



## After the Fact | Beyond Polarization: Where Americans Agree

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### TRANSCRIPT

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**Mónica Guzmán, senior fellow for public practice, Braver Angels:** We're not here to try to change people's minds on the issues; we're here to try to change people's minds about each other.

**Dan LeDuc, host, "After the Fact" Podcast:** Welcome to "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. And that was Mónica Guzmán with Braver Angels. At a time of political polarization in America, her organization is working to get people talking to each other again.

It starts, she says, with learning how we can disagree in better ways. That's hard to do when conversations in the current climate often feel uncomfortable and even stressful. That brings us to our data point for this episode: A solid majority of Americans—65%—have said they feel exhausted when thinking about politics these days, according to Pew Research Center. And it takes a toll: 55% say that discussing politics makes them feel angry.

The Center's Carroll Doherty and Hannah Hartig spoke to us about what they found when polling the American public about their perspectives on politics today. While it's clear that Americans don't agree on much, there are a few areas, even now, where data shows we can find some understanding.

Well, we want to welcome Carroll Doherty, who directs political research at the Pew Research Center, his colleague, a senior researcher on political matters at the Pew Research Center, Hannah Hartig. The two of you and your team over at the Center recently published a report, the title of which grabbed my attention: "America's Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics."

I think most of us could pick up a daily newspaper might find some evidence of that, but you were able to put numbers to it. Could you give us some of the topline findings?

**Carroll Doherty, director, political research, Pew Research Center:** We went into this with the idea that we wanted to look at the state of political representation in the United States. And what we found was just a kind of striking negativity across many areas, in many realms. It was extraordinary, actually, the negativity.



And we know that Americans aren't fond of politicians, traditionally, going back decades. But the level of sort of cynicism, I think, surprised us a bit. So we gave people several opportunities and open-ended questions to tell us how they felt. And it just came through. One example, asking people to describe their own views of politics today, 79% gave us a negative word. And some of those words were unprintable. They were unprintable, and the themes were: Elected officials are corrupt. There's too much money in politics. The polarization is out of control.

**Dan LeDuc:** I mean, we were all taught, if we paid attention in high school civics class, the, you know, the virtues of our system, right? Checks and balances, the people are heard. We have a imperfect system, but one that survived more than 200 years. This latest finding sort of tracks some trend lines for what you've been looking at in the last few decades, and the trend is not up.

**Carroll Doherty:** One of the longest trends in all of American public opinion is trust in government. And we're at 16% now, saying they can trust the government. That's among, if not the lowest, in 70 years. And, and, you know, certainly among the lowest. But it's been low for quite a while now, for probably at least two decades.

It's been around 25, 20, something like that, percent saying they can trust the government. It's almost as if this is the new normal, as we're experiencing it now. The party that controls the White House is always a little more trusting than the out party, but neither are very trusting.

**Dan LeDuc:** You know, one of the ironies I took away from reading the report was we have this great divide and, you know, opposing views that seem to be visceral. But there's a source of agreement on this. There's a source of agreement across the parties.

**Hannah Hartig, senior researcher, Pew Research Center:** Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. There's this sort of inherent tension that we're seeing, and throughout the survey, we saw that Republicans and Democrats alike were all sort of decrying polarization.

Time and time again in the survey, you see that people have this idea that Republicans and Democrats spend too much time disagreeing with one another and not actually getting anything done, that there's too much attention paid to, you know, partisan squabbles and not important issues facing the country.

And yet, we're extremely polarized. And also, there's a rise in partisan antipathy. And what that means is holding a negative view of the opposing party. So, you know, on the one hand, you have, um, basically bipartisan agreement that our divisiveness is a huge issue for our politics, and yet we're all still very dug into our sort of partisan corners.



And when I say “we,” of course, I mean the U.S. public. Our current survey also asked about how members of the public are viewing the parties, and nearly 3 in 10 have an unfavorable view of both major parties. If we think about the parties as being the primary vehicles by which people are having their views represented, you know, it calls into question: Is this another huge problem for our political system?

**Carroll Doherty:** It’s a great point, because, at a time of high polarization, partisan polarization, you still see a lot of people are saying, “A pox on both your houses.” Especially young people who are saying that, and that’s notable. A lot of the findings here, young people are saying “enough.”

**Hannah Hartig:** It is sort of a tall task to think about how to, how we bridge the divide. It’s an incredibly important question. And I think it’s a natural one that comes after you read this study. We’re geographically sorted. You’re less likely to live next to someone who has a different political view than you do. Increasingly, your religion and education, gender, race, and ethnicity is almost always aligned with partisanship, which makes it feel even more entrenched to this sort of “entrenchedness,” I don’t know if I said that right.

**Dan LeDuc:** It’s a great word. Even if you just made it up.

**Hannah Hartig:** It’s not a real word?

**Dan LeDuc:** I like it.

**Hannah Hartig:** I take credit.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, what does the data out of this report tell us about the system’s biggest inherent problems?

**Carroll Doherty:** I think money and politics gets too little attention these days. Honestly, it’s something that’s really falling off the radar, even for news organizations. There’s not much coverage of it these days for Americans.

It’s still a major frustration. There’s too much money in politics. Members of both parties say that, and they want to limit on the amount of money that can be used in campaigns: 72% say they favor that. This is something that’s a source of the public’s frustration, has been for a while, and it’s not going away.

**Hannah Hartig:** Yeah, that’s so true, Carroll. And it also bleeds into how Americans are viewing the types of people who run for office. There’s this idea that you have to be well



connected or have a lot of money. But our survey also revealed that people are skeptical for why people are running in the first place, their motivations for running. They think that they're running to either make a lot of money, or to get fame and attention for themselves. So this idea about money being a corrupting force in politics, it touches a number of different areas.

We have some data about civility, about the tone and nature of political debate in the country, and people say that it's become less fact-based. There's this idea that there's a lot of potshots taken at people and it's getting too personal. And this is just sort of me thinking about it, and I wonder if we cannot make it so negative even in the way that we speak to one another, or politicians speak to one another, and if that, you know, can do some good. It's obviously not going to solve our differences on substantive issues.

**Carroll Doherty:** The policy issues are tough to bridge. Issues like abortion, gun control, climate change, people feel strongly about, they disagree, and that's a legitimate disagreement. The partisan antipathy side, it may be the most dangerous side of all because it's saying to the other side, not the party, but the people in that party, "No, you're more immoral. You're more lazy than other Americans." As we found in a previous study, that share has grown over the years. And I think it does come from some of the toxic discourse that we've seen. We did a big survey five years ago about political discourse. That seems almost quaint now, given some of the things we asked about talking over each other in a meeting. And I'm thinking now we could ask a lot more.

**Hannah Hartig:** We had these sort of imagined scenarios, and now we look at them and we're like, "Oh, this is child's play."

**Carroll Doherty:** Child's play compared to what goes on today. But, but it's incumbent upon political leaders in both parties to lower the temperature. This kind of toxic discourse has an impact and contributes to polarization among the public.

**Dan LeDuc:** Is there anything in the data that shows some areas of agreement?

**Carroll Doherty:** People do want better infrastructure, and both parties want this. Um, so, so there are some areas of agreement, but they're sort of outside of the realm of day-to-day politics and the political battles.

And of course, on the personal side, people do care about their own families, and they value spending time with families, which may not seem like much, but, uh, this is a scenario where all Americans can, or most Americans can agree.



**Dan LeDuc:** Earlier we heard from Mónica Guzmán, and we now turn to our conversation with her. She is a journalist and the author of a book called *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times*. She's also a senior fellow for public practice at Braver Angels. Here's Mónica:

**Mónica Guzmán:** I've been a journalist my whole career, and boy, I just, I fell in love with the mystery of people. People are so fascinating. And I care really deeply about helping people understand each other. When the partisan polarization started infecting kind of everything, I realized that I needed to step out of journalism and try to work on something around the fundamental brokenness of everything. But the other really personal reason I'm doing this is that I'm from a politically divided family. I'm a Mexican immigrant; my parents are as well.

They voted for Trump the last two elections. I voted for Clinton and Biden. You can imagine the tension in our household, and I've learned a lot from that tension. And it made me really interested in discovering what skills, what tactics, what things can we do in conversation and in our own minds to make it so that we actually can see past this divide and see behind the frustrations and disagreements.

**Dan LeDuc:** Let's talk a little bit about what you learned from that tension. But even how do you describe the tension and sort of situation in America today?

**Mónica Guzmán:** I say that we are so divided we're blinded.

We are blinded to the debates, the real debates that actually challenge us. We tend to caricature, not only what debates are really about, but also the people who disagree with us, and why they must believe what they believe. We fall into some really pernicious assumptions, including the idea that if they oppose what I support, they must hate what I love.

There's a lot of reasons we ended up here. Our media and our politics and the way they're incentivized isn't helping, but I'm really of the mindset that we can't wait for the institutions to just fix it all on their own.

**Dan LeDuc:** I'm just interested in your perspective also on where we are in the history of our country. This separation and polarization has been building for a while. But efforts like yours and Braver Angels are relatively new. Did we reach a point from where the water was, like, just simmering and we knew things weren't getting along, where we're bubbling over now and we just have to act?



**Mónica Guzmán:** I think it certainly feels that way. And I don't want to dismiss other parts of American history that were quite divisive. There was one where we killed 700,000 fellow Americans in the Civil War. What's going on now, I think of a couple things: sorting, othering, and siloing.

Sorting, we like to be around like-minded people. It's great. It's how we build friendships and communities. Othering, we discriminate against people we deem different, even if that difference is not that meaningful. So, when it is meaningful, whoa, watch out. And then siloing is really powerful because of our media these days that follows us everywhere and that we curate with all the voices we love.

So, when we are exposed, even to ideas that do disagree with our own, it's often through layers of judgments from the people who do agree with us. Here's some of the things that have happened that seem particularly pernicious.

There's a kind of like thing behind our political opinions where we almost care more about bringing down the other side than we do championing our own. Political scientists have seen that increase over the decades. We also have, for example, people in Congress, the congressional workweek went from five days to three back in 1994.

And our elected officials flew home every single week. And there were no longer baseball practices where the Republican and the Democrats' kids were playing together, right? So we're missing these opportunities for collisions. And that's not just in Congress. Blue ZIP codes are getting bluer. Red ZIP codes are getting redder.

And so we're in this vicious cycle that's really accelerated where we're judging each other more while we're engaging each other less. And it's very difficult to get to that underlying truth when we're, when we put ourselves at such a distance, in part because we're afraid and we're nervous, and we also really get soothed by certainty. We manufacture certainty in the face of a lot of confounding questions, because, hey, it's no fun to live in a lot of anxiety.

**Dan LeDuc:** Yeah. And this is an anxious time for a lot of reasons. There is this notion that by maybe trying to talk to someone on the other side of your political viewpoint that you might somehow even be validating like this harmful idea to even have a conversation. Do you buy that?

**Mónica Guzmán:** I certainly relate to that idea. I've thought that many times, that if when I'm in a conversation with someone who really believes things that I find extremely difficult, I start to wonder if I'm implicated somehow in even allowing this person to say these things out loud at all.



I think in the practice of this I've come to learn a couple of things that have brought that fear down in myself. One is this principle of containment. It's one thing to have these kinds of conversations in a place where lots of people are listening and you don't know who it is, so I understand why people are afraid. "Oh no, I've let something out of the box and it's going to infect people." But if it's a one-on-one conversation, if you contain that to a very small group, then contagion of a bad idea is no longer a concern.

But let's go even further. The research is showing us that we exaggerate to an alarming degree. When we look across the political divide, and I'm talking blue and red here, we exaggerate how many extreme views there are, how extreme those views are, and then how many people hold them, right? There's that to keep in mind.

So if you're approaching a person and you're thinking, "I'm gonna release a harmful idea. I'm approaching a harmful idea," try to reframe that and say, "No, I'm approaching a person."

The last thing I'll say is that even if there is harm, even if there is harm in talking about some ideas, there is so much harm in not ever talking about anything. There is so much harm in the distrust that has built in these vacuums that we have allowed to build between us.

**Dan LeDuc:** So how do you encourage folks to talk to each other despite their reservations?

**Mónica Guzmán:** I think the first step isn't even about other people. It's about ourselves. We live in such a reactionary time. We're consuming, many of us, digitally, so many opinions and memes and things that come at us so quickly that it's just a reaction.

We don't have time to reflect. We don't spend a lot of time in solitude. Like taking stock of the ideas that have crossed through our minds. So that means that there's just a lot of assumptions that we have unconsciously picked up. So I think the first step is to question our assumptions.

But you have to notice them first. So, notice your assumptions so you can question them. And then you can ask, "Wait, what am I missing? I wonder where I got that idea."

And after you take some time really doing that, then you'll begin to do it too in your conversations with other people. You'll notice all the assumptions that come flooding into your mind when they say or do something. And instead of, "Ah, I knew it, they're doing this because they're bad people in this way."



Then instead you get curious. And you go, “Wait a minute, what am I missing? I wonder why they believe that.” And then ask questions to actually unpack that mystery of who they are, rather than just putting your story about them into them and then jailing them in that cage.

**Dan LeDuc:** Peter Coleman at Columbia, who is talking with us elsewhere in this season, talks about that as well. The self-reflection that sort of has to begin the process, right? Man, does that make it harder? Because it puts it on the person.

**Mónica Guzmán:** Absolutely.

**Dan LeDuc:** Yeah, so what’s the motivation? It’s like I can just sit here in my own little tribe and I can watch the shows I want to watch, and I can talk to the people I want to talk to. What’s the motivation to get out of that?

**Mónica Guzmán:** There are many. I’ve met people with lots of different on-ramps to this. There’s folks who care deeply about political issues. Maybe they even consider themselves advocates. And for advocates, it is extraordinarily important not to just believe your assumptions and projections about those who disagree with you, who you want to persuade. You have to reserve some of your time and energy to checking those assumptions with the reality in actual conversations, or whatever actions you’re taking to advocate are just gonna not work at all.

Then there’s a lot of people who have broken relationships or had a relationship broken for them, who are really suffering and want to restore something there. And so they come to Braver Angels, or they come to this work because they wonder if there’s just something they can do. There’s a woman I know who was able to repair a relationship with her father that was really all about her walking into his house and hearing Fox News and getting irritated, and then he would get irritated, and then she would have to go stay in a hotel. They managed to repair that right before he died. And have the best relationship they ever had.

**Dan LeDuc:** Let’s say someone has the will, willingness to self-reflect and the desire to engage. How do they do that? How do they get from that? “Okay, I’m ready. I’m willing to reach out.” Whether it’s Braver Angels or your own personal experience, what are the things you can tell people who are saying, “OK, I’m willing to give this a try?”

How do they do that?

**Mónica Guzmán:** One thing is to make sure that you are going into the conversation not with the sole purpose of changing the other person. That comes off very condescending. We are very sophisticated people. We know when we’re being sold something, and we know when we’re being disrespected. So across these divides, that happens often, where the





disagreements get so intense and emotionally penetrating that you just go, “What’s wrong with you?” So, step one is, just don’t go in with that. And put yourself in that mindset of, “Look, I’m here to understand.” Step two is, depending on your style, make sure that you really are leaving room for the other person and that you are invested in that process of understanding. Maybe you’ve asked a question, or maybe they begin to explain an opinion.

And if you don’t, if you don’t quite understand, or if there’s more to it, then make sure that you check with them. So you say, “So what I hear you saying is this and this.” And if they go, “Yeah, exactly,” then you’ve already, you’ve climbed the first little summit. You’ve climbed the first little hill.

You’ve established a sense of, “I see you.” And when that happens, people relax a little. They’re ready to go a little bit farther. And they can tell that you’re actually invested in understanding them, which, by the way, is one of the most beautiful experiences when others are interested in us.

It’s a really great thing, right? You get to go a little farther. A really big thing that I think is extraordinarily powerful is to ask “how” instead of “why.” So instead of asking questions that are versions of “Why do you believe what you believe?”—especially across a big divide—ask, “How did you come to believe what you believe?”

The difference is, when you ask “why” across a divide, you’re putting someone on trial. They’re going to be guarded. They’re going to want to go and reach for the talking points that others have taken shelter under, whatever it takes to get you off their back. But if you ask, “How did you come to believe what you believe?” you’re asking for their story.

And only they know their story, and they are the world’s foremost expert in their own story, and hey, now we’re taking a tour instead of going on trial. And then you can do that lovely thing, the pivot. We call it the pivot at Braver Angels, where you say, “OK, here’s what I’ve heard from you,” or “Thank you,” or “I, I get it. Here’s what I’ve understood from you. I see it differently. Can I tell you what I mean?” Get that buy-in from the other person, and now you can share your story.

**Dan LeDuc:** Now, let me ask you the harder question, which is, somebody goes through the self-reflection. They’re motivated. They try this conversation, and it fails. For whatever reason, the other person isn’t responsive, the questions aren’t asked correctly, and it becomes not a good experience. How do you motivate someone to try again?

**Mónica Guzmán:** Mmm. One thing to remember, you know, what keeps people apart is a big, big, big judgment, a really big assumption, that it can take time to untangle.



And that assumption, that judgment is what's keeping you from even conceiving of having that conversation again. And so just leave that question open. Look, if you still have a relationship with this person, but you just can't talk about politics right now, fine, you know?

You never know what time will do, you never know when that door will crack open a little bit, and I really believe in sort of allowing that uncertainty to live.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, what do young people think of all this polarization? We'll get to that question next time, and we hope you'll join us. Thanks for listening. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."