



## Bridging America's Political Divide

This research brief sheds light on key barriers to uniting our highly polarized country and what we might do to overcome these barriers. The brief is based on an online survey we conducted of approximately 1,400 Americans in early July 2020. **Because of survey limitations (see methods below), these findings should be considered preliminary.**

### Key takeaways:

- **Contrary to what is commonly imagined, our survey suggests that Americans are not completely locked in ideological bubbles.** The overwhelming majority of respondents have at least one friend they “generally disagree with on key political issues.” Thirty-eight percent reported having 1 - 2 friends with whom they disagree, 26% reported 3 - 5 friends with whom they disagree, 20% reported more than 5 friends with whom they disagree, and only 11% reported no friends with whom they disagree. Many Americans are also engaging in regular political conversations with those who hold opposing views. Over 40% of survey respondents reported having a conversation at least once a week with someone who doesn't share their political views.
- **While Americans in the past worried a great deal about their child marrying someone from a different race or religion or entering a same-sex relationship, our survey suggests that far more Americans these days are concerned about their child marrying someone with opposing political views.** Only 39% of Republicans and 33% of Democrats in our survey were comfortable with their child marrying someone from the other party. Encouragingly, a significant majority of survey respondents are now comfortable with their child marrying someone of a different race (75%) and a different religion (60%). Fifty-five percent of respondents are comfortable with their children entering a same sex marriage. Democrat survey respondents are far more likely to be comfortable with their child marrying someone who is gay (71%) or transgender (56%) than someone from the Republican party (33%). Republican respondents, on the other hand, are slightly less likely to be comfortable with their child marrying someone who is gay (33%) than someone from the Democratic party (39%) and far less comfortable with their child marrying someone who is transgender (16%) than someone who is a Democrat.
- **Most survey respondents identify political differences as a barrier in friendships as well, although the extent of the barrier appears to depend on the political issue.** Democrats, for

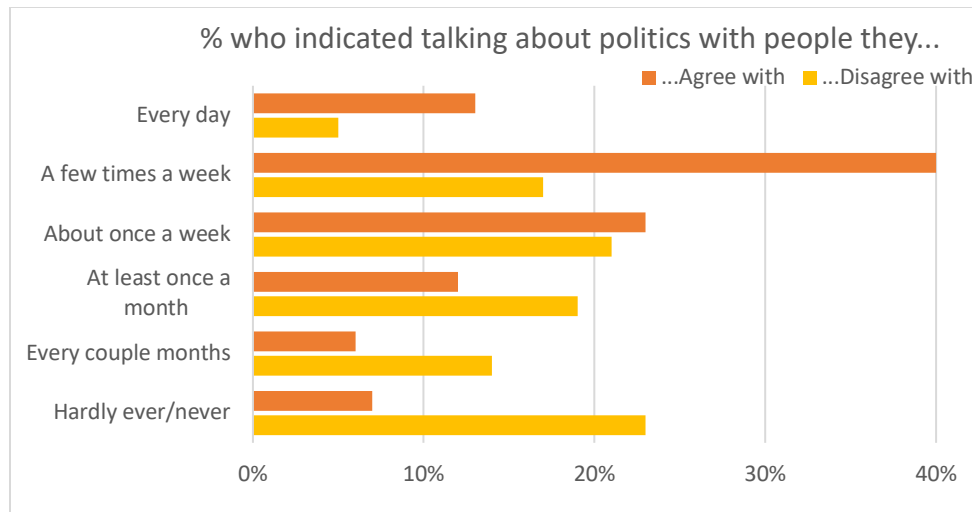
example, are far more willing to be friends with someone who disagrees with them on health care (69%), gun control (65%), or reproductive choice (65%) than they are to be friends with someone who disagrees with them on racism (39%), mask-wearing (40%), or “whether or not Trump is a good president” (49%). Most Republicans, and in some cases a large majority of Republicans, are willing to have friends they disagree with on every topic. Republicans are far more willing than Democrats to have friends they disagree with on “whether or not Trump is a good president” (81%), racism in America (67%), and mask-wearing (73%).

- **Even though significant majorities of Democrats and Republicans are having conversations “across the aisle,” it appears that they tend to find these conversations either only marginally useful or not useful at all.** Only 17% of survey respondents said they tended to find these conversations useful or very useful, 59% reported that these conversations were a “little useful” or “somewhat useful,” and 24% reported “not at all.” Both Democrat and Republican survey respondents indicated a number of reasons why these conversations have been difficult and unconstructive, including viewing those with opposing views as relying on opinions rather than facts and as unwilling to listen or modify their views. Perhaps because of these difficult conversations, about two-thirds of our respondents reported they’re “not that interested” or only “somewhat interested” in talking to those they disagree with politically. Only 1 in 5 indicated they were interested (15%) or very interested (6%).
- **Encouragingly, most survey respondents (67%) agree with the statement, “I think it’s important to get along with people who I disagree with politically” (21% said they neither agree or disagree) and 65% are hopeful that “Americans will overcome their political differences.”**
- **Further, while our survey respondents have tended to find conversations about political views unconstructive in the past, a large majority (80%) of them are “happy” to engage in conversations with those with opposing views in the future *if the conditions are right, i.e., if they can be assured that others will listen to them respectfully.* We may be able to greatly increase the number of Americans who engage constructively with those who don’t share their political views in many settings if we work to create the norms and conditions in schools, workplaces, religious institutions and many community organizations that make constructive conversations possible. (See pages 6-7.)**

**More specifically, our survey indicates the following:**

***1. Significant majorities of Americans are having conversations and friendships with people who hold differing political views.***

We prompted respondents to think about the people they talk with, “whether in person, over the phone, or online,” and asked how often in the past several months they talk about politics with people they generally agree with as well as generally disagree with. Forty-three percent said they talk about politics at least once a week with people they generally disagree with (see chart below).

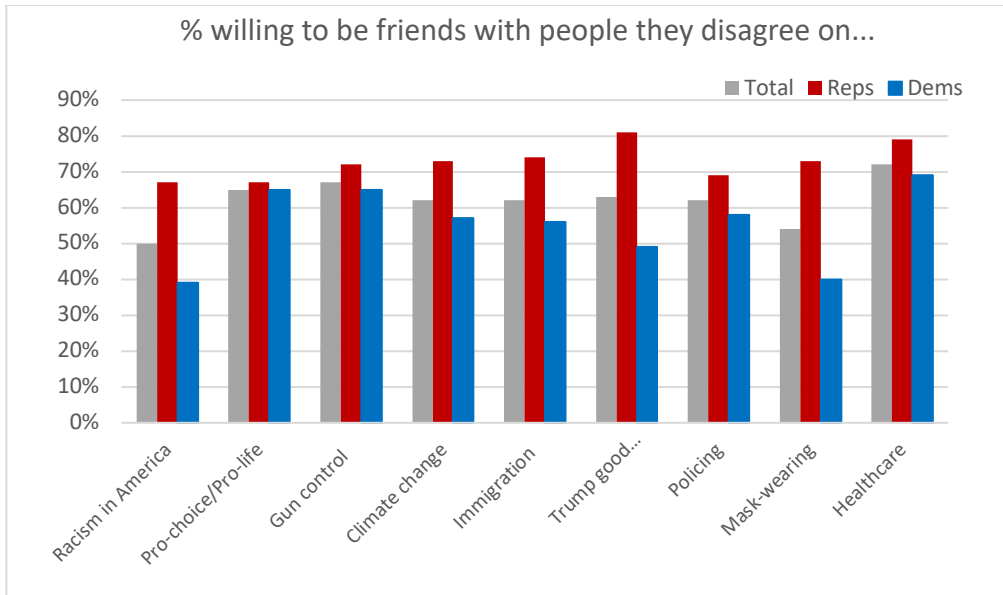


Democrats, women, Asian-Americans, and older adults reported having these conversations least often; Republicans and those with higher levels of education reported having them the most often.

The overwhelming majority of respondents also said they have at least 1 - 2 friends whom they “generally disagree with on key political issues.” Thirty-eight percent reported having 1 - 2 friends with whom they disagree, 26% reported 3 - 5 friends, 20% reported more than 5 friends, and only 11% reported having no such friends. Democrats, Black respondents, and non-parents were more likely to say they had no such friends, and Republicans were more likely to say they have more than 5.

Americans, of course, have political views on many different topics, and in efforts to bridge divides it’s important to understand which topics are most and least polarizing. We asked respondents about whether they could be friends with people with whom they disagree on particular, salient political topics—immigration, racism, reproductive choice, policing, mask-wearing, health care, climate change, “whether or not Trump is a good president,” and gun control.

There were substantial variations in Americans’ willingness to be friends with those with opposing views based on the issue. Democrats, for example, are far more willing to be friends with someone who disagrees with them on health care (69%), gun control (65%), or reproductive choice (65%) than they are to be friends with someone who disagrees with them on racism (39%), mask-wearing (40%), or whether or not Trump is a good president (49%). Most Republicans, and in some cases a large majority of Republicans, are willing to have friends they disagree with on every topic. Republicans are far more willing than Democrats to have friends they disagree with on “whether or not Trump is a good president” (81%), racism in America (67%), and mask-wearing (73%). There were no significant differences between Democrats and Republicans in their willingness to be friends with those with opposing views on reproductive choice, gun control, and policing. See chart below.



**2. Americans generally are not finding conversations across political difference to be useful.**

Even though significant majorities of Democrats and Republicans are having conversations “across the aisle,” it appears that they tend to find these conversations either only marginally useful or not useful at all. Only 17% of survey respondents said they tended to find these conversations useful or very useful, 59% reported that these conversations were a “little useful” or “somewhat useful,” and 24% reported “not at all.” Women, Asian-Americans, and older adults were least likely to report that these conversations are useful, while Republicans, Black Americans, and respondents with higher levels of education were most likely to characterize them as useful. Both Democrat and Republican survey respondents indicated a number of reasons why these conversations have been difficult and unconstructive, including viewing those with opposing views as relying on opinions rather than facts and as unwilling to listen or modify their views.

**3. Most Americans are not interested in talking to those they disagree with politically in the future.**

Whether or not Americans have had conversations “across the aisle” in the past, are they interested in having these conversations in the future? It appears that most Americans are not. About two-thirds of our respondents reported they’re “not that interested” or only “somewhat interested” in talking to those they disagree with politically. Only 1 in 5 indicated they were interested (15%) or very interested (6%). Democrats, women, and Asian-Americans were least interested. Republicans, parents, Americans with higher levels of education, and those between 25 – 45 years of age were most interested. Being engaged with politics—e.g., reading about politics and volunteering for or donating to political causes—is correlated with both more interest in having these conversations and with actually having more of these conversations.

**4. Americans are uncomfortable with the idea of their children marrying someone who doesn’t share their political views.**

Another window into how Americans think about political differences and whether they are motivated or willing to bridge them is whether they would feel comfortable with their child marrying someone with opposing political views.

In the not so distant past, large majorities of Americans were uncomfortable with their child marrying someone who was different from them in terms of race and religion. Only 4% of Americans approved of Black-white marriages in 1958 ([see here](#)) and only 19% of Americans who got married before 1960 married someone from a different religion ([see here](#)). Most Americans (57%) about twenty years ago also disapproved of same-sex marriage ([see here](#)). On the other hand, Americans were relatively open to marrying those who didn't share their political views ([see here](#)), and in 1958, 72% of Americans reported not caring whether their daughter married someone from the opposite party ([see here](#)).

Times have changed. We asked survey respondents “whether you have children or not, how comfortable would you be with your child marrying someone” who has one of these characteristics? Our list of characteristics included “is gay or lesbian,” “supports the Democratic Party,” “supports the Republican party,” “identifies as transgender,” and “belongs to a different religion.” See below for the percentage of Republicans and Democrats who indicated “comfortable” or “very comfortable” (those in parentheses represent “not comfortable” or “not comfortable at all”).

	<b>Republicans</b>	<b>Democrats</b>
Identifies as transgender	16% (71% not)	56% (28% not)
Is gay or lesbian	33% (51% not)	71% (16% not)
Supports the Democratic party	39% (36% not)	86% (2% not)
Belongs to a different religion	45% (26% not)	73% (8% not)
Has no religion at all	42% (41% not)	78% (11% not)
Is a different race or ethnicity	62% (14% not)	85% (4% not)
Has a different nationality	70% (10% not)	89% (3% not)
Supports the Republican party	83% (1% not)	33% (45% not)
Has no political affiliation or interest	63% (13% not)	71% (9% not)

Both Republican and Democrat respondents are far more comfortable with their child marrying someone from a different race or religion and far less comfortable with their child marrying someone from the opposing political party than they were in the past. Encouragingly, 62% of Republican and 85% of Democrat respondents are comfortable with their child marrying someone from a different race—findings supported by a Gallup poll that indicates that 87% of Americans approve of interracial

marriages ([see here](#)). Forty-five percent of Republican and 73% of Democrat respondents in our survey were comfortable with their child marrying someone from a different religion. A Pew survey indicates that in 2015 almost 40% of Americans, in fact, actually married someone from a different religion, a big jump from the 19% of Americans who entered an interfaith marriage before 1960 ([see here](#)).

But only 39% of Republicans and 33% of Democrats in our survey were comfortable with their child marrying someone from the other party. While 72% of Americans didn't care whether their daughter married someone from the opposite party in 1958, 45% reported not caring in a Gallup poll in 2016 ([see here](#)). Democrat respondents are far more likely to be comfortable with their child marrying someone who is gay (71%) or transgender (56%) than someone from the Republican party (33%). Republicans, on the other hand, are slightly less likely to be comfortable with their child marrying someone who is gay (33%) than someone from the Democratic party (39%) and far less comfortable with their child marrying someone who is transgender (16%) than someone who is a Democrat. Another survey similarly found that Republicans are more uncomfortable with their child marrying someone who is transgender than someone who is a Democrat ([see here](#)).

## The Good News

All this suggests that there are major barriers to bridging divides in this country. But our data also provides reasons for hope. While large percentages of Americans view our country as divided, 65% of respondents are “hopeful that Americans will overcome their political differences” (although Democrats, at the time of our survey, were less hopeful than Republicans). According to a survey conducted by More in Common, 77% of Americans believe “our differences are not so great that we can't come together” ([see here](#)). Our survey suggests that about two-thirds of Americans “think it's important to get along with people I disagree with politically.”

Further, it appears that Americans are quite open to talking to those with opposing political views *under certain conditions*. We asked survey respondents whether they would be “happy” to have these conversations if those with opposing views “listened to them respectfully.” Eighty percent of respondents agreed with this statement and only 8% disagreed; there were no significant differences between Democrats and Republicans. We also asked respondents if they “can have respect for people who I disagree with politically if they respect me back.” Again, 83% of respondents agreed with this statement and only 5% disagreed; Republicans were somewhat more likely to agree (88%) than Democrats (80%).

We may be able to greatly increase the numbers of Americans who engage constructively with those who don't share their political views in workplaces, faith-based institutions, colleges, and many other settings if we work to create the norms and conditions that make constructive conversations possible. That work certainly won't be simple, but the alternative is even greater antagonism and polarization in our country and our communities.

How do we create these norms and conditions? Creating these conditions often involves, among many things, helping people develop the foundational skills that make constructive conversations

possible, including listening, checking for understanding, and finding areas of common ground. It often involves not just talking but doing things together—common service projects that bring together people with divergent political views. It means not avoiding real disagreements but [arguing more thoughtfully and effectively](#). As Eric Liu, the director of Citizen University, [puts it](#): “...imagine if in public libraries, civic clubs and other such spaces we taught ourselves how to argue better, how to identify and name our foundational fights over principle, how to argue all sides and not just one’s own, how to change one’s own mind as well as another’s, and how to put together solutions that draw from each pole of principle—as if we had responsibility for solutions, not just posturing.”

It means the hard work of [creating a moral framework](#) based in human rights and differentiating between political positions that have a moral basis and those that do not. Many political positions about immigration have a moral basis, but there’s no reasonable moral argument for separating children at the border. Pro-life and pro-choice positions both have a moral basis. Racism, sexism, and homophobia do not.

And it means well-facilitated conversations based on agreed-upon norms. These norms should include assuming others’ good intentions, being mindful of the perspectives and histories of the people in the room, challenging ideas rather than people, avoiding sweeping generalizations, expecting mistakes, listening generously and appreciating the complexity of other people as one appreciates one’s own.

## Resources

### ***Organizations, Programs, and Frameworks***

[Better Arguments Project](#): A national civic initiative with guiding dimensions, principles, and resources designed to encourage better arguments in various settings, including business, education, community, home, faith, and public office.

[Braver Angels](#): A citizens’ organization dedicated to bringing people together across political difference through debates, skills training, workshops and opportunities for building alliances.

[National Conversation Project](#): A collaborative platform that aggregates, aligns, and amplifies the efforts of the [#ListenFirst Coalition](#) to mainstream conversations in which we #ListenFirst to understand people across difference.

[Weave: The Social Fabric Project](#): A program of the Aspen Institute whereby ordinary citizens join as “Weavers” to repair the country’s social fabric through relationship-building.

### ***Curriculum, Programs, and Activities***

[American Exchange Project](#): A domestic exchange program that allows American high school students to “study abroad” in their own country, the goal being to build enduring respect and understanding across economic, political, and geographic divides.

[Facing History and Ourselves](#): Repository of online resources, frameworks, and professional development opportunities on a variety of topics including democracy and civic engagement, race in U.S. history, justice and human rights, bullying and ostracism, and global immigration.

[OpenMind](#): A psychology-based interactive platform that fosters openness to diverse perspectives and equips people across campuses, companies, organizations, and communities with essential skills to communicate constructively across differences.

[Teaching Tolerance](#): Repository of online resources, frameworks, and professional development opportunities to educate and empower youth to be active participants in a diverse democracy.

## **Methodology**

The online survey which made possible the data summarized in this report was conducted via Amazon's Mechanical Turk or Mturk, a fee-for-service survey panel that attracts diverse samples (i.e., Workers) from all over the United States and other countries. Specifically, the survey (N = 1434, 44% male, 6% Black, 79% White) was designed in Qualtrics and disseminated through Mturk to U.S.-based adults over 18 years of age, in early July. One of Mturk's features is its system and premium qualifications; as such, we requested Workers who were in the U.S. and had a 95% approval rating (meaning, their work gets approved by researchers or those requesting their tasks 95% of the time). Given the political nature of the survey, we also requested over 600 conservative and 600 liberal Workers. After systematic cleaning of the final dataset, almost 54% of the final sample identified as Democrat or leaning Democrat, 35% as Republican or leaning Republican, and those remaining (11%) identified as "Independent," "other," or "none."

The survey included about 60 primary questions (with some open-ended response options) largely developed by Making Caring Common, and it took participants less than 20 minutes to complete. Upon completion of survey data collection, we used raking to generate sample weights which matched the sample to the population of U.S. adults on gender, race, age, income, educational attainment, and political party or affiliation. All results presented in this report incorporate the survey weights in order to attain better estimates of the U.S. population. Population values for gender, race, age, income, and educational attainment came from the U.S. Census, while data for political party came from the most recent Gallup survey available. Even with sample weights, our sample was disproportionately higher educated (with more than a high-school diploma) and working age (ages 25 to 55).

Regarding other survey limitations, some threats to internal (e.g., attention or motivation) and external validity (e.g., generalizability) using Mturk have been reported (see Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). Nonetheless, researchers have found that results obtained from Mturk samples are consistent with results obtained from other widely used and accepted sampling pools (see Follmer, Sperling, & Suen, 2017; Huff & Tingley, 2015).



## **Citations**

Berinsky, A. J., Huber, G. A., & Lenz, G. S. (2012). Evaluating online labor markets for experimental research: Amazon.com's mechanical turk. *Political Analysis*, 20(3), 351-368.

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Huff, C., & Tingley, D. (2015). Who are these people? Evaluating the demographic characteristics and political preferences of Mturk survey respondents. *Research and Politics*, 1-12.