



EMERGING LEADERS
FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

Workshop #2: Dynamics and Impact of Polarization

Lauren Kirby

When was the last
time you were really
mad about something
or at someone?



PARTISAN DIVIDE

PEW RESEARCH CENTER | OCTOBER 5, 2017

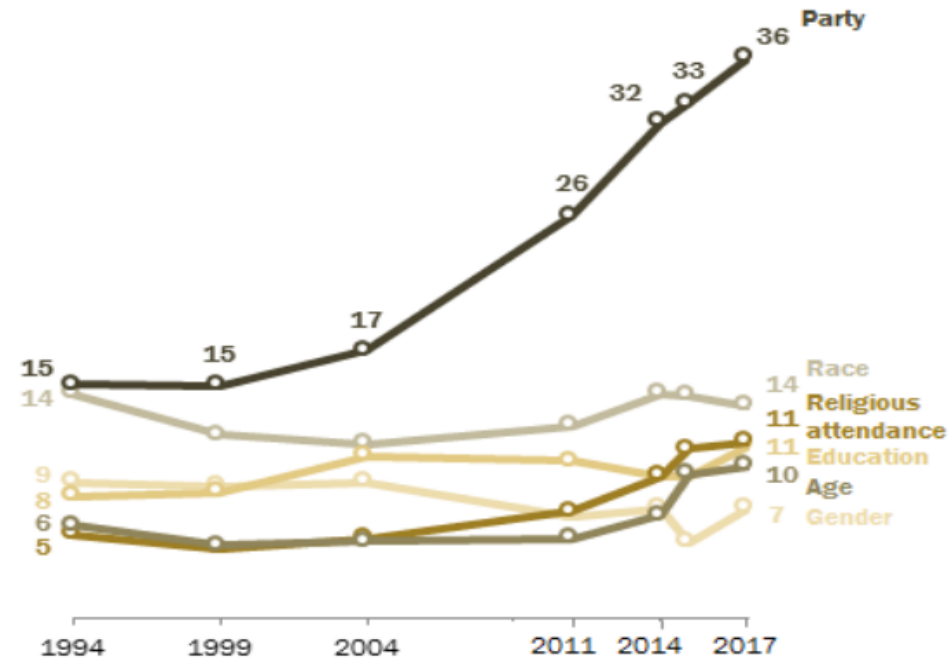


THE PARTISAN DIVIDE ON POLITICAL VALUES GROWS EVEN WIDER

As partisan divides over political values widen, other gaps remain more modest

**As partisan divides over political values widen,
other gaps remain more modest**

Average gap in the share taking a conservative position across 10 political values, by key demographics



Notes: Indicates average gap between the share of two groups taking the conservative position across 10 values items. Party=difference between Rep/Lean Rep and Dem/Lean Dem. Race=white non-Hispanic/black non-Hispanic. Education=college grad/non-college grad. Age=18-49/50+. Religion=weekly+ religious service attenders/less often. Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

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PEW RESEARCH CENTER | [Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Ever Wider](#)

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Today, **political identity** is the strongest driver of how people view others in everyday social situations, more important than race, religion, class, or education - **even in community settings unrelated to politics.**

**Dolan, Eric. "The startling power of political identity in shaping Americans' social preferences." ([PsyPost.org](#), May 2, 2025)*

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- ✓ Democrats and Republicans have developed highly toxic views of the opposite party.

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The other party

Rep/Lean Rep

86

Dem/Lean Dem

89

Rep/Lean Rep

70

Dem/Lean Dem

81

Pew Research Center. "A Year Ahead of the Midterms, Americans' Dim Views of Both Parties" (October 2025).

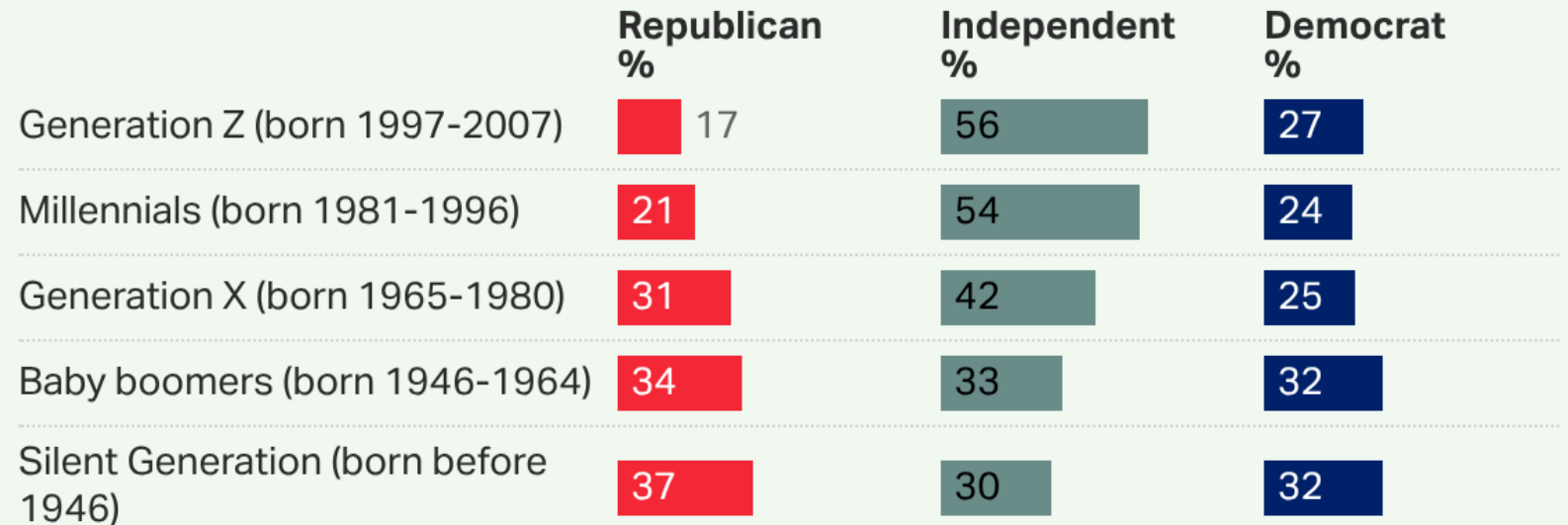
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/10/30/how-americans-feel-about-the-republican-and-democratic-parties/>

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Party Identification by Birth Cohort, 2025

In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat or an independent?

As of today, do you lean more to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party?



Based on annual averages of Gallup telephone interview data

"No opinion" responses are not shown.

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YOUTH DYNAMICS

“Polarization doesn’t seem to be a fixed trend in Gen Z’s minds.

STANFORD REPORT | [What does Gen Z think about political polarization?](#)

“Young lawmakers make up just 25% of state legislators nationwide...

They introduced 40% of the bipartisan bills enacted in 2023 at the state level, proving that they are willing to work across the aisle to get things done.

PACKARD FOUNDATION | [Young Lawmakers Lead the Way on Bipartisan Solutions](#)

How does this resonate
with you?



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VILLAINIZATION OF THE “OTHER” SIDE MAKES VIOLENCE EASIER TO ACCEPT AND ACCOUNTABILITY HARDER TO CALL FOR

“Politics becomes a tool. It ceases to be a tool for government, but a tool for winner take all battle—for permanent political victory, not permanent political participation.”
STAKEHOLDER, WI

“The idea of if somebody else wins, I lose, the zero sum game mentality. The rhetorical stoking particularly by elites within a hierarchy of the party. It’s very much a follow the leader mentality. If you create the us vs. them and hit up the ‘them taking from us,’ that seems to be enough fuel.”
STAKEHOLDER, NC ON THE TIPPING POINT TOWARD VIOLENCE

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45.2%

DEMOCRATS BELIEVE 45.2% OF
REPUBLICANS SUPPORT PARTISAN
MURDER.

42%

REPUBLICANS BELIEVE 42% OF
DEMOCRATS SUPPORT PARTISAN
MURDER.

POLARIZATION RESEARCH LAB | [Partisan Animosity and America, Jan 2024](#)

73%

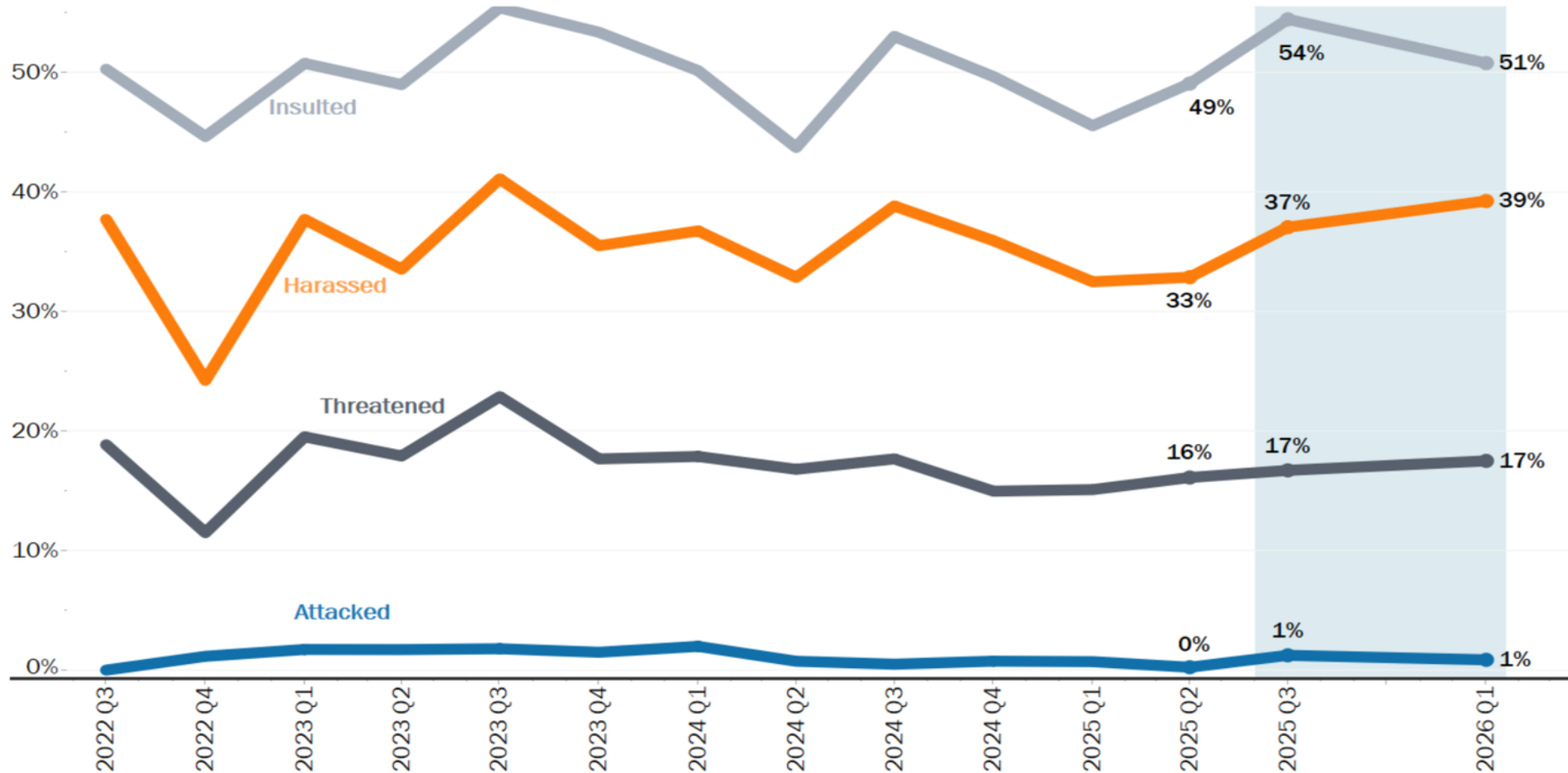
PORTION OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE
DEMOCRATS ATTRIBUTE TO RIGHT-
WING GROUPS

72%

PORTION OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE
REPUBLICANS ATTRIBUTE TO LEFT-
WING GROUPS

PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE | [Political Violence in America, Jan 2026](#)

Percentage of Local Elected Officials Reporting Hostile Experiences by Quarter



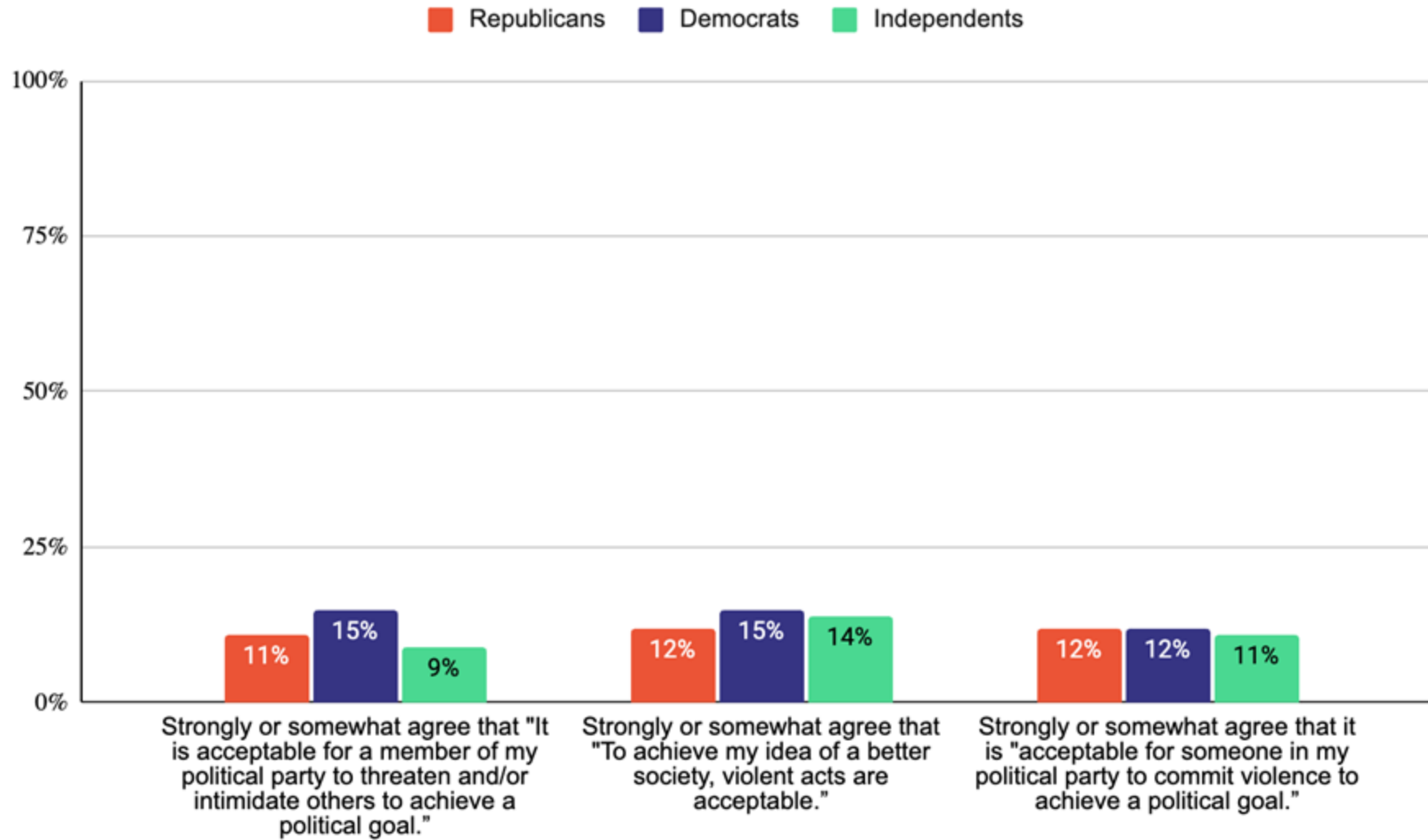
Notes: Analysis above does not include school board officials ($n = 6,984$). All figures rounded to the nearest percent. Survey was not administered in Q4 2025.
 * indicates a statistically significant change from the prior quarter at the $p < .05$ level in a Pearson's Chi-Square test

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Bridging Divides Initiative, July 23, 2026 press release, "Hostility Against Local Officials Is Continuing at Elevated Levels in 2026, Disproportionately Impacting Women, Minority, and New Officeholders."

Poll results of 1,005 US adults (age 18 and up) between August 16-17, 2022



PARTISANSHIP ITSELF DOES NOT PREDICT ACCEPTANCE OF VIOLENCE

“Traditional political identities (Democrat, Republican, Independent) do not explain political violence among young Americans. ... Advanced statistical testing confirms that **partisanship and ideology are not significant predictors of support for political violence.**”

HARVARD YOUTH POLL | [51st Edition, Fall 2025](#)

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3.9%

SUPPORT AMONG **DEMOCRATS**
FOR ANY FORM OF PARTISAN
VIOLENCE.

3.3%

SUPPORT AMONG **REPUBLICANS**
FOR ANY FORM OF PARTISAN
VIOLENCE.

POLARIZATION RESEARCH LAB | [Partisan Animosity and America, January 2024](#)

~10%

PERCENT OF AMERICANS WHO
FOUND THE CHARLIE KIRK
ASSASSINATION ACCEPTABLE.

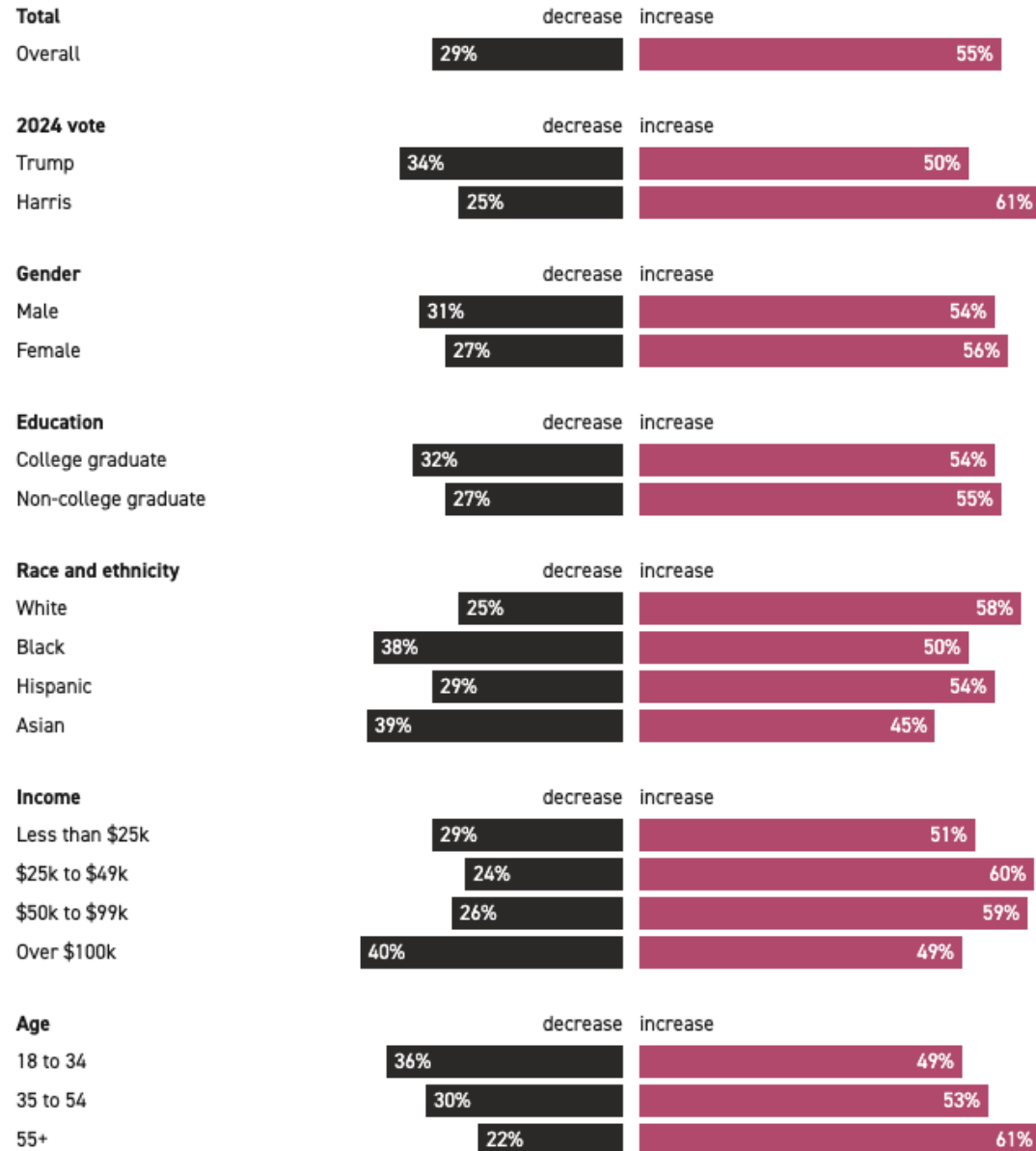
~10%

PERCENT OF AMERICANS WHO
FOUND THE ATTEMPTED PELOSI
ASSASSINATION ACCEPTABLE.

THE NEW YORK TIMES | [What Drives Political Violence in America](#)

Americans broadly expect political violence to **increase**

When you think about the atmosphere around U.S. politics today, which of the following best reflect how you feel? I expect politically motivated violence in the U.S. to...



POLITICO | America is bracing for political violence—and a significant portion think it's sometimes OK

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Why are we polarized?



Structural Drivers Of Polarization



Moving to live in politically-homogeneous communities



Changing demographics: U.S. foreign-born population increased from 4.7 percent in 1970 to 14.8 percent in 2024



Rising income inequality



Declining trust in institutions



Closed media ecosystems



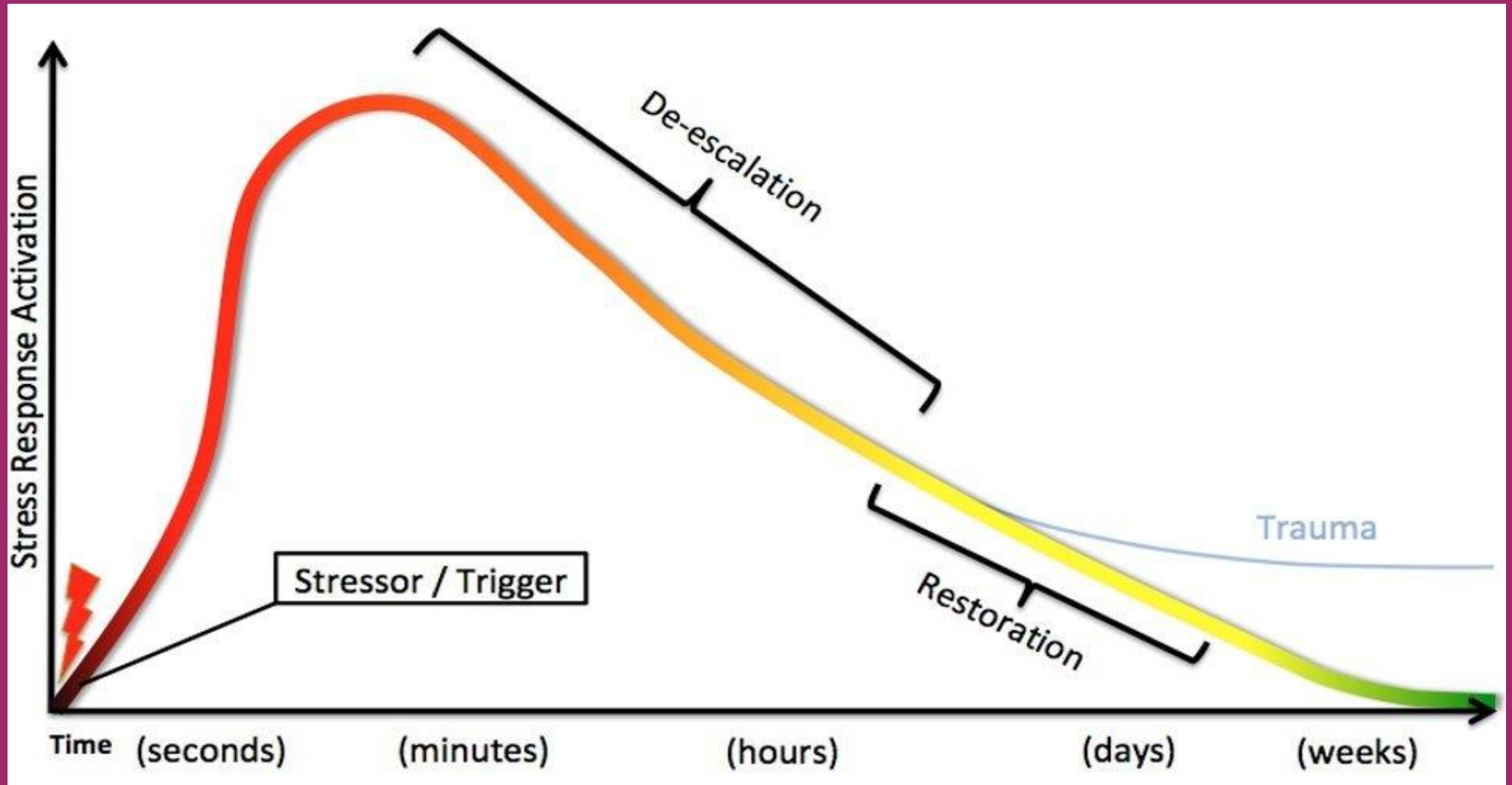
Psychological and Behavioral Drivers Of Polarization



- Screens & social media tap into our stress response
- When stress is extreme or prolonged, our nervous systems can become dysregulated
- Threat perception is increased > a sense of belonging becomes more important than facts



Psychological and Behavioral Drivers Of Polarization



We Are Not Rational



“Our minds were designed for groupish righteousness. We are deeply intuitive creatures whose gut feelings drive our strategic reasoning.”

Haidt, Jonathan. The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion Kindle ed.: Random House, 2012.



COMMON TYPES OF EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION

Dead Cat Strategy

Introducing a shocking or absurd claim to divert attention from a more damaging story.

Example: *A political figure makes a deliberately outrageous post the same day that a damaging investigative report is released.*

Emotional Hijacking

Content engineered to trigger strong emotional responses (e.g., outrage, fear, disgust) that override critical thinking; emotionally aroused audiences are more likely to share without verification.

Example: *Fabricated atrocity images are posted with inflammatory captions to provoke moral outrage and rapid sharing.*

FOMO Exploitation

Creating artificial urgency or fear of being "left behind" to pressure targets into rapid, unreflective action.

Example: *Extremist recruiters telling potential recruits or supporters that "the revolution is happening now – don't be on the wrong side of history."*

Moral Targeting

Identifying and exploiting the specific moral foundations (e.g., care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity) that resonate with target audiences, then framing propaganda accordingly.

Example: *Propaganda targeting loyalty-oriented audiences frames dissent as betrayal; propaganda for care-oriented audiences frames the same issue through victimhood narratives.*

Moral Outrage

This tactic appeals to righteous indignation and frames issues as fights between good and evil. This is often an extreme version of more generalized emotional manipulation or hijacking.

Example: *Suggesting that a group of people are inherently evil/Satanic or anti-American.*

Outrage Farming

Deliberate creation of polarizing content to generate maximum engagement through anger, exploiting algorithmic amplification of high-engagement content.

Example: *A page posts a fabricated inflammatory story about a cultural flashpoint, knowing the ensuing outrage will drive massive engagement.*



IDENTITY

“Identities are markers of similarity, difference, or affinity among individuals and groups. Identity can seem inherent but rather emerges from one’s relationships to others in a given context or situation.”

U.S. Agency for International Development. "Conflict Assessment Framework." (June 2012). https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnady739.pdf.

Belonging is More Important than Facts



“Having social support, from an evolutionary standpoint, is far more important than knowing the truth about some facts that do not directly impinge on your life.

Boyer, Pascal, anthropologist and psychologist at Washington University in St. Louis. As quoted in Beck, Julie. "This Article Won't Change Your Mind." The Atlantic (March 13, 2017). <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/03/this-article-wont-change-your-mind/519093/>.



COMMON TYPES OF IDENTITY GRIEVANCE MANIPULATION

Audience Segmentation and Micro-Targeting

Using data analytics to divide a population into psychographic segments, then delivering tailored propaganda to exploit specific fears, values, or grievances.

Example: Cambridge Analytica used Facebook data to [build psychographic profiles](#) and serve customized political ads calibrated to personality traits.

Grievance Exploitation

Identifying real or perceived injustices and framing them to direct anger toward designated enemies, positioning the extremist group as the only willing solution.

Example: Far-right recruiters frame economic decline as caused by immigration rather than structural change, offering their movement as the answer.

Identity Appropriation

Creating fake personas claiming membership in a specific demographic group to manipulate discourse by appearing to speak from within that community while saying things that other communities will find either reprehensible or artificially agreeable.

Example: The Russian Internet Research Agency operated accounts [posing as Black American activists](#) to sow division and amplify racial tensions.

Scapegoating

The systematic attribution of complex social problems to a specific outgroup, simplifying complicated causality into a villain narrative that focuses grievance on that outgroup and justifies hostility against them.

Example: Economic hardship caused by global financial systems is consistently misattributed to the Jewish community, providing a concrete target for diffuse anxiety.

Us vs. Them Framing (In-group/Out-group Polarization)

A systematic construction of rigid in-group/out-group boundaries through propaganda emphasizing existential threat and dehumanization.

Example: Extremist content frames opponents not as fellow citizens but as existential threats, using dehumanizing language that portrays compromise as surrender.

Wedge Driving

Identifying and exploiting existing social, political, or cultural fault lines, amplifying both sides to deepen polarization and weaken social cohesion.

Example: Russian operations during the 2016 U.S. presidential election simultaneously [operated right and left-wing Facebook pages](#) to maximize polarization.



We Are Predisposed to Our Politics



“Because of genetics, early development, and subsequent life experiences, people carry with them distinct brain response patterns, sympathetic nervous systems, values, moral foundations, negativity biases, strategies of information search, tastes, [and] preferences.... These...coalesce into...behaviorally relevant biological predispositions.”

These “**preset response tendencies (that is the predispositions we carry with us) shape political views and opinions....**”

Most people possess an “ingrained emotional and therefore physiological response to stimuli that ends up being relevant to politics.



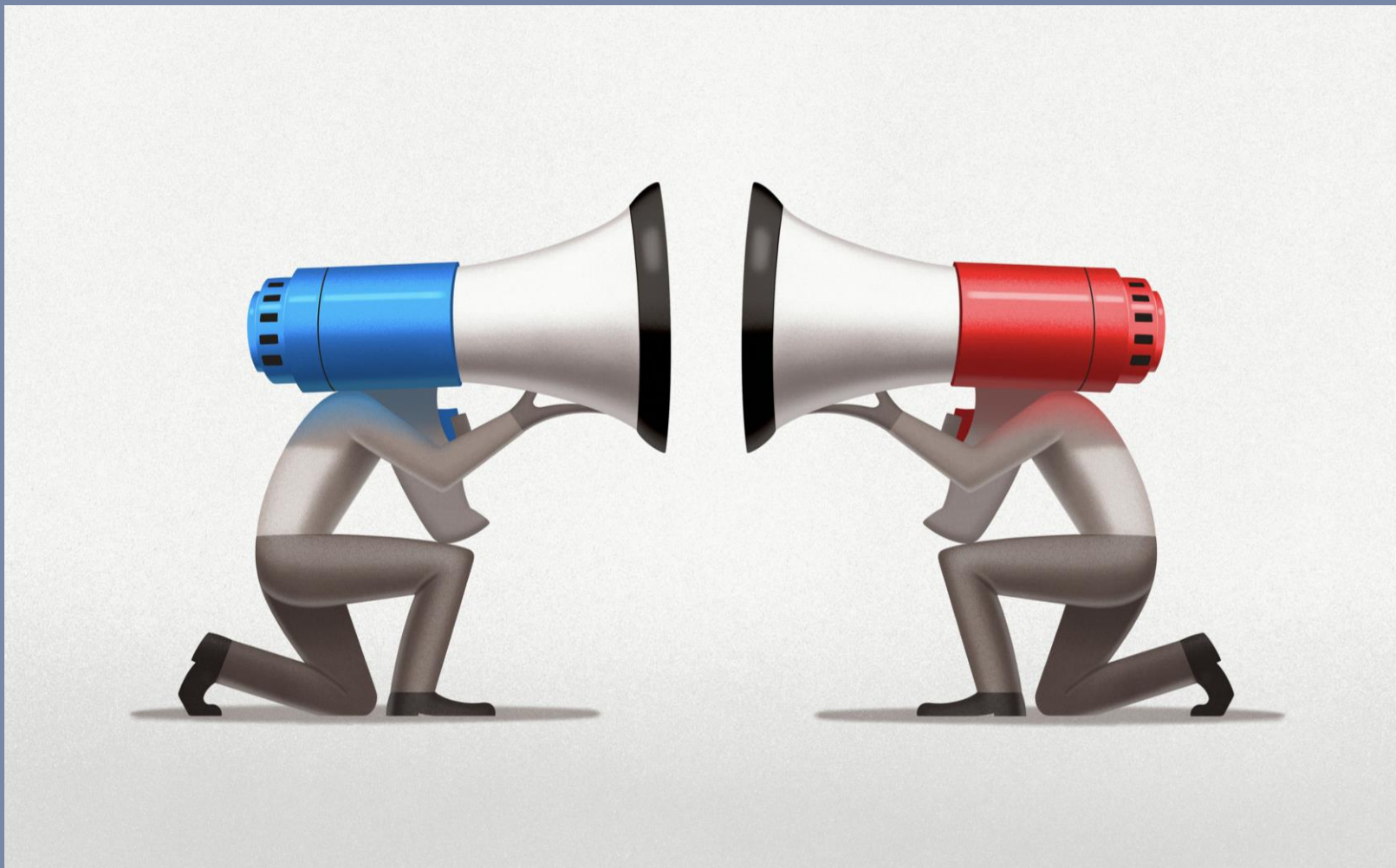
Neural Polarization



There is “a neural basis for partisan biases in processing political information.... in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (DMPFC), a brain region associated with the interpretation of narrative content.”

“Findings suggest that **biased processing in the brain** drives **divergent interpretations of political information** and subsequent **attitude polarization**.

Leong, Y. C., et al. (2020). "Conservative and liberal attitudes drive polarized neural responses to political content." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(44): 27731-27739. // Edsall, Thomas B. "Do You Live in a 'Tight' State or a 'Loose' One? Turns out It Matters Quite a Bit." *New York Times* (March 29 2023). <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/29/opinion/red-blue-tight-loose-state.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>.



Where do you see polarization manifesting?

Grievance

“Grievances are deep feelings of dissatisfaction...with how their society is organized.... This dissatisfaction arises from the perception (real or imagined) that **their needs for identity, physical security, or livelihood are not met, or that their interests or values are threatened**.... grievances may also be sustained and transmitted...through culture, memory, and actual experience.

U.S. Agency for International Development. "Conflict Assessment Framework." (June 2012). https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnady739.pdf

PROPENSITY TOWARD VIOLENCE COMES FROM DEEPLY FELT GRIEVANCES

“Higher acceptance [of political violence] clusters among young people facing greater economic precarity, lower trust in institutions, higher social alienation, and stronger beliefs that others hold harmful intentions.”

HARVARD YOUTH POLL | 51st Edition, Fall 2025

“The key fear that we found was the fear of political exclusion where, as they became a minority, they couldn't get their grievances, they couldn't get their interests through politics. And by the way, this is happening on both sides.”

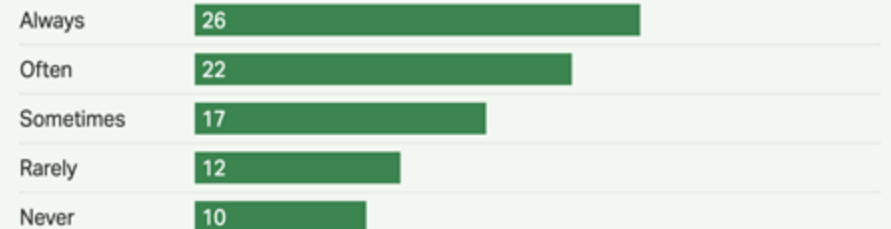
“People get really angry if they don't feel heard, if they feel left out in the process.”

STAKEHOLDER, NC

Americans' Acceptability of Political Violence, by Feelings of Social Isolation and Belonging

% Sometimes OK

Feel lonely



Feel targeted/excluded



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THE NEW YORK TIMES | [What Drives Political Violence in America](#)

GALLUP / KETTERING FOUNDATION | [Democracy for All Project](#)



When have you seen a grievance spark into action?

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Shared Common Values

- **90%** of Americans agree that equal protection under the law, the right to vote, and freedom of speech are important to our country's identity
- **81%** of Democrats and **94%** of Republicans share pride in being American, while being able to “acknowledge” our “country's flaws.”
- **72%** of Americans “desire to be a part of the solution in restoring civility to our country”
- **83%** “expect government leaders to find common ground across political lines”





When have you seen community come together?

Conflict Resilience

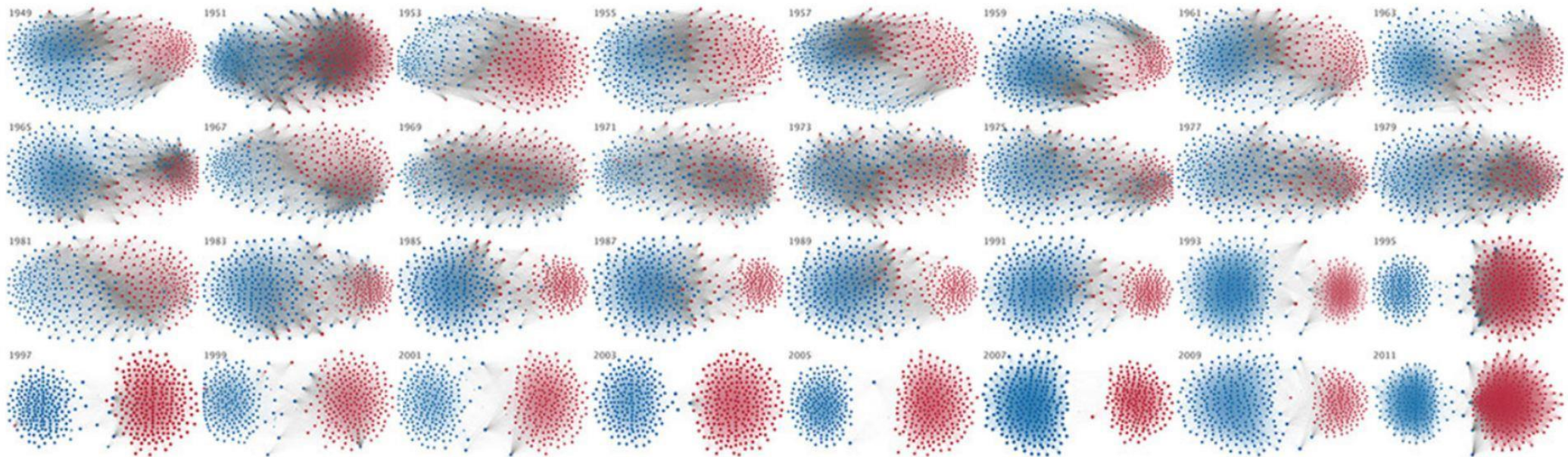
“Societies that are resilient to violent conflict are those where different groups can constructively interact with one another to address potential causes of tension, such as socio-economic, political, ethnic or religious differences, or unequal resource allocation.

From the UN Development Programme, as quoted in Hurlburt, Heather, Nichole Argo, Ben Itzhak, Rachel Brown, Laura Livingston, and Samantha Owens. "Building U.S. Resilience to Political Violence A Globally Informed Framework for Analysis and Action." (December 10, 2019). <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/policy-papers/building-us-resilience-political-violence/>.

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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?



FRIENDLY CITIES LAB | The Rise of Partisanship and Super-Cooperators in the U.S. House of Representatives

IN CLOSING

Do you view behaviors (in yourself or others) you have observed in your life the same or differently now?

Where do we go from here?