, financial lending decisions, and health care delivery, among others.

These kinds of problems enable foreign and domestic entities to spread misinformation or disinformation that plays on internal divisions and exacerbates racial tensions. They do not create the differences, but can make them worse by spreading false information with the goal<sup>48</sup> of sowing public doubt and mistrust. We saw this in the 2020 election and its aftermath, and polling data suggests a number of people internalized the misinformation.

In a digital era, it is important for people to understand how to evaluate news stories and online information. Since traditional news and social media sites can provide users with false or misleading information, attention must be paid to educate people in how to evaluate media materials. Digital literacy campaigns instruct people in how to evaluate information sources, distinguish authoritative from non-authoritative sources, and stop the spread of false information.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas student Mary Blankenship and Carol Graham have shown how quickly and widely disinformation can spread via Twitter. They write that the ability to use fake identities propels inaccurate informa-

tion because people can engage in this behavior without any accountability. They can spew false material about COVID-19, political opponents, or community groups, all with considerable anonymity.<sup>49</sup>

Several existing groups have found success with formal digital training, such as Older Adults Technology Services which helps those over 60 learn how to fact-check online information, recognize signs of fraud and misinformation, and understand how the internet works.<sup>50</sup> Similar courses exist for high school students. The Baltic countries have achieved significant success via these types of programs.

Making sure K-12 students have access to history classes and civics education should also be part of this effort. Understanding the past and being able to analyze contemporary issues and institutions would encourage people to take their civic responsibilities seriously. This is a long-term strategy but one that will help to build an enduring foundation for future democratic governance.

## ■ Improving the political tone

Just as important as the content of policy choices is the manner in which those decisions are deliberated and conveyed to the general public. The communications tone and the political process used to resolve conflict shape how the public views the policy resolution. If a leader is divisive, uses rude language, and makes policy decisions unilaterally or arbitrarily, they engender less public support than if the individual works through established institutional mechanisms. Psychological research by Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer has found that the manner in which a policy is framed when presented to the public shapes support for that legislation.<sup>51</sup>

Rather than playing to the party base, leaders must find areas of agreement and build coalitions through respected processes. They should avoid divisive language that triggers polarization and radicalization from others and use a moral framing that appeals to diverse political views. Mitigating polarization and hyper-partisanship will require a two-pronged approach: wise policy decisions and wise procedures for adjudicating differences of opinion.



## CONCLUSION

To summarize, there are a number of concrete steps that would deradicalize the country, address extremism, and improve problem solving. I have outlined a number of proposals that would be helpful in achieving these aims. While these actions are not a definitive list, they represent constructive steps that would move America forward.

Cutting across all these suggestions is the idea that problem solving requires meaningful moves to institute reform, address inequity, promote respect, and improve civility. The way national and local institutions operate and people deal with one another matters in terms of how the system functions and how individuals feel about government performance. Increasing reconciliation through the restoration of respect, justice, and civility needs to be a top priority at every level of government and society. Taking these actions at the national, state, and local levels would represent meaningful steps down the path toward addressing the underlying conditions that encourage polarization, radicalization, and extremism.

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- <sup>51</sup> Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer, “From Gulf to Bridge: When Do Moral Arguments Facilitate Political Influence?,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 2015.

The background of the image is a solid dark blue. It features two diagonal stripes: a white stripe running from the top-left towards the center, and a red stripe running from the bottom-right towards the center. The word "BROOKINGS" is centered in the blue area.

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