



Perspective

EXPERT INSIGHTS ON A TIMELY POLICY ISSUE

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A House Reunited

**Prospects for Bipartisanship
in a Divided Country**

January 2023

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This Perspective was published in 2023. Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.

It is a contentious time in the United States. A global pandemic has upended the social and economic life of the country (Dworsky and Saunders-Medina, 2022; Holliday et al., 2020; Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021; Martin and Brahmhatt, 2021). The 2020 presidential election was followed by an attack on the U.S. Capitol (U.S. Attorney’s Office, District of Columbia, 2021), and there was an attempted assassination of a sitting justice on the U.S. Supreme Court (U.S. Attorney’s Office, District of Maryland, 2022). And a diverse variety of political, socio-economic, and policy issues led to an estimated 42,347 protests between January 2017 and January 2021 (Leung and Perkins, 2021).

We do not believe that this constellation of events, in and of itself, is a threat to American democracy. We do, however, propose that a *lack of solutions* to the problems that underpin these events are threats. The purpose of this Perspective is to scope out some of these issues and offer potential solutions that appear to be acceptable to most people from across the political spectrum.

We first define *democracy* and *public policy* and discuss how political polarization can affect both concepts. We propose that the functioning of democracy depends on a healthy discourse about specific considerations that

affect public policy. And it appears that this discourse is driven increasingly by ideology rather than objective analysis rooted in data and facts (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018; Thomson, 2010). To explore potential solutions, we organized a series of workshops to separate the politics from the policy issues and find areas of consensus among participants holding different views about select problems.

Democracy, Public Policy, and Politics

The United States has a representative democracy, which affords its people “a range of rights and opportunities to influence the making of public policy by the government” (U.S. Congress, 2003, p. 7). Broadly speaking, “[p]ublic policy is whatever governments choose to do or not do” (Dye, 2016, p. 2). We started with the assumption that political polarization can affect discourse about public policy, potentially clouding the distinction between opinion and fact in discussions about specific issues (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018).

We define *political ideology* as an abstract worldview that people use as a yardstick to evaluate their evolving views on both politics and public policy (Mason, 2018).

Some propose that this yardstick has at least two elements: The first is people’s views on specific issues (e.g., taxes or national security). The second is social identity, or how one self-identifies with a particular group (e.g., conservative, moderate, or liberal). Furthermore, these elements might not always neatly overlay for people or groups. Although it is beyond the scope of this Perspective to review the rich literature on measuring political ideology and polarization, we organized a series of workshops to discuss politically divisive issues, with the goal of having participants put aside their political identities and focus on the nuances of policy issues.

These workshops were intended to be rich conversations that could serve as launching-off points and inspiration for thinking about a more productive dialogue about highly polarized issues. We found that, although people from across the political spectrum might disagree about the general causes and context of these issues, there are, in fact, opportunities for agreement on specific solutions.

The remainder of this Perspective describes key issues that emerged in our workshops on the broad issue of affective

political polarization. Using affective polarization as an interpretive frame, we then present key issues that emerged in the policy-specific workshops. The appendix describes the details of these workshops, which included a total of 49 participants. Of these participants, 46.9 percent were women, 22.4 percent were people of color (i.e., Black, Asian, Indigenous, or Latino), 28.6 percent were from think tanks, 22.4 percent were affiliated with academia, another 22.4 percent were associated with nonprofit organizations, and 16.3 percent were affiliated with local, state, or federal entities.

We do not endorse any particular idea that arose in our conversations—and note that some ideas are more feasible or effective than others. Instead, we identify one proposed solution for each workshop topic that might appeal to consensus and that we think merits further evaluation. This Perspective concludes with a brief discussion of these potential solutions.

The United States in the 21st Century: A Polarized Democracy

The United States appears to be experiencing a period of affective polarization. Affective polarization goes beyond ideological partisanship: Whereas partisans self-identify with and favor their ideological in-groups, affective polarization is marked by strong distrust and hostility toward an ideological outgroup (Druckman, Klar, et al., 2021). Of particular note is that, in the current period of affective polarization in the 2000s, in-group warmth has held generally steady: **The level of affective polarization is being driven by increasingly negative attitudes toward out-group members** (Druckman and Levy, 2021). That is

Abbreviations

ANES	American National Election Studies
CES	Current Employment Statistics
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CPS	Current Population Survey
CVE	countering violent extremism
DHS	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
DSA	Digital Services Act
ODNI	Office of the Director of National Intelligence

to say, affective polarization in the United States is more about hostility toward *them* than about solidarity with *us*. Of course, high levels of polarization are not new to the United States—after the Civil War, the country was highly polarized, with animosity peaking at the turn of the century as the parties fought over industrialization (Brady and Han, 2006). But although polarization has occurred before in the United States, the current trend toward more ideological hostility and rigidity has been steadily building since the 1970s, with serious harmful effects for the democracy (Phillips, 2022).

We see this highly polarized state in current U.S. politics—in which political elites have become increasingly extreme and rigid, and the polity increasingly self-sorts so that people work, live, and socialize with like minds—as a framework for thinking about highly contentious policy issues. In drawing from the concept of affective polarization, we do not mean to discount the meaningful stakes around policy arguments, nor do we downplay the sincere political differences involved. Rather, we mean the opposite: Strong democracies have robust dialogue as the polity works out creative solutions to hard policy problems. However, affective polarization is a potentially crippling barrier to fruitful political argument. In this sense, affective polarization is an underlying cause of policy gridlock. We hope that it can also be a heuristic for exploring the question of whether people in the United States can cultivate self-awareness and have more-fruitful conversations that focus on areas of consensus and opportunity.

Understanding Drivers, Consequences, and Responses to Polarization

In the rest of this section, we discuss affective polarization in more detail. Our workshops on political polarization writ large were not specific to any policy but rather examined the drivers and effects of polarization. Participants in our polarization workshops discussed a variety of factors they saw as contributing to political polarization in the United States.

These factors fell into two broader categories:

- internal human behavioral patterns of group identity
- external structural factors.

Human beings are fundamentally group-oriented; people habitually and ubiquitously self-organize through in- and out-group identity. This tendency toward *groupishness* makes it easy for people to construct a polarized us-versus-them social world, while structural factors (e.g., inequalities, geographic sorting, increased party control in Congress) function as barriers to interaction and trust-building that might decrease polarization between groups. During our discussions, participants pointed out how polarization undergirds and exacerbates tensions over other policy issues—framing polarization as a type of foundational condition that makes consensus broadly harder to achieve.

Whereas our policy-specific workshops discussed areas of consensus and pushed toward “quick wins,” the polarization workshops focused on the foundational problem of greater affective polarization as context for policy paralysis. Although participants expressed agreement that affective polarization was a serious challenge, they also generally expressed hope. As we detail below, as much as

Structural changes in politics, communities, and institutions . . . make it less and less likely that people will interact with those in other groups and build coalitions.

polarization hurts deliberative democracy, our participants expressed faith and hope in American democracy and its resilience.

Human Behavior and Structural Changes Drive Polarization

When asked about the underlying drivers of polarization, participants talked about a broad human tendency to be clannish—the inclination to self-organize and define around in-group versus out-group identity—as a fundamental barrier to productive political dialogue. This groupishness is a widely observed human social and cognitive behavior that can contribute greatly to polarization (Chambers, 2018). From this perspective, polarization is “less about disagreement [over issues] and more about low openness to different views When you think about the values, Democrats and Republicans aren’t that different,

but they perceive they are different, largely because of the openness issue,” as one participant said.

Some participants pointed out that polarization is worsened when political parties function as clans that speak to only their in-groups’ concerns. As one participant said, “The Democratic party exists in Philly and Pitt, then just doesn’t talk to anyone in the middle of the state. Similarly, Republicans don’t talk to anyone in the cities, like Democrats have ignored the working class.” This groupishness can be compounded by insider language that improves in-group solidarity but can be a barrier to communication and mutual understanding between groups (Marcellino et al., 2020).

Furthermore, respondents reported that ideological conflicts at the national level felt like an existential battle that has massive stakes for winners and losers (Roberts-Miller, 2022). A particular irony of this is that the perception of difference driving this sense of existential threats tends to mismeasure these threats, with group members misappraising the differences between groups (e.g., perceiving a wide difference in religious adherence between the major parties) (Claassen et al., 2021). Thus, polarization itself might drive polarization.

Structural Changes and Affective Polarization

The other set of barriers that participants found was structural changes in politics, communities, and institutions that make it less and less likely that people will interact with those in other groups and build coalitions (Putnam, 2000; Tocqueville, 2003). For example, geographic sorting by party or political identity emerged as a key theme: Opportunities to encounter people with different views are declining, and, at a fundamental level, this is happen-

ing increasingly in in-person and online communities (Brugnoli et al., 2019; Sussell and Thomson, 2015). U.S. migration patterns in the past two decades have led to counties redder (more Republican) or bluer (more Democrat) and being less and less purple (Liu, Andris, and Desmarais, 2019). This social sorting, in which people choose to live in increasingly homogenous communities, reduces opportunities to encounter difference, and economic disparities between rural and urban communities could increase (Wilkinson, 2019). Participants pointed to the decline of diverse institutions, such as labor unions and religious denominations, as another structural problem. Institutions that force diverse populations to interact promote crosscutting identities that can reduce affective polarization (Harteveld, 2021). Furthermore, changes in Congress (e.g., increased ideological sorting in parties, increased power of senior party leadership, and the decline of committee coalitions) (Farina, undated) also emerged as structural drivers for polarization.

Participants also reported finding the nationalization of politics, often reinforced by national media, as a structural change that was increasing polarization. They emphasized that local politics tended to focus on shared problems, while national elections tended to focus on cultural identity issues that could be deeply divisive (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway, 2021). Additionally, a national shift away from civic education and a shared identity as Americans has made it easier for subgroup identities—particularly ideological and ascribed ones (e.g., ethnicity and race)—to assert themselves and decrease trust in the shared social compact of democracy (Festenstein, 2009; Yuki, 2021). Furthermore, structural changes to the media landscape, such as shifts in media subjectivity, marketing toward specific

audiences, and the emergence of social media, have created echo chambers in which polarized groups increasingly hear news that reinforces polarization and potentially leads to radicalization (Du and Gregory, 2017; Harel, Jameson, and Maoz, 2020; Kavanagh, Marcellino, et al., 2019).

Finally, participants emphasized how patterns of inequality between groups (e.g., race, urban versus rural, college versus non-college graduates) that both are real and perceived can erode shared national identity, decrease shared trust, and increase polarization (Mazarr, 2022; Winkler, 2019). They pointed out that long-standing inequalities associated with ethnicity, class, and geographic location can be corrosive to sharing in a higher-order identity and promote a retreat to a shared subgroup identity. Some participants focused on racial and class inequalities, specifically for Black Americans and the rural poor. They argued that long-standing systemic and structural racism and growing class inequality in rural populations could be profoundly alienating. In essence, if one feels like the deck is so stacked against oneself (or one's children) that there is no real hope, why trust democracy?

How Can Things Change?

Participants proposed a variety of nonpartisan interventions that might help reduce polarization. Some argued for political structural reform, such as fusion balloting, ranked-choice voting in primaries, and party appointment in primaries (Drutman, 2022; La Raja and Rauch, 2020).

Because exposure to people from different groups and different views might reduce polarization (Baliotti et al., 2021), participants also suggested interventions to increase the number of outgroup interactions, such as expanding access to state universities. State universities are one of

Examples of Political Structural Reform Discussed in the Workshops

- Fusion balloting: More than one party can support the same candidate on a ballot.
- Ranked-choice voting: Each voter ranks candidates in order of the voter's preference.
- Party appointment: Candidates are selected through a party caucus rather than primaries.

the remaining institutions that have the capacity to bring together people from diverse backgrounds. Although this does not always occur, higher education can purposefully bridge existing divides based on race, ethnicity, class, political ideology, and urbanicity, so students are likely to meet people unlike themselves.

But participants also expressed hope for changing the national discourse and current political culture. A habit of robust dialogue is critical for a strong, healthy nation (Mazarr, 2022). Participants suggested that increased opportunities for healthy dialogue—for example, national debates (e.g., the famous 1965 James Baldwin–William F. Buckley debate on race) or imagining social media apps that support cross-group conversation (instead of reinforcing in-group identification)—could increase exposure to outside views that are focused on greater understanding rather than on changing opinions (Cleven, Bush, and Saul, 2018; Levendusky and Stecula, 2021). Finally, although several participants praised examples of local initiatives to decrease polarization, the group emphasized that polarization was a national problem and that any solutions must scale. So, although our participants expressed deep concerns about the challenges stemming from affective polar-

ization, they also expressed hope and confidence in the resilience of the democracy.

Key Takeaways from the Policy Workshops

In the following subsections, we give a brief overview of key takeaways discussed during the policy-specific workshops. The structure of the discussions was purposefully vague to prevent bias in what topics were acceptable to raise. As a result, many of these discussions focused on different features of an issue, at varying levels of analysis, that often took diverging directions during each workshop.

We make no endorsement of any of the ideas that were put forth and provide citations for a limited number of claims. Thus, some ideas that participants put forth might not be supported by evidence or might not be reasonably feasible to implement. Nonetheless, we present the flow of these group discussions that led to our primary goal: identifying some areas of consensus.

Misinformation and Disinformation

Disinformation refers to false information that is deliberately and often covertly spread with the goal of influencing public opinion (“Disinformation,” undated); *misinformation* is defined as information that is misleading or incorrect (“Misinformation,” undated). The key difference is that propagandists intentionally create and share disinformation, while consumers unwittingly consume misinformation.¹ In scoping the problem of disinformation and misinformation, participants highlighted potential causes, offered examples of these activities, and noted challenges in policy responses.

In terms of causes, one participant highlighted the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which led to a rise in online mis- and disinformation, and that stay-at-home orders might have increased online consumption of that information. Another participant mentioned social media algorithms that shared misinformation and “thrive[d] on outrage.” Other participants spoke about a lack of trust, noting, for example, that neither conservatives nor Black Americans trusted the government or social media companies.

Several participants talked about mis- and disinformation campaigns targeting specific racial or ethnic audiences, including Black and Vietnamese audiences. One participant observed that Black Americans’ experiences with falsehoods (e.g., such as the blatant lies told to Black Americans during the U.S. Public Health Service’s syphilis experiments on Black men at the Tuskegee Institute without their informed consent; see Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021) make them uniquely vulnerable to COVID-19–related mis- and disinformation. Another cited reporting that suggested that Russian disinformation was targeting Spanish-speaking communities (“Russia Disinformation on Ukraine Spreads on Spanish-Speaking Social Media,” 2022). Participants also described mis- and disinformation as an extraordinarily complex phenomenon that did not lend itself to easy solutions. As one example, a lot of mis- and disinformative content, particularly political memes, is slanted, sometimes containing a kernel of truth, rather than straightforwardly false, and this fact challenges content-moderation efforts (Helmus et al., 2020).

Finally, the workshops highlighted key challenges in formulating an effective response to mis- and disinformation. For one, conservatives and liberals might have very

different perceptions of falsehoods. Some liberals see conservatives as swamped in mis- and disinformation, such as that demonstrated in the “Stop the Steal” movement and suspicions about COVID-19 vaccines. In contrast, some conservatives believe that liberals “get a pass” on their own efforts to disseminate mis- and disinformation, such as the suppression of details surrounding Hunter Biden’s laptop by some in the national media and government (Folkenflik, 2022; Hooper and Gerstein, 2022). Some conservatives also report believing that fact-checkers are inherently biased (Walker and Gottfried, 2019). This disconnect has helped breed further mistrust and can undermine these effective responses. A case in point was the response to a U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) plan to create a Disinformation Governance Board that neither side trusted, albeit for different reasons (Editorial Board, 2022). Another challenge that participants noted was that the rate of technological change easily outpaces the development of policies to address those changes.

Specific Actions and Barriers

First, most participants said that they viewed media literacy as a key effort. One said that people have to “invest in critical thinking and make sure we are teaching kids early on how to identify misinformation.” Some participants suggested that states should mandate media literacy education for primary or secondary students.² Some also suggested that the United States invest in local or independent journalism and that the Federal Communications Commission take a more active role in ensuring that “responsible information is being disseminated” on the airwaves. We note that there are real and perceived risks to government investment in any type of independent media source.

As one participant noted, “The policies we have been talking about probably require much more consensus about the nature of the problem and how it is working.”

Several participants addressed the need to build trust and a shared understanding of the threat of mis- and disinformation. The goal would be to develop a cross-partisan effort or a sense of shared mission for how Americans should address the threat. Some participants expressed the need for a “social movement” to help convince Americans of the dangers of mis- and disinformation. Another participant said that they thought that it would be good to identify a “common enemy” against which Americans of all stripes could rally. One participant suggested that Americans could all agree on the need to counter foreign propaganda and that such propaganda represented “low-hanging fruit.” Another participant said that they thought that Americans could agree on the need for antitrust legislation that would limit the power of “big tech.” And still another said that they thought that Americans could agree on the need to protect children. Humility was also seen as

a remedy for the partisan divide. As one participant said, “I think, from a conservative side, acknowledging there are problems, not just doubling down and going after evil conservatives—I think some humility from the government saying that they got some things wrong [would be helpful].”

Many participants offered recommendations for social media platforms. Two participants of seemingly different political persuasions agreed on the need for legislation requiring greater transparency from social media platforms that might include audits of their algorithms and estimates of the numbers of inauthentic accounts on these platforms. The legislation would require “granular reporting requirements” that would address how the platforms moderate content, how they build algorithms, and details of other platform policies. It would also provide select researchers with access to platform data. Another participant suggested that the platforms invest in content moderators who specialize in understanding unique online communities, such as Black or Latino Americans. These would be experts who “really understand the trends and conversations and how they are being manipulated.” One participant suggested that platforms should “lean into a culture of free speech” that uses First Amendment protections as a “moral standard” for content-moderation policies.

Other participants offered more blue-sky opinions on platform fixes. One spoke of an “algorithmic award system” that would reward users for combating misinformation, and another suggested the need for alternatives to the current incentives of “likes and clicks.” One participant highlighted the role of the “slow-tech movement” and the work of the Center for Humane Technology, a group of Silicon Valley software engineers “trying to start conversa-

tions among software developers to help create technologies that help us live our values rather than take us away from our values” (Crane, 2018).

Participants identified a variety of barriers to countering mis- and disinformation policies. One person emphasized that many of the policies needed to address disinformation require consensus. As one participant noted, “The policies we have been talking about probably require much more consensus about the nature of the problem and how it is working.” Highlighting the mistrust among conservatives, one participant observed, “It seems like [the left is] targeting the Joe Rogans of this world instead of our adversaries, and [conservatives] see that as a glaring black mark on the state of content moderation.” Mistrust among historically disenfranchised groups, particularly Black Americans, was frequently highlighted during these discussions.

Participants also spoke of barriers to regulation. One participant reported seeing political polarization as a reason that the political system does not produce regulation or reform that is “substantial.” Given the difficulty of passing legislation, the assumption was, they said, that any legislation that is enacted would likely stay on the books, untouched, for many years: “If we pass something on privacy, nothing will happen again for 40 years, so we have to think about every unintended consequence. We need a sandbox, some kind of test-and-learn mechanism.” Another decried the tech industry’s strong lobbying efforts.

One barrier for media literacy programming is that teachers are not allocated sufficient time for professional education, including how to teach media literacy, according to a participant who developed training curricula for local teachers.

Areas of Consensus

Overall, levels of consensus were relatively high among participants in the mis- and disinformation workshops, and any disagreements focused on relatively narrow issues. The results were unsurprising given that members of this group appeared to be less diverse in their political affiliations than those of other workshop groups. The most significant contention was related to platform content moderation. As noted, one participant advocated for a more free-speech approach to content moderation and for reforms to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (Pub. L. 104-104, 1996, Title V), the law that protects social media companies from civil litigation for some of the content that users post on their platforms (47 U.S.C. § 230). Another attendee countered that the First Amendment was a “uniquely American take” and not appropriate for global companies addressing a global problem. Another urged a more restrictive approach to content moderation, noting that “maybe there is some reining in that needs to be done in our consideration of free expression.” Another participant questioned regulators’ ability to strike the right balance in changing Section 230.

Other disagreements were more minor. One participant, for example, expressed doubt that a “social movement” could build consensus around countering disinformation.

Election Security

Most participants in the election security workshops expressed agreement that increasing public confidence in the U.S. election system was a priority. Toward this end, they acknowledged the role of supporting the existing election infrastructure—both the physical (e.g., voting

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machines) and the human (e.g., election officials) dimensions of this system.

In terms of physical infrastructure, participants generally expressed agreement that all elections carried risks but that the country’s decentralized election system had a strong record of keeping physical election infrastructure secure. That record did not, they said, suggest that no risks or vulnerabilities exist, however, and participants said that

continued vigilance was needed to maintain this track record in the future.

Another dimension is the general public’s perceptions of election security. As one participant noted, “confidence in the election cannot be linked to the outcome.” This concern is nothing new. In December 2000, for example, just 15 percent of Democrats reported that they believed that President George W. Bush had won the presidential election “fair and square” (Carroll, 2001). In April 2021, just 21 percent of Republicans said that they viewed President Joseph R. Biden’s election as legitimate (“One Year Later,” 2021). Such misperceptions create opportunities for domestic political groups, nonstate actors, foreign adversaries, and others to exploit. Some examples include using violence (Ware, 2022) or making false claims of election-related irregularities (*Trump v. Wisconsin Elections Commission*, 2020).

In terms of the human dimension—the volunteers, civil servants, and elected officials who run U.S. elections—participants discussed two problems:

- One is that election workers were increasingly under threat; as one participant noted, “They are in a strip mall, a Wendy’s—their goal is to serve the public. They are not resourced to handle any type of threat environment.”
- Another problem that one participant raised was the potential of insider threats whereby elections officials seek to undermine the legitimacy of elections they are charged with overseeing.

Specific Actions and Barriers

The primary focus of both election security workshops was improving perceptions that U.S. elections are secure.

Participants focused on ways to do this within the election process itself, through public outreach, and through local, state, and federal governments. The election process itself proved to be a source of misperceptions about election security. As one participant noted, there is a degree of “mystery around voting” that can lead to the belief of false claims about election fraud.

The groups agreed on several ways to prevent such claims from taking hold among the public. For example, several participants proposed online ballot tracking using unique identification numbers so a voter can confirm the exact date and time their in-person or mail-in ballot was counted. Others proposed lifting restrictions on counting mail-in ballots before Election Day. This would give election officials additional time to not only count ballots but also conduct other security measures, such as signature verification. Furthermore, the extra time would produce more-accurate reporting of results on Election Day itself instead of preliminary results that could significantly change after all ballots are counted. Similarly, inaccuracies in voter rolls could lead some people to believe that the voting process was rife with errors or malfeasance. Both groups acknowledged that what appear to be straightforward changes could become “political minefields,” as one participant put it. For example, some noted that both parties had significant stakes in expanding false narratives about election security: “Republicans fundraise off voter fraud, and Democrats off voter suppression,” one participant said.

Another opportunity for action involved public outreach. The mechanics of elections typically do not attract much public attention. Some participants noted a need to “educate people about the common good that is at

stake in conducting successful elections in this country.” Several participants proposed strategies to reinforce the local nature of elections and prevent them from becoming politicized by national rhetoric. For example, nonpartisan organizations, such as the League of Women Voters or philanthropic foundations, could help local officials conduct outreach. However, other participants noted that philanthropies might promote political agendas or be perceived as having one.

A few participants suggested that local election officials rely on local television and newspaper outlets to highlight their efforts to secure local elections and, conversely, avoid relying on national outlets, such as CNN, MSNBC, or Fox News, to broadcast these messages because these national outlets might be perceived as having a national political bias. Others proposed outreach to schoolchildren, informational videos with local election officials, more election observers, and tours of election offices so that people can put a “face to a name” of their local officials. One participant warned, however, that “there is a perverse relationship between transparency and confidence and cases where it undermines it.” Thus, outreach must be done carefully in ways that involve people who are nonpartisan, trusted, and local without unintentionally fueling false narratives about election fraud.

Yet another opportunity discussed focused on the role of government in promoting a secure election. Participants proposed two approaches:

- First, they repeatedly emphasized the need for a local approach because elections are run largely by state and local governments. Such efforts are a way to prevent the nationalization of elections, they said, and some participants said that they thought

that people might trust local officials more than state officials and far more than federal officials. However, some participants noted that the federal government still has the supporting roles of sharing threat intelligence, holding training sessions, funding initiatives run at the local level, and connecting various stakeholders to share best practices.

- The second approach was having nonpartisan, authoritative sources deliver “press announcements” to deflate much of the “hot air” surrounding election security. One idea was to require some type of bipartisan oath that both parties (and their candidates) would agree to before elections begin. As one participant put it,

We could have bipartisan pressure to make politicians accept whatever outcome the elections say and pursue legitimate outcomes. We have to somehow take the wind out of those sails— Look, if you’re going to participate, you’ve got to put faith in the system itself.

Another idea put forth by a participant was to have the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and DHS serve as authoritative sources for delivering concise information to the public about foreign threats to elections. An example of this strategy is the joint ODNI–Federal Bureau of Investigation news conference in October 2020 that warned the public about Iranian efforts to interfere in the presidential election (ODNI, 2020). However, participants acknowledged the risk that any messaging, especially from federal authorities, could become political fodder during contentious election years.

Areas of Consensus

Participants identified at least three areas of consensus. First, they recognized the need to sufficiently resource elections and to estimate how much local, state, and federal officials need to ensure a safe election. That analysis would ensure that there was an optimal payoff for a particular investment at the right level of government. Second, they expressed agreement that several of the best practices mentioned earlier for state and local governments (e.g., tracking ballots after submission, counting mail-in ballots before Election Day, management of voter rolls) could significantly improve perceptions of U.S. elections. The best practices that are proven in one jurisdiction could be adopted by other jurisdictions if conservative and liberal stakeholders could agree on the justification for their use. Third, state and local election officials could thoughtfully leverage third parties that are trusted by the broader population. In general, these officials would not include political candidates, especially when the legitimacy of a particular election is tied to the outcome. For example, outreach to trusted local news sources, by nonprofits (such as the League of Women Voters), and by local nonpartisan election officials are strategies to improve trust in what is largely a secure election system. Meanwhile, the federal government could still play a limited role, including coordination by DHS and collaboration with trusted third parties (e.g., nonprofits, cybersecurity by state national guard units, the intelligence community) to update voters on potential threats. However, most participants said that, given the natural skepticism about federal involvement in local affairs, using federal authorities carries risks of creating a backlash or fueling perceptions of partisan involvement in elections. Most participants expressed agreement

that a targeted approach, led at the local level, was an ideal way to improve the perceptions that anyone from any party had of election security.

Violent Extremism

Violent extremism has been referred to as “slow violence.” First offered by scholar Rob Nixon, *slow violence* refers to how a conglomeration of factors coalesce to create what one participant described as a “perfect storm” (Nixon, 2011). Some workshop participants highlighted several factors that they said had contributed to this perfect storm. Several referenced COVID-19 and the social isolation inflicted by stay-at-home orders and remote schooling as leading to a rise in online activity generally and the consumption of violent-extremist content specifically (Clair et al., 2021; Pasternack, 2021). Others bemoaned greater political partisanship, less trust in government, and the rapid growth of online mis- and disinformation that contributed to a rise in conspiracy theories.

Participants further noted that the very nature of violent extremism was changing. The rise of right- and left-wing extremism is in part propelled by feelings of disenfranchisement and the sense of lost cultural identity, some participants suggested (see also Brown, Helmus, et al., 2021). Such feelings have historically been associated with certain disadvantaged populations but now seem to afflict broader sets of people. One participant highlighted that many potentially violent extremists no longer take part in or lend their support to formal and organized extremist groups: “It is so unorganized. You can kind of define it as a group of angry people. There is anger, but also ideologies are mixed. People jump from group to group, and there are not clear leaders.” Another participant noted recent

Several [participants] referenced COVID-19 and the social isolation inflicted by stay-at-home orders and remote schooling as leading to a rise in online activity generally and the consumption of violent-extremist content specifically.

research showing that political violence was increasingly manifested at political demonstrations.

Specific Actions and Barriers

One approach that received significant attention among discussants was the public health model for countering violent extremism (CVE). This approach, which focuses on a prevention model, requires the support of multiple disciplines and stakeholders, including behavioral health services, schools, employers, and social services. It also provides a framework for allocating resources according to different phases of prevention, from primary prevention

There is a sense of malaise and hopelessness in addressing extremism.

that seeks to mitigate root causes of extremism to tertiary prevention that offers a “targeted approach” for intervening with those who are already radicalized (Challgren et al., 2016). It also draws on the lessons learned from other public health activities, such as drug and alcohol addiction and gang violence (Garcia, 2019).

In line with the tertiary prevention approach of the public health model were others’ mentions of increasing off-ramp opportunities for those in the grip of violent extremism. One participant spoke about “investing in prevention programs, off-ramps, and mental health services to help get people out of violence.” Another highlighted the promising work of the tech firm Moonshot, which runs a 24/7 helpline that offers crisis counseling to people who are engaging in white supremacist and violent antigovernment activities. Previous data suggest that such people click on ads offering mindfulness or counseling hotlines more than they do other ad content offered by Moonshot (Pasternack, 2021). The approach offers a unique model for targeted mental health interventions.

Several participants highlighted areas in need of more research and improved programming. One issue was expanding the relevance of CVE programming to address older Americans who are gravitating toward extremism. “I think the demographic shift with the militia movements

and conspiracy movements is 40-, 50-year-old people, and we are not talking about what do with a lot of them,” one participant said. Some participants expressed agreement that more research was also needed to understand racial grievances and the experiences that led to those grievances.

Participants also highlighted the value of media literacy programming and other interventions designed to debunk conspiracy theories. One caution was the need to ensure that CVE programs protect civil rights and civil liberties so that the programs themselves do not generate mistrust. “If the public doesn’t trust you, then you are out of business,” one participant observed. Others spoke of the need for education: “Our schools need to do a better job at educating the younger generations about democracy and what makes it work.”

Participants identified a variety of barriers to implementing CVE programming. One challenge related to political and social will. First, there is a sense of malaise and hopelessness in addressing extremism. “I think a challenge is convincing people that you can do something about it. People throw up their hands,” one participant said. Another highlighted how the long-term nature of CVE efforts promotes this dour outlook. A second issue related to political will associated with domestic terrorism. Some participants expressed the view that foreign terrorism instilled a sense of urgency to address the threat, but many said that they did not feel the same urgency about domestic terrorism or did not understand the threat. One example was the U.S. Department of Defense discontinuing efforts to “combat exceptionally rare instances of extremism in the military” (Donnelly, 2022). As one participant said, “I think the minimizing of the problem is a barrier and the politicization is also a problem.”

In general, it is challenging to bring people to the table to counter domestic extremism. Because of decreasing trust in government, many people do not want to participate in community efforts designed to counter extremism. Some participants noted that this was a particular issue in rural communities, where the domestic threat is often considered the most serious. It can be hard to get local intelligence from police departments in rural communities where “everyone knows each other.” It is also difficult to identify credible voices: “How do we operate in those communities when it is so hard to get in there?”

Several participants touted the value of former extremists (or “formers”) who had played a significant role in helping to disengage violent extremists from their movements and promote deradicalization. One participant noted the value of behavioral health practitioners in working with extremists, saying, “You don’t need to be a former to help.” At the same time, this participant said that many practitioners do not fully understand the online space that promotes hate: “The low digital literacy of the behavioral health practitioners is a barrier.”

Other barriers were also mentioned. One participant said that they believed that the current administration was not doing enough to address domestic extremism: “Their actions haven’t been as good as their words. They haven’t set up any interagency task forces.” Another participant highlighted government policies that “prevent us from going to the same chat rooms extremists are going to. We can only do it if we have someone who can act as an informant, but that has its own problems.”

Areas of Consensus

Overall, consensus was high among participants, and most were focused on groups who were typically labeled as right-wing extremist rather than groups typically labeled as left-wing extremists. The only major debate concerned the public health model of CVE, and even this debate highlighted congruence among participants. When one person critiqued the public health model as not effective for countering extremism, most of the others came to the model’s defense. Another participant was “caught off guard” by the critique but was eager to learn the lessons from other public health endeavors. Another said, “I like the public health approach . . . I think that this is a good way forward, and no one discipline has the answer.”

Immigration Reform

Participants painted U.S. immigration reform as a complex policy issue characterized by mutually reinforcing tensions. They said that outdated and complicated legal immigration policies (coupled with a lack of political will) galvanized people toward illegal immigration, which, in turn, increased national pressure levels around immigration in general. Attendees identified a raft of humanitarian concerns, enforcement concerns, systemic failures, and outdated policies that were so interconnected that they could not be addressed piecemeal. In the eyes of the participants, immigration policy reform writ large was like a puzzle in which moving any one piece required moving others, adding another layer of difficulty to the individual problems. We note that a few participants refused to attend a virtual workshop with others with differing political positions on this issue.

Participants identified two concerns: The Byzantine rules, years-long waits, and outdated systems of legal immigration incentivized illegal immigration, they said. [But] legitimate security needs make immigration reform very difficult.

Our participants generally fell into two camps: (1) advocates for immigrant populations and (2) those with experience in immigration enforcement. The former group included representatives from what appeared to be politically center-right advocacy and public policy organizations, scholarly experts from the academic world, and politically left-of-center advocacy groups focused on specific issues. The latter group was primarily former government employees with experience at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Specific Actions and Barriers

Participants identified two concerns as connected and mutually reinforcing: On the one hand, the Byzantine rules, years-long waits, and outdated systems of legal immigration incentivized illegal immigration, they said: The cost is so high that illegal immigration becomes relatively attractive. At the same time, legitimate security needs make immigration reform very difficult: The potential costs of streamlining and liberalizing immigration absent strong borders are an unattractive choice to many in the United States. As one participant put it, “You can’t have immigration reform without border security, and you can’t have border security without immigration reform.” This view highlights the role of using precise language in discussing the nuances of such sensitive policy issues. Within this broader tension, people from various perspectives offered a variety of specific policy issues that could make immigration policy contentious and hard to reform.

Participants expressed concern about legislative paralysis: Within Congress, they said, immigration has reached such an ideological stalemate that the executive branch and the courts have become the battleground on which both sides compete. Participants argued that the lack of legislative involvement reduces the potential for collaborating across the political aisle on creative solutions and that courts and executive action cannot replace the legislature’s fundamental role in crafting U.S. law and, thus, shaping policy. Participants also expressed concern that, because immigration courts fall under the executive branch, immigration court policy undergoes a “whiplash effect” when the administration changes hands.

Participants identified multiple problems with the current immigration system, including bureaucratic com-

plexity; multiyear, million-case backlogs in the courts; and mandatory detention. Participants with enforcement experience also pointed out that barriers to legal immigration drive illegal border crossings in volumes that compromise higher-priority enforcement efforts against drug and human trafficking. In contrast, participants coming from an advocacy background argued that the lack of representation for undocumented immigrants exacerbates the political stakes; these participants claimed that undocumented immigrants lack a legal voice in U.S. governance and that those who favor a more restrictive immigration policy prefer it that way. Thus, easing or restricting citizenship access (and voting rights) has high political stakes. Because immigration can be a signpost for political identity, it is an easy locus for polarizing issues. In addition to specific policies and conditions, participants argued, until the country has a better dialogue about immigration, it is unlikely to come to a political consensus.

The discussion revealed many nuances in participants' individual positions. Some participants voiced concerns about xenophobic or nativist arguments and conspiracy theories about a "great replacement" of White Americans. One concern was that "immigration" could be a placeholder for fears about preserving American identity (religious, ethnic, cultural), while, for others, it could be an economic issue. For some, they said, the desire was to limit immigration levels, and others wanted to change the immigration process. A related concern was that core immigration issues are not explicit, making meaningful dialogue more difficult. In short, using those different frames as shorthand for anti- or pro-immigration positions was a barrier to consensus.

Areas of Consensus

Even without broad consensus on immigration policy, there might be some quick wins for specific issues. Making more-incremental moves, such as reviving Section 245(i) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (Pub. L. 82-414, 1952, as amended by Pub. L. 106-553 and Pub. L. 106-554, 2000)—which allows people in the United States to obtain lawful permanent residence under certain conditions³—streamlining citizenship for military spouses, or some kind of bounded amnesty for undocumented immigrants covered by Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (for more details, see DHS, 2022a),⁴ might allow for at least partial consensus and progress without waiting for a broad resolution of immigration policy. Another suggestion was removing immigration courts from the U.S. Department of Justice and creating independent courts. Additionally, a potential area for consensus is matching immigration policies with labor market demands. As one participant noted,

As far as having a legal immigration system in sync with our economic needs and having a conversation about how to make that happen—an extension to that: How do we create legal pathways for those countries where people are more likely to come to better match supply and demand? I could go on, but I will stop with those. Basically, visa reform—we manage our legal structure differently to meet the supply and demand pressures.

Several participants noted that this "labor market demand" perspective would also involve sufficient resources for local and state governments to support immigrants within their communities.

And although marrying improved border controls with immigration process reforms might be a challenge,

In recent years, there appears to have been a proliferation of claims that American democracy is on the decline. Historically, these prophecies have failed to materialize.

participants expressed agreement that there was broad appetite for improvement. Those focusing largely on security and those focused more on a more fair and functional process both expressed dissatisfaction with current conditions.

Refocusing on Solutions

In recent years, there appears to have been a proliferation of claims that American democracy is on the decline. Historically, these prophecies have failed to materialize. For example, in the 1970s, unemployment and inflation rates were high, and race riots were occurring in several major U.S. cities. Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned in 1973 after a criminal investigation, President Richard M. Nixon resigned the next year in the wake of the Watergate scandal, and the U.S. military withdrew from South Vietnam

in 1975. In 1976, *U.S. News and World Report* ran a story titled, “Is Democracy Dying? Verdict of 8 Leading World Scholars” (“Is Democracy Dying?” 1976). The forecasts were stark: “In the U.S., its record recently is found to be anything but dazzling: disastrous war in Vietnam, messy scandals flowing out of Watergate and other abuses of Government power, and the persistent miseries of hard times.”

Several leading scholars were equally somber. Political scientist Max Beloff remarked that the Soviet system had “considerable self-confidence: They believe in themselves. They feel history is on their side. This is what democracies believed in the nineteenth century.” Sociologist Michel Crozier remarked, “There is no doubt democracy has declined,” and noted that Western democracy “is not well fitted to deal with [modern] complexities.” And economist Friedrich Hayek told *U.S. News*, “I don’t think we ought to say that democracy has failed. What has failed is the particular form of democracy the nations of the West have tried.” Even then–U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Daniel Patrick Moynihan is quoted expressing doubts: “Democracies are becoming a recessive form of government, like monarchies used to be—something the world is moving from rather than to. We’ve taken enough punishment lately to wake ourselves up and realize we may be in trouble.” Despite these dour forecasts, the United States has persevered.

Identifying Acceptable Solutions

We take a different view of the future of American democracy. As we noted at the beginning of this Perspective, we do not believe that recent events, in and of themselves, are

threatening American democracy. Instead, the threat is the lack of solutions to the problems that underlie these events.

We asked our participants from all parts of the political spectrum to explore solutions that could gain bipartisan consensus. From the discussions, we identified one actionable solution from each policy topic that appeared to have the consensus of most attendees. Table 1 displays each topic, the consensus solution, and the data available to assess whether the solution would prove effective. We discuss each proposed solution and the data available in more detail below.

Mis- and Disinformation: Promote Transparency Legislation

We agreed with participants’ statements that partisans’ different views on how to counter mis- and disinformation represent a critical barrier. More research is needed to understand how partisans view this issue and the degree to which they can agree on different policy solutions.

Some participants in the mis- and disinformation workshops favored regulations ensuring greater transparency of platform policies and data. Numerous policy proposals highlight the importance of regulations that would shed light on otherwise-opaque platform policies, information on the types of social media accounts and problematic content removed from social media feeds, and insight into the extent to which social media feeds peddle mis- and disinformation (Bodine-Baron et al., 2018; Commission on Information Disorder, 2021; Polyakova and Fried, 2019). In theory, requiring platforms to provide this type of data would help hold social media platforms more accountable to the public, enable assessments of the effectiveness of different platform moderation policies, and help policymakers make more-informed decisions about other regulatory measures. That such provisions appear to have bipartisan support makes them all the more appealing in an age of partisanship and disagreement (Perrino, 2022).

A variety of proposed legislation tries to address these and related transparency proposals. Among the crop of proposals are the Honest Ads Act (U.S. Senate, 2019), the

TABLE 1
Select Solutions, by Workshop Topic

Topic	Proposed Solution	Data Source
Mis- and disinformation	Promote transparency legislation for social media platforms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The European Parliament’s Digital Services Act (DSA) (European Parliament, 2022)
Election security	Use survey data to inform the allocation of resources to secure future elections.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> American National Election Studies (ANES) Original survey data at the state and local levels
Violent extremism	Develop strategies for clinical counselors to address violent extremism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Process and impact evaluations using surveys and qualitative interviews
Immigration	Increase immigration to places where the labor market has demand for immigrants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Population Survey (CPS) Current Employment Statistics (CES)

A key concern expressed by most participants was public misperceptions about the security of U.S. elections.

Algorithmic Justice and Online Platform Transparency Act (U.S. Senate, 2021b), the Platform Accountability and Consumer Transparency Act (U.S. Senate, 2021a), and the Digital Services Oversight and Safety Act (U.S. House of Representatives, 2022). The content of these proposals varies considerably. The Honest Ads Act, for example, requires only that platforms disclose information about the funding and targeting of political advertisements. In contrast, the Platform Accountability and Consumer Transparency Act and the Digital Services Oversight and Safety Act are more expansive. They require transparency of paid advertisements (including how ads are targeted), transparency about platform algorithms or decisionmaking about the removal of “problematic content” or accounts, disclosure of “high-engagement” or viral public online posts, and making private data available to select and qualified researchers who would, in turn, be required to respect user privacy (L. Edelson, 2022).

As this legislation slowly progresses through Congress, critical questions remain as to the effectiveness of this legislation for informing public debate about platform

policies and ensuring that the complex legislation can be effectively and efficiently implemented. To better understand these questions, researchers and regulators might look to the European Parliament, which recently passed the DSA. The DSA is a large and complex piece of legislation that includes provisions for the transparency of online ads, disclosure of account suspensions and moderated content, transparency of algorithmic recommender systems, and data access for vetted researchers. The DSA does present an opportunity to carefully examine the impact of that legislation in the near term and study best practices for implementation.

Election Security: Surveys to Find and Invest in Vulnerable Jurisdictions

A key concern expressed by most participants was public misperceptions about the security of U.S. elections. To put this into perspective, note that an estimated 154.6 million people voted in the 2020 presidential election (Fabina and Scherer, 2022). To date, only 18 election fraud cases have been officially detected in the 2020 elections (Heritage Foundation, undated). Participants acknowledged that, like all election systems, the U.S. election system has risks. However, a key concern expressed was that some members of the public might exaggerate unlikely or nonexistent risks. Such misperceptions, in turn, could create opportunities for exploitation by foreign and domestic actors with ulterior motives (Enders et al., 2021).

Recent research has revealed evidence that self-reported anticipation of voter fraud has been relatively stable for presidential elections between 2012 and 2020—between an estimated 42 and 44 percent (Enders et al.,

2021). Furthermore, evidence from the 2020 election indicates that perceptions of specific types of voter fraud might vary by political party (Enders et al., 2021). Other research has indicated that conspiratorial beliefs and political partisanship are predictors of beliefs in electoral fraud but that Democrats and Republicans might be worried about different types of fraud (see, for example, J. Edelson et al., 2017).

Drawing from our workshop discussions, we propose that one actionable solution is to use survey data to inform the allocation of resources to secure future elections. For example, jurisdictions with races that are forecasted to be close might require more resources to improve perceptions of election security than less contested elections require. Furthermore, preelection surveys could help officials assess what kinds of election fraud are salient so they can dedicate resources to relevant security measures. One source of data is the ANES, a survey that uses a probability-based representative sample at the national level (ANES, undated). In 2020, the ANES asked respondents about their perceptions of voter suppression, vote account accuracy, and trust in local election officials (ANES, 2021). Modeling these data could help policymakers identify and invest in local jurisdictions with voters prone to exaggerate the risks surrounding election security. Furthermore, administering preelection surveys at the local and state levels could also help inform where there is a greater concern about election security before elections begin.

Violent Extremism: Look to the Public Health Model for Prevention

The public health model for terrorism prevention encapsulates a variety of recommendations proposed in the

extremism workshops, and it could offer a useful way of framing the country's response to violent extremism. For example, to inform primary prevention efforts that seek to address root causes of domestic extremism, it will be critical to better understand the experiences and motivations driving the grievances of disaffected Americans. Secondary prevention, with its focus on identifying and engaging with those at risk of extremism, might require media literacy and other interventions that can reduce the likelihood of radicalization (Challgren et al., 2016).

For our recommendations, we pay special attention to tertiary prevention efforts that promote the use of off-ramps that will be crucial in helping those caught in the grip of extremism to disengage from such movements. We know from previous research that people do leave extremist groups and settings (disengagement) and extremist ideology (deradicalization). Often, it is support from family and friends, which sometimes takes the form of an intervention, that helps prompt the person to begin disengagement and, subsequently, deradicalization (Brown, Helmus, et al., 2021; Brown, Ramchand, and Helmus, 2022).

In addition, a growing number of initiatives and organizations offer formal services and interventions, such as Parents for Peace and Life After Hate, that have helplines that family, friends, and extremists themselves can call for assistance. The support that clients receive from these organizations often comes from former extremists themselves, who can draw on their prior experiences and bona fides to build trusting relationships with extremist clients.

An alternative model comes from the tech firm Moonshot, which serves Google Ads to those searching for extremist content online. Initially, these ads served up video content intended to help extremists or aspiring

The United States is currently facing a labor shortage; as of August 2022, roughly 6.3 million American workers were unemployed, but there were 11 million job openings.

extremists reconsider their radicalization. Lately, however, the firm has worked to address mental health needs of extremists, which research suggests are particularly high among this population (Brown, Ramchand, and Helmus, 2022; Gill et al., 2021). In one online experiment, Moonshot found that those seeking to join far-right extremist groups were 48 percent likelier than members of a comparison group to click on ads promoting mental health counseling (Atkinson, 2018). Another organization, Muflehun, also draws on the need to expand access to mental health care. In this initiative, Muflehun identifies at-risk localities and then assesses the extent to which at-risk populations are able to access community mental health care (DHS, 2022b).

One value of supplementing intervention programming with community mental health care is that the latter is far more prevalent and accessible to people who might

not even be seeking care for violent extremism and enables trained mental health clinicians to address underlying mental health problems. Such clinicians can also use established techniques, such as motivational interviewing, which has been shown to increase a client's readiness for change in the context of substance use (Brown, Ramchand, and Helmus, 2022). Ultimately, for such treatments to be feasible and effective, it will be crucial to increase awareness of extremism among clinical care populations, promote the use of assessments that can help clinicians recognize the clinical signs of violent-extremist ideologies, adapt motivational interviewing tools to the extremism problem, and, finally, adapt existing therapeutic approaches that are often used for depression, anxiety, or substance abuse to the extremism problem set. Finally, these disengagement and deradicalization therapies, like all such interventions, must be subject to evaluations that can determine their effectiveness. This latter issue is no small requirement. Although anecdotes abound of extremists who have benefited from such interventions, the use of prospective evaluations on treatment has been severely limited.

Immigration: Implement Thoughtful Immigration Policies That Align with Labor Market Demands

The United States is currently facing a labor shortage; as of August 2022, roughly 6.3 million American workers were unemployed, but there were 11 million job openings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022b). Even if everyone who wanted to work were employed, the United States would still face an estimated deficit of around 5 million workers. The global COVID-19 pandemic and previous restric-

tive immigration policies, including refugee caps and visa bans, have slowed legal immigration. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, net international migration added 247,000 to the U.S. population between 2020 and 2021, a 76-percent decrease from the 2015 to 2016 peak, when net international migration was 1,049,000 people (Schachter, Borsella, and Knapp, 2021).

Immigration workshop participants identified a potential solution to address current labor shortages and immigration concurrently: Provide an opportunity for thoughtful immigration policies that align with labor market demands. A similar concept proposed to address agricultural work shortages is the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021 (U.S. House of Representatives, 2021).⁵ The bipartisan bill contained provisions to establish a certification for agricultural workers, conferring a DHS-designated legal work status based on such qualifications as hours worked in the industry, criminal background, and time spent in the United States. It also would modify the H-2A temporary agricultural worker visa program to reduce barriers to integrating undocumented workers into the agricultural workforce.⁶

Using employment and unemployment data from CPS and CES, labor markets and specific locations with the greatest demand for workers could be tracked and identified for targeted, temporary work authorizations under the existing H-2 temporary-worker program (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022a). These two surveys combined could form a more holistic picture of the U.S. labor market by looking at both employers and employees. Responses to the CPS labor force questions could be used to identify individual labor and unemployment metrics by state. Data from CES can pinpoint specific industries with labor short-

ages by state (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, undated). In parallel, this approach also requires federal support for local and state economies receiving large amounts of immigrant workers to help reduce any localized economic burden (Rueben and Gault, 2017). Linking immigration to U.S. labor demand could help refocus immigration discussions away from party identification debates and toward U.S. economic viability. We caution that a rigorous evaluation is necessary to ensure that any policy change does not lead to labor market segregation by the race or ethnicity of particular immigrant populations.

Limitations

Several limitations with this exercise are worth noting. First, our sample of workshop participants is not representative of American society or any particular segment of the general population. We used snowball sampling, in which stakeholders both inside and outside of RAND recommended a diverse variety of people to invite to participate in our workshops. Second, some of the workshop sessions might have had an uneven distribution of political beliefs among participants. We did not explicitly ask workshop participants to disclose their political beliefs. Instead, we inferred based on their past political associations (e.g., serving in a Republican or Democratic presidential administration), public statements (e.g., speeches or news interviews), or published works (e.g., commentaries or peer-reviewed articles). In some cases, our workshop sessions might have had more participants holding more liberal than conservative views, while other sessions might have had participants holding more conservative than liberal views. Third, discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and

In conclusion, we do not believe that any event in and of itself is a risk to American democracy. We propose instead that the risk is the lack of solutions to the problems that underpin these events.

ethnicity were not a central focus of most workshop discussions, despite the diversity of participants. During our policy-specific workshops (mis- and disinformation, election security, extremism, and immigration reform), topics related to white supremacy, anti-Asian sentiments, anti-semitism, and gender were not central to the discussions. However, some of these topics were more salient during our political polarization workshops.

We hypothesize that there were at least two reasons that discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity were not salient during our policy-specific workshops despite the diversity in participants. First, the topics were not salient to some participants. The workshop questions were purposely broad, and discussions were driven by participants, with limited guidance by our facilitators. Discussions about race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity

might have become more prominent if our facilitators had asked direct questions about these identities. Second, we told participants that the goal of these workshops was to find areas of consensus. The intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity (and other identities) is complex (Collins, 2015) and might elicit strong views from some participants (Westwood and Peterson, 2022), and some participants might have avoided mentioning identity-specific themes to ensure that the group would reach consensus (English and Kalla, 2021).

Either of these hypotheses being correct would suggest a need for future policy-specific workshops that include direct questions on identity to ensure that they are salient during relevant discussions.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, we do not believe that any event in and of itself is a risk to American democracy. We propose instead that the risk is the lack of solutions to the problems that underpin these events. Under this assumption, we organized a series of virtual workshops of diverse stakeholders to discuss sensitive policy issues, with the goal of putting aside one's political identities, focusing on the policy issue, and seeking consensus with others who might hold very disparate beliefs. Drawing from these discussions and the relevant literature, we found areas of consensus pointing to ideas for interventions, and then proposed ways to measure these interventions. This exercise, although simple, highlights that reasonable people from different demographic, economic, political, professional, and social backgrounds can reach consensus on issues during a time that many have characterized as politically and socially divisive.

Appendix. Workshops

We organized ten workshops; two focused on political partisanship writ large, and the others focused on four topics related to national security: extremism, election security, disinformation, and immigration reform. We selected these topics based on input from RAND experts and focused our attention on issues that were salient to DHS. Each workshop lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. We called these workshops the RAND Democracy Project and told participants that the goal was to bring together diverse stakeholders, discuss the nuances of a specific policy topic, and find pragmatic solutions that would be acceptable to people from across the political spectrum.

The team identified attendees who were subject-matter experts or had expertise relevant to the workshop topics based on their history of public involvement with particular issues (e.g., industry experience, congressional testimonies, government service, published commentary or research).⁷ We invited a diverse set of participants based on ascribed (who they were) and achieved (what they did, such as their place of employment and professional experiences) characteristics, as well as their past political associations. Specifically, we purposely invited attendees based on their demographic backgrounds (e.g., race, gender, age), political associations (e.g., past or current associations with Republican or Democratic administrations or independents), and professional experiences (e.g., local, state, and federal service; local and national nonprofits; think tanks; academia; the media; private industry). Table 2 indicates the workshops and numbers of attendees.

Table 2 displays the details of these workshops. We held two workshops with different groups of participants

TABLE 2
Dates and Number of Attendees for Each Workshop

Workshop	Session	Number of Attendees	Date
Political partisanship	A	4	June 22
	B	5	July 13
Election security	A	5	June 16
	B	6	July 21
Mis- and disinformation	A	5	June 22
	B	4	July 29
Extremism	A	6	June 30
	B	5	July 28
Immigration reform	A	7	June 27
	B	3	July 14
Total	10	50	

NOTE: All dates were in 2022. We treated the political partisanship workshops differently from workshops that focused on specific policy issues. Discussions on partisanship gave us a frame of reference for understanding themes from the policy-specific workshops. Each participant attended one workshop, except for one person who attended two workshops. The total number of attendees was 49.

on political partisanship, extremism, election security, mis- and disinformation, and immigration. We also held a single workshop on the foreign policy implications of political partisanship with five national security stakeholders. We excluded the analysis of this workshop from this Perspective because the discussion was qualitatively different from the other topics, focusing on foreign policy instead of domestic policy issues within the United States. The group sizes ranged between three and seven members, and no

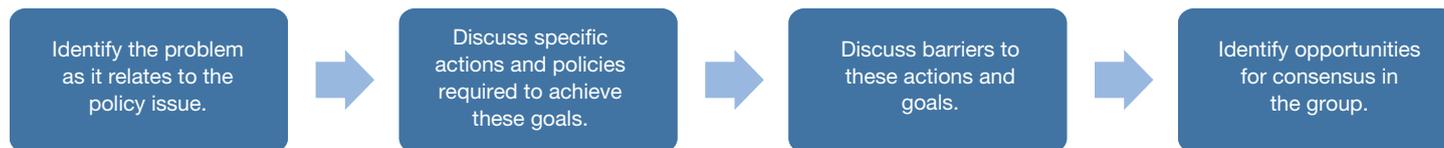
more than two current researchers from RAND participated in any given workshop. Each participant attended only one workshop, except for one person who attended two workshops.

All workshops occurred online via Zoom and followed Chatham House rules, meaning that we held the identity and affiliations of each participant in strict confidence. There was no video or audio recording of the discussions,

but a notetaker from RAND did document what participants said, without using individual identifiers. RAND experts served as workshop facilitators.

The figure shows the flow of each workshop. The discussions began with a broad and open discussion of the topic, then focused on specifics as time progressed, and concluded with at least two or three solutions that appeared to us as acceptable to most people in the groups.

Workshop Facilitation Flow



Notes

¹ Malinformation is “based on fact, but used out of context to mislead, harm, or manipulate” (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, undated). Participants used primarily the terms *mis-* and *disinformation* during these discussion groups, sometimes interchangeably, with some reference to malinformation. We note that there is overlap between the terms but that they represent key themes as discussed by participants.

² A growing body of evidence is suggesting that various types of media literacy interventions help protect audiences against mis- and disinformation (Guess et al., 2020; Helmus et al., 2020; Roozenbeek and van der Linden, 2019).

³ According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021,

Section 245(i) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), as amended by the Legal Immigration Family Equity (LIFE) Act and LIFE Act Amendments of 2000 (Pub. L. 106-553 and -554), enables certain individuals who are present in the United States who would not normally qualify to apply for adjustment of status in the United States to obtain lawful permanent residence (get a Green Card) regardless of:

- The manner they entered the United States;
- Working in the United States without authorization; or
- Failing to continuously maintain lawful status since entry.

To qualify for this provision, you must be the beneficiary of a labor certification application (Form ETA 750) or immigrant visa petition (Forms I-130, Petition for Alien Relative, or I-140, Immigrant Petition for Alien Worker) filed on or before April 30, 2001.

⁴ DACA defers the removal of people who arrived in the United States as children and meet certain requirements regarding length of time in the United States, education, criminal record, current age, and age at the time of immigration.

⁵ The Farm Workforce Modernization Act has passed through the House and is currently in the Senate Committee on the Judiciary.

⁶ According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2022, “The H-2A program allows U.S. employers or U.S. agents who meet specific regulatory requirements to bring foreign nationals to the United States to fill temporary agricultural jobs.”

⁷ Because we promised not to identify participants by their names or professional affiliations, we are omitting most of these details.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank several people: K. Jack Riley from RAND who helped support the original sketch of this idea; Andrew Parasiliti, adjunct political scientist at RAND, for his thoughtful feedback on early drafts of this Perspective; Aldi Rao for supporting one of our workshops; and our fellow workshop facilitators, Ryan Andrew Brown, Shelly Culbertson, and Michelle Woods, all from the RAND Corporation. We also thank Melissa Bauman for improving the organization and prose of this Perspective.

Finally, we thank our peer reviewers, Howard J. Shatz from RAND, Jessica Welburn Paige from RAND, and Colin P. Clarke from the Soufan Group, for their thoughtful peer reviews.

The views of sources consulted in this study are solely their own and do not represent the official policy of the U.S. Department of Defense or any other entity of the U.S. government.

About This Perspective

The purpose of this Perspective is to showcase pragmatic solutions to sensitive policy issues that could be acceptable to people from across the political spectrum. In recent years, a series of events (e.g., global pandemic, polarized elections) appear to have increased contention in the United States. Some have proposed that these are signs of the decline in American democracy. We disagree and propose that the actual threat to democracy is not any particular event but the lack of solutions to problems that underpin these events. Toward this end, researchers from the RAND Corporation organized a series of workshops with diverse stakeholders to discuss five relevant topics—political partisanship writ large and four policy-specific issues (mis- and disinformation, election security, extremism, and immigration reform). The goal of these workshops was to identify areas of consensus and specific, actionable solutions. This Perspective presents some proposed solu-

tions, and potential data sources to evaluate these solutions, to problems related to the four policy-specific issues. The views in this Perspective reflect our expert opinions, inspired by the robust conversation we had with workshop participants. To help shape our Perspective, we have synthesized our workshop conversations, adding citations from relevant research literature to provide scholarly context for the various policy facets we explored.

Funding

This project is part of the RAND Corporation's continuing program of self-initiated, independent research. Funding for this research was made possible by the independent research and development provisions of RAND's contracts for the operation of its U.S. Department of Defense federally funded research and development centers.

About this perspective

The global pandemic, the attack on the U.S. Capitol, an assassination attempt on a sitting U.S. Supreme Court justice, and the many issues that led to an estimated 42,347 protests between January 2017 and January 2021 are not, in and of themselves, threats to American democracy. A lack of solutions to the problems that underpin these events are threats. The authors of this Perspective first define democracy and public policy and discuss how political polarization can affect both concepts. They propose that the functioning of democracy depends on a healthy discourse about specific considerations that affect public policy and that this discourse is driven increasingly by ideology rather than objective analysis rooted in data and facts. The authors organized a series of workshops to separate the politics from the policy issues and find areas of consensus among participants holding different views about select problems. During the workshops, stakeholders discussed political partisanship writ large and four policy-specific issues: mis- and disinformation, election security, extremism, and immigration reform. The goal of these workshops was to identify areas of consensus and specific, actionable solutions. This Perspective presents some proposed solutions, and potential data sources to evaluate these solutions, to problems related to the four policy-specific issues. The authors have synthesized their workshop conversations, adding citations from relevant research literature to provide scholarly context for the various policy facets they explored.



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