

May 2021

# Two Stories of Distrust In America



More in  
Common

# Two Stories of **Dis**trust in America



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Common**

## About More in Common

The report was conducted by More in Common, a new international initiative to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media and government to connect people across lines of division.

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The report, data visualizations, and other aesthetic considerations were designed and created by Michelle Ng and Alane Marco.

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# Foreword

Every democracy depends on a threshold level of trust among its citizens and in its key institutions of government, business, and civil society. Currently however, the United States falls short of that ideal. According to More in Common’s research, less than one in four Americans believe the federal government, American corporations, and national media to be honest. This distrust is not limited to institutions either: fewer than two in five Americans feel “most people can be trusted.”

**AMERICA’S CRISIS OF TRUST** has been a well-documented and frequently cited story in recent years, but national events give reason to elevate this challenge to a top priority. For instance, as of this writing, 70% of Republicans do not believe that President Biden legitimately won enough votes to win the presidency.<sup>1</sup> And in the midst of a global response to the Covid-19 pandemic, 46% of Americans report that they do not intend to get vaccinated.<sup>2</sup> If a foundational element of a healthy democracy is trust, the United States is on undeniably shaky ground. Addressing these low levels of trust must be an urgent priority for every American and especially for those in positions of leadership.

In this report, More in Common seeks to shed new light on Americans’ experiences of trust and distrust. In particular, we look at trust through the lens of individuals’ ideologies and personal experiences of belonging, dignity, and equality. Our intent is to describe how perspectives on truth and fact are shaped by factors that go much deeper than our fractured media landscape and the explosion of online disinformation. The trust people hold toward institutions and others is shaped by their settings, experiences, and underlying worldviews. Understanding the different ways in which distrust manifests will help policymakers, institutional leaders, and everyday Americans determine what actions they can take to build back trust and ultimately contribute to a healthier and more productive democracy.

In addition to providing an overview of key measures of trust that draw from our original research and established sources, this report highlights two

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<sup>1</sup> Agiesta, J. (2021). “CNN Poll: Americans are divided on what causes problems in US elections”. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/30/politics/cnn-poll-voting-rights/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ramirez-Feldman, L. (2021). “The fight against vaccine hesitancy shifts to younger Americans”. Yahoo! News. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/the-fight-against-vaccine-hesitancy-shifts-to-younger-americans/ar-BB1qenv6>.

distinct stories of distrust. The first is an ideological “us versus them” distrust seen every day in headlines about partisan polarization and across social media. Characters in this story seem to assign trust based upon how they perceive the ideological orientation of groups and institutions.

The second story of distrust, which we refer to as social distrust, is one connected more with experiences of belonging, dignity, and equality. In contrast with ideological distrust, social distrust is reported on less frequently and often only partially. Recent work on social capital and the coronavirus, for example, highlight the connections among social relationships, institutional trust, and in response to the pandemic. But the import of social distrust extends far beyond the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> This story takes us into neighborhoods and highlights the salience of race, age, education, and gender in understanding levels of trust.

**OUR INTENT IN DISTINGUISHING THESE TWO STORIES** of distrust is to encourage policymakers and leaders, especially those in government, to be more targeted in the steps they take to rebuild trust by understanding different audiences. An important conversation is underway about America’s political polarization and the need for greater bipartisanship across levels of government. As a group that has studied polarization in the U.S. for the past three years, More in Common knows there is enormous appetite among the public for authentic bipartisanship, for a less hostile national conversation, and for political actors to emphasize commonality. At the same time, the research demonstrates that the roots of distrust go beyond politics. With the spotlight on ideological distrust, the critical ways in which national, state, and local leaders can influence social trust among Americans are often overlooked.

Efforts from government leaders to promote bipartisanship and to restore Americans’ confidence in the institutions of democracy should be complemented by strategies and programs for building social trust within and across communities, groups, and people. A comprehensive strategy to build trust would catalyze a virtuous cycle wherein efforts to reduce ideological and social distrust reinforce and accelerate one another. As trust levels grow in our communities and the nation, it will make it easier for collective action to address urgent challenges such as invigorating economic growth and addressing issues of racial inequality.

**THE LANDSCAPE OF DISTRUST IN AMERICA IS DAUNTING**, but far from hopeless. With a more robust understanding of the nature and drivers of trust and distrust, it can be improved. The goal of this report is to contribute to such efforts.

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<sup>3</sup> Suttie, J. (2021). “Strong Communities Have Fewer COVID-19 Cases”. Greater Good Science Center. [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/strong\\_communities\\_have\\_fewer\\_covid19\\_cases](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/strong_communities_have_fewer_covid19_cases). Researchers from MIT and York University in Toronto found that counties in the United States with higher social capital had lower infection rates and fewer deaths from the COVID-19 virus.

# Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of multiple large-scale national surveys of Americans about the state of trust in America. It finds significant evidence for deep and widespread levels of distrust across society.

**AMONG NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS** – government, media, and business – More in Common tested in December 2020, none earned the trust of a majority of Americans. Levels of interpersonal trust were similarly concerning, with a majority of Americans saying you “can’t be too careful in dealing with other people” and one in three Americans saying there is no community outside of friends and family where they feel a strong sense of belonging.

These topline findings paint a stark picture. If we probe deeper, however, we discern important distinctions in the probable drivers of distrust. Understanding these nuances does not make the overall picture brighter, but it can illuminate potential solutions and pathways to renew trust. Two distinctive “stories” of distrust are evident in the data – an ideological ‘us versus them’ distrust and a ‘social distrust’ that tracks interactions and feelings of belonging, dignity, and equality. These two stories are not fully comprehensive of the myriad drivers of distrust in America, but they capture distinctive ways distrust relates to ideology and experience.

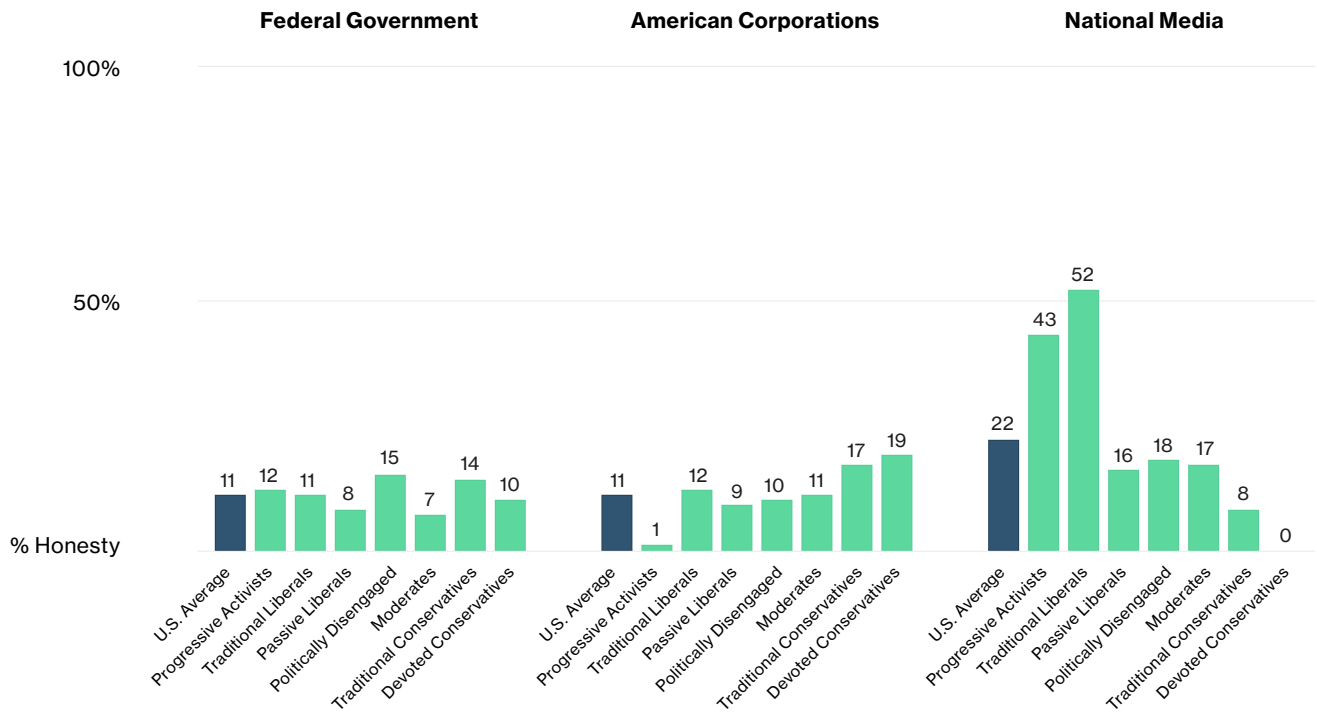
It is a challenging moment to generate broader consensus that building trust should be a national priority. In a survey More in Common fielded in December 2020, only 51% of Americans said we need to heal as a nation as opposed to defeat the evil within. These findings underscore the importance of finding new ways to connect with broad sections of the American public around efforts to build trust. This report focuses on how drivers of distrust vary among Americans as these distinctions may provide new opportunities for such efforts.

**See Figures 0.1–0.4 on following pages.**

Figure 0.1

## Low Level of Trust in Institutions is the Norm

No national institution is perceived as honest by more than 1 in 5 Americans.

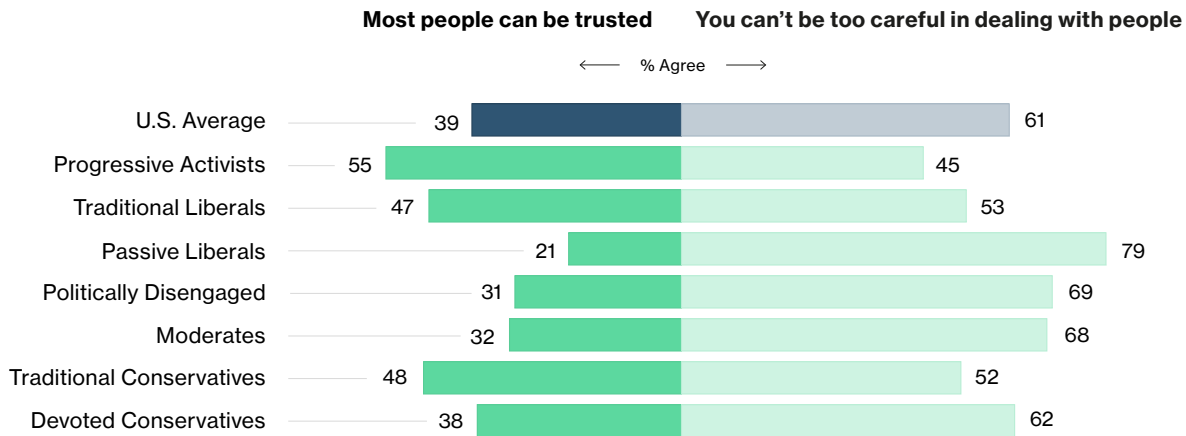


Survey Question: "In your personal experience, do you feel like...is always dishonest, more dishonest than honest, equally honest and dishonest, more honest than not, or always honest?"  
 Showing: % 'always honest' and 'more honest than not.'  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020

Figure 0.2

## Low Level of Trust in Other People is the Norm

Less than 4 in 10 Americans feel "most people can be trusted."



Survey Question: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?"  
 Source: More in Common, August 2020

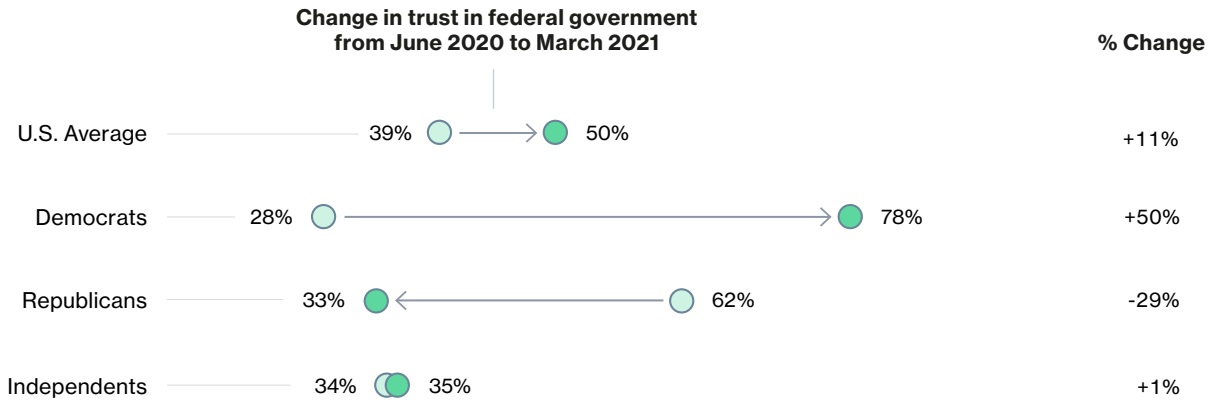


Figure 0.3

## Ideology Predicts Distrust Towards Key Institutions

■ July 2020, Trump Administration  
■ March 2021, Biden Administration

Confidence in the federal government to do what is right for America swings significantly for partisans based upon whether their party is in control.

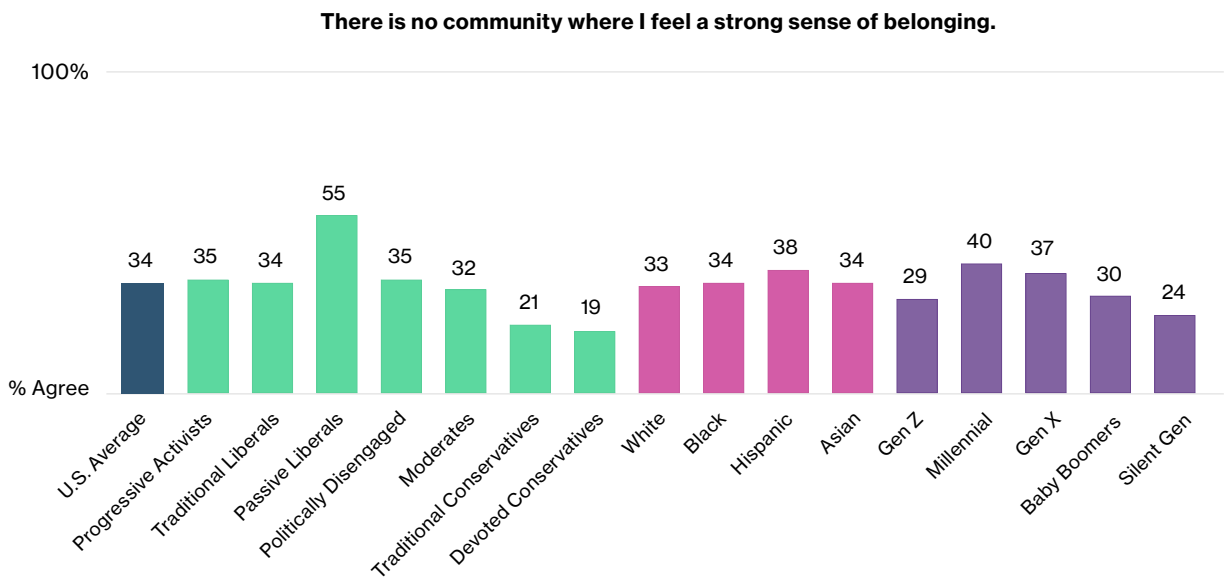


Survey Question: "Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, some confidence, hardly any confidence, or no confidence at all in the federal government to do what is right for America?"  
 Showing: % 'great deal of confidence' and 'some confidence.'  
 Source: More in Common, July/August 2020; More in Common, March 2021.

Figure 0.4

## Significant Experiences of Lack of Belonging, Especially Among Passive Liberals

Over half of Passive Liberals (55%) report that there is no community where they feel a strong sense of belonging.



Survey Question: "Having a sense of belonging means you feel accepted and valued. Outside of your family and friends, please select the community to which you feel the strongest sense of belonging."  
 Showing: % 'There is no community where I feel a strong sense of belonging.'  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

# Methodology

**THE DATA CITED IN THIS REPORT** were sourced through multiple national quantitative surveys across more than 10,000 Americans, supplemented by qualitative data collected over the course of 2020. For all quantitative studies referenced, More in Common collaborated with global data and public opinion company YouGov for fieldwork, survey execution, and data tabulation.

## Quantitative National Surveys

### **Democracy Survey 1**

More in Common conducted online survey interviews with 8,000 Americans in July–August of 2020. The data was weighted to be representative of American citizens to a sampling frame built from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). The data was weighted using propensity scores, with score functions including gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (6-category), race (5-category), and education (4-category). The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 1.33.

### **Democracy Survey 2**

More in Common surveyed 2,000 Americans (from the original sample of 8,000) in December of 2020. The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 1.96.

### **Democracy Survey 3**

More in Common surveyed 1,000 (from the original sample of 8,000) Americans in March of 2021. The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 2.08.

### **Post-Election Survey**

More in Common surveyed 2,000 Americans over the period of November 4–6, 2020. Data was weighted using propensity scores, with score functions including gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age, race, and education. The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 2.64.

### **American Fabric**

More in Common surveyed a sample of 4,456 US adults from July 11–20, 2020. Approximately 2,000 of the overall sample are a subset of respondents who had participated in an 2018 More in Common survey of 8,000 participants on political attitudes in the United States. This study has an overall

margin of error of +/- 1.7 percent and higher for analyzing subgroups. Some sections were randomly assigned to half of the respondents, and for those questions the margin of error is +/- 2.2 percent. The data was weighted using propensity scores and post-stratification, with a sampling frame built from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). The propensity score function included gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-category), race (4-category), and education (4-category). The weights were then trimmed at a maximum value of 7, and then re-centered to have a mean of 1.

To request the full dataset for this report, email [contact@moreincommon.com](mailto:contact@moreincommon.com).

## Qualitative Research

### Hidden Tribes Live

From April through November 2020, More in Common maintained and engaged a qualitative research panel with a total of approximately 250 participants, distributed across multiple waves of recruitment. Participants were recruited to represent an approximately representative sample of Americans, including by gender, race, age, geographic region and political party identification. Participants engaged in activities several times per week via an online research platform where they answered surveys, submitted text responses, uploaded self-recorded videos, participated in group discussions, and completed other activities. The topics explored on the platform ranged from national politics to cultural issues to their lives and identities. Respondents received compensation in return for their participation. Their quotes have been edited for punctuation, spelling and length, and all names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

### Hidden Tribes Segments

Throughout this report we reference the segments produced in Hidden Tribes (2018) through an agglomerative hierarchical clustering statistical segmentation process based on core beliefs and political behavior variables. From left to right, these are the categories: Progressive Activists, Traditional Liberals, Passive Liberals, Politically Disengaged, Moderates, Traditional Conservatives, and Devoted Conservatives. (See Fig. 0.5 on following page.)

#### HERE IS A QUICK SNAPSHOT OF EACH HIDDEN TRIBE:

**Progressive Activists (8% of the population)** are deeply concerned with issues concerning equity, fairness, and America's direction today. They tend to be more secular, cosmopolitan, and highly engaged with social media.

**Traditional Liberals (11% of the population)** tend to be cautious, rational, and idealistic. They value tolerance and compromise. They place great faith in institutions.

**Passive Liberals (15% of the population)** tend to feel isolated from their communities. They are insecure in their beliefs and try to avoid political conversations. They have a fatalistic view of politics and feel that the circumstances of their lives are beyond their control.

**The Politically Disengaged (26% of the population)** are untrusting, suspicious about external threats, conspiratorially minded, and pessimistic about progress. They tend to be patriotic yet detached from politics.

**Moderates (15% of the population)** are engaged in their communities, well informed, and civic-minded. Their faith is often an important part of their lives. They shy away from extremism of any sort.

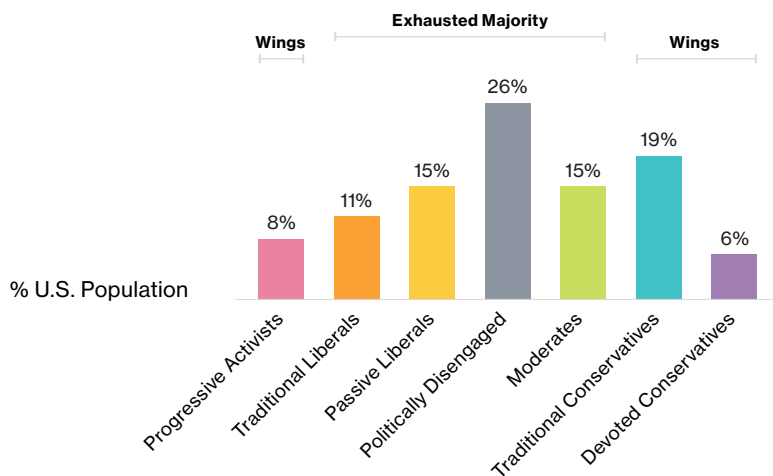
**Traditional Conservatives (19% of the population)** tend to be religious, patriotic, and highly moralistic. They believe deeply in personal responsibility and self-reliance.

**Devoted Conservatives (6% of the population)** are deeply engaged with politics and hold strident, uncompromising views. They feel that America is embattled, and they perceive themselves as the last defenders of traditional values that are under threat.

Figure 0.5

## The Hidden Tribes of America

The three outer segments form the “wings,” and the four inner segments form the “exhausted majority.”



Source: More in Common, Hidden Tribes. 2018.

For more information about the methodology and the segments, visit [www.HiddenTribes.us](http://www.HiddenTribes.us).

**Note on Institutional Trust Metrics:**

In addition to using a standard survey question on institutional trust – asking respondents' confidence level that various institutions will do what is right for the country – we also measured trust using a question adapted from previous research, that evaluated the extent to which respondents viewed different institutions (e.g. federal government, local government, media) as honest or dishonest (5-pt scale). We find that these two measures of trust are closely related and vary similarly. We opted to use the trust as honesty index in this current study to more clearly get at the notion of distrust as a violation or betrayal of relational expectations.

# Recent Trends in Trust

## CHAPTER 1

In 2018, Richard Edelman, President and CEO of Edelman, which conducts an annual Trust Barometer, said, “The United States is enduring an unprecedented crisis of trust.”<sup>4</sup>

**INDEED, A GROWING NUMBER OF PUBLIC OPINION POLLS SUGGEST THAT TRUST IS ERODING AT AN ALARMING RATE.** In recent years, the collapse of trust in America more generally has been a frequent topic of analysis, books, and commentary, and trust in institutions has been a widely publicized measure.

Researchers have identified a broad range of root causes of distrust, including financial insecurity, emotional insecurity and identity insecurity. When looking at the decline in trust towards government, scholars have pointed to poor institutional performance, large-scale global shocks and growing political polarization as reasons. In addition, political polarization has grown worse over a time period that coincides with the emergence of more partisan media outlets. In more recent years, it has also become easier for individuals to derive information from partisan echo chambers – bubbles that reaffirm existing perspectives and highlight points of ideological grievance and outrage. (See Figures 1.1 and 1.2 on following page.)

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More than  
**80%**  
of Americans in the 1960s had confidence in the federal government to do what is right for the country.

Less than  
**30%**  
of Americans in the last 15 years had confidence in the federal government to do what is right for the country.

Source: “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019.” 2019. Pew Research Center

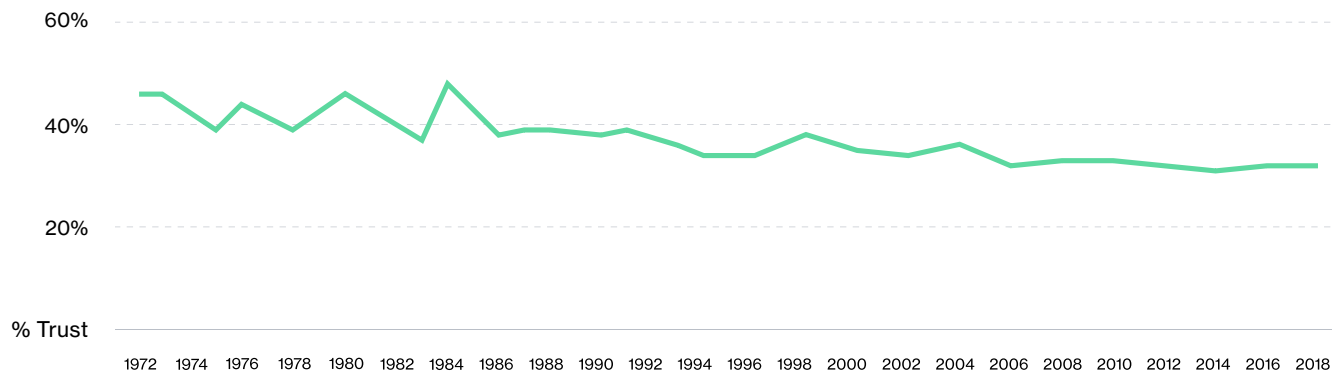
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<sup>4</sup> Edelman. (2018). “2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Reveals Record-Breaking Drop in Trust in the U.S.” Edelman Press Release. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/2018-edelman-trust-barometer-reveals-record-breaking-drop-in-trust-in-the-us-300585510.html>.

Figure 1.1

## Decline in Interpersonal Trust

The percentage of Americans who feel people can be trusted has generally declined over the past 50 years.



Survey Question: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?"  
Source: "Trust in Other People." 2018. National Opinion Research Council (NORC). The General Social Survey (GSS) is a project of the independent research organization NORC at the University of Chicago, with principal funding from the National Science Foundation.

Figure 1.2

## Decline in Trust in Federal Government

Confidence in the federal government to do what is right has declined significantly in the past two decades.



Survey Question: "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?"  
Source: "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019." 2019. Pew Research Center.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>

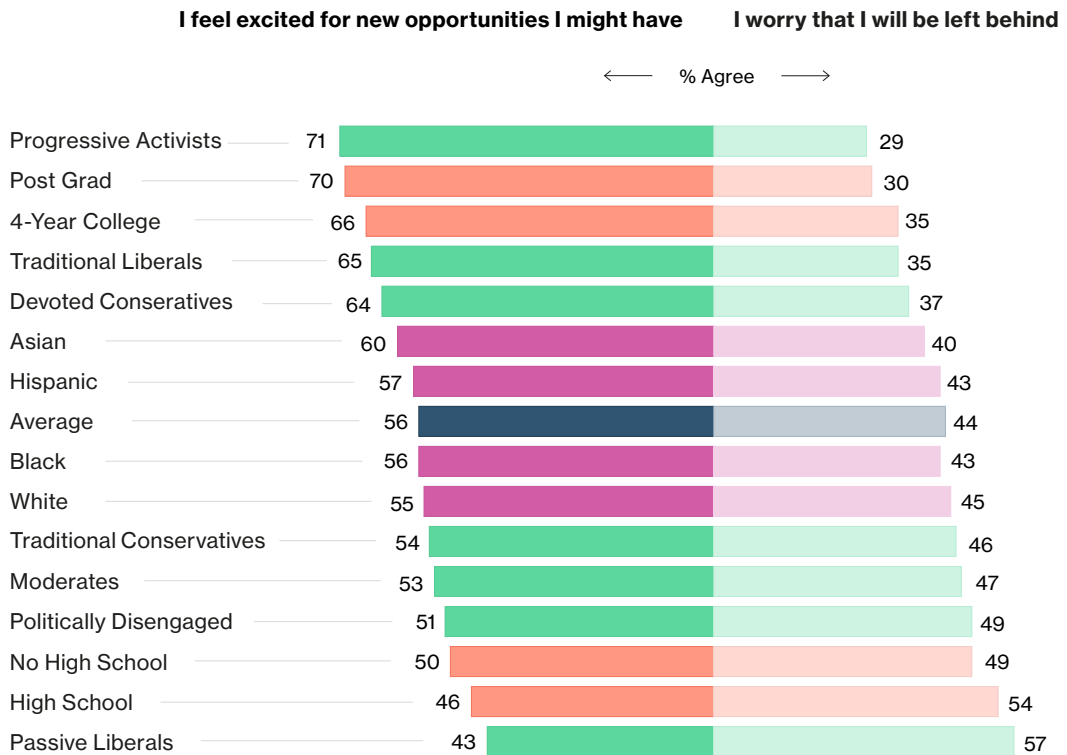
**MORE IN COMMON'S RESEARCH HAS FOUND SOME CONCERNING** findings in Americans' current perceptions about the direction of the country and their own place in it.

While a majority of Americans (56%) are excited about the new opportunities they might have in a rapidly changing America, there is a substantial proportion (44%) who are more concerned they will be left behind. **(See Fig. 1.3.)** These findings are similar among races – with 45% of white Americans, 43% of Black Americans, 43% of Hispanic Americans, and 40% of Asian Americans worried about being left behind. There is variation in this sentiment based on educational attainment. Forty-nine percent of those without a high school diploma and 54% of those with a high school diploma are concerned about being left behind, but only 30% of those with postgraduate degrees feel that way.

Figure 1.3

### Confidence in the Future

Americans with lower levels of education are among most worried about being left behind.



Survey Question: "Pick the number that corresponds with the statement you most agree with: 4 - When I think about the rapid pace of change in America, I worry that I will be left behind, 3, 2, 1 - When I think about the rapid pace of change in America, I feel excited for the new opportunities I might have."  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

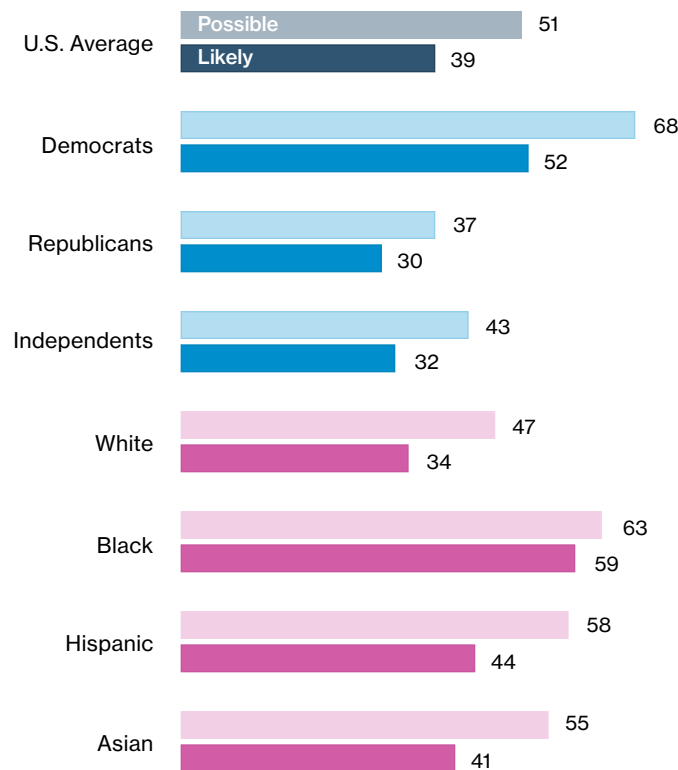


Around half of Americans (51%) think it is possible to come together in 2021, but only 38% think it is likely. (See Fig. 1.4.) This sentiment broke along ideological lines with 68% of Democrats and 38% of Republicans thinking unity is possible, and 52% of Democrats and 30% of Republicans saying it is likely we will come together. The responses also varied by race – with 47% of white Americans, 63% of Black Americans, and 58% of Hispanic Americans thinking unity is possible, and 34% of white Americans, 59% of Black Americans and 44% of Hispanic Americans thinking it is likely.

Figure 1.4

## Possibility vs. Likelihood of Coming Together in 2021

Americans are split over whether unity is possible in 2021, but most do not feel it is likely.



Survey Questions: "How possible do you think it is for the country to come together in 2021?"  
 "How likely do you think it is that the country can come together in 2021?"  
 Showing: % 'very possible' and 'somewhat possible'; 'very likely' and 'somewhat likely'  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

**THE DATA UNDERSCORE THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE SITUATION.** Trust levels have been eroding over an extended period of time, Americans are skeptical about the idea that we can change course as a nation, and while a slight majority are excited about their personal prospects in a rapidly-changing country, many Americans are worried about being left behind. In the next chapter, we will discuss why all Americans should be concerned about these trends, given the critical role trust plays in a healthy democratic society.

# Why Trust Matters

## CHAPTER 2

Without a baseline of trust in key institutions and in each other, we cannot solve collective problems or advance changes that benefit all sectors of society. In high-trust societies, people are able to organize more quickly, initiate action, and sacrifice for the common good. High trust societies have lower economic inequality and growing economies, lower rates of corruption, and a more civically engaged population. Distrust, on the other hand, leads to political extremism and an unwillingness to engage in society.<sup>5</sup>

## Trust and Cooperative Behavior

Behavioral scientists have long recognized the importance of trust in promoting the cooperative arrangements that lay at the foundation of a democratic society. Trust is a necessary precondition for cooperative behavior – a key ingredient of a working democracy. Social trust has been shown to be associated with civic engagement. Consistent waves of the annual American National Election Study (ANES) show that citizens with higher levels of trust are more likely to be involved in volunteering and charitable giving. In addition, citizens with higher levels of trust tend to be more supportive of programs that benefit lower income individuals and social programs that promote egalitarian outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

### EXAMPLE: THE COOPERATIVE TRUST CYCLE

Consider, for example, a young entrepreneur attempting to take out a loan to start a restaurant. The importance of trust is illustrated at every step of this process. **First, the entrepreneur must have confidence that the social and economic conditions that will support such a business will endure into the future.** For example, he or she must believe that a given neighborhood will continue to be well-trafficked and that the inhabitants of that neighborhood will continue to have enough financial resources to afford an occasional night out.

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<sup>5</sup> Brooks, D. (2021). "America is Having a Moral Convulsion". The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/10/collapsing-levels-trust-are-devastating-america/616581/>

<sup>6</sup> Warren, M. (2018). Trust and democracy. The Oxford handbook of social and political trust, 75-94.

**Second, the bank must believe that the entrepreneur will make wise financial decisions that will allow him or her to eventually pay back the loan with interest.** All of this is predicated on a relationship of interpersonal trust (between the entrepreneur and the bank lender) and a trust in the basic economic functioning and continued vitality of the society. Thus it is easy to see how basic trust is a core component of a functioning economy, because it permits people to confidently invest in the future.

## Trust and a Shared Fate

Trust also fosters another idea that is critical to a successful democracy: the idea of a shared fate. A sense of a shared fate is shown when citizens practice generalized trust, an open sort of trust that encompasses many others in society, even and especially people who one may consider as from the “out-group.” This is in contrast to particularized trust – trust that focuses only on one’s in-group – which can lead to a civic dead-end. This narrow type of trust is linked to viewing novel or unfamiliar people or situations as threatening. People who engage in particularized trust are more pessimistic, have higher authoritarian tendencies, and are avoidant of others whom they perceive as being outside of their inner circle. Tocqueville posited that societies who cultivate this detrimental individualistic thinking are in danger of having disengaged citizens who do not feel invested in the societal good.<sup>7</sup>

## Leaders Must Prioritize Trust

When considering the landscape of trust in America today, there are several reasons that leaders, especially government leaders, must prioritize efforts to build trust. First, despite today’s high levels of distrust in our institutions, Americans still say they want the federal government to take a more active role in solving the nation’s problems, both domestically and abroad. In an annual Governance poll by Gallup conducted in 2020, 54% of U.S. adults favored increased government intervention and 41% stated that the government is doing too much that should be left to individuals and businesses.<sup>8</sup> And, in a 2020 survey, a majority of adults said that the federal government should play a role on a wide variety of issues.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the majority of Americans believe that it is necessary to improve the trust environment. Nearly two-thirds of Americans said that low trust in the federal government makes it harder to solve many of the country’s problems.<sup>10</sup> In a 2018 survey, 68% of Americans said it was very important to repair the

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<sup>7</sup> Tocqueville, A. de. 2000. *Democracy in America*. Translated and edited by Mansfield, H. C. and D. Winthrop. Chicago, Chicago University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Brenan, M. (2020). “New High 54% Want Government to Solve More Problems in U.S.” Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/321041/new-high-government-solve-problems.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> Pew. (2020). “Americans’ Views of Government: Low Trust, But Some Positive Performance Ratings.” Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/14/americans-views-of-government-low-trust-but-some-positive-performance-ratings/>.

<sup>10</sup> Keeter, S., Perrin, A., and Rainie, L. (2019). “Trust and Distrust in America.” Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/>.

public's level of confidence in the federal government and 58% said it was very important to improve confidence in fellow Americans.<sup>11</sup>

### EXAMPLE: THE PANDEMIC RESPONSE

As we look at where our nation is now, there is no better example of the impact of trust on policy solutions than the response to the coronavirus pandemic. Trust in government has played a significant role in determining how different countries have performed in containing and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in those countries that had not recently experienced deadly outbreaks of other coronaviruses or emerging infections.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, the lack of trust in government has increased across the globe in the pandemic. In May 2020, government emerged as the most trusted institution when people sought leadership in the fight against Covid-19 and restoring economic health. Over the course of 2020 and into 2021, government lost the most ground of any institution – down eight points globally in January 2021.<sup>13</sup>

We have seen levels of mistrust in the government around the pandemic from across the ideological aisles in the United States. Only half of Americans say they have a great or fair amount of trust in the federal government to provide accurate information about the virus, while the other half have not very much trust or none at all. There is a wide gap based on party – with 72% of Democrats, 48% of independents and 30% of Republicans trusting the information.<sup>14</sup> And, we have seen disparities in trust that will impact our ability to end the pandemic. Data collected by the data science company Civiqs indicates a sharp divide based upon party identity in terms of willingness to get the COVID-19 vaccine.<sup>15</sup>

**THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT TRUST CAN BE IMPROVED.** Eighty-four percent said the level of confidence Americans have in the federal government could be improved and 86% believed the level of confidence Americans have in each other can increase,<sup>16</sup> but it is clear that the country's trust levels will not get better without a focused attempt by leaders across society and targeted actions to do so. In the next chapter we take a deeper dive into the current landscape of trust in America.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Bolyky, T., Crosby, S., and Kiernan, S. (2020). "Fighting a Pandemic Requires Trust." Foreign Affairs. [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-10-23/coronavirus-fighting-requires-trust?utm\\_medium=email\\_notifications&utm\\_source=reg\\_confirmation&utm\\_campaign=reg\\_questpass](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-10-23/coronavirus-fighting-requires-trust?utm_medium=email_notifications&utm_source=reg_confirmation&utm_campaign=reg_questpass).

<sup>13</sup> Edelman. (2021). "Edelman Trust Barometer 2021." <https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2021-01/2021-edelman-trust-barometer.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Talev, M. (2021). "Axios-Ipsos poll: Trust in federal coronavirus response surges." <https://www.axios.com/axios-ipsos-poll-federal-trust-covid-surges-95aeb75e-b9ad-4ccd-b5e5-3301e7c68a6f.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Civiqs. (2021). "Coronavirus: Vaccination." [https://civiqs.com/results/coronavirus\\_vaccine?annotations=true&uncertainty=true&zoomIn=true&trendline=true&race=Black%20or%20African-American&party=Independent](https://civiqs.com/results/coronavirus_vaccine?annotations=true&uncertainty=true&zoomIn=true&trendline=true&race=Black%20or%20African-American&party=Independent).

<sup>16</sup> Keeter, S., Perrin, A., and Rainie, L. (2019). "Trust and Distrust in America." Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/>.

# America's Trust Deficit

## CHAPTER 3

**AMERICANS' DISTRUST IS MANIFESTED IN THEIR VIEWS OF GOVERNMENT, MEDIA, CORPORATIONS, AND EVEN IN EACH OTHER.** This section includes a review of the landscape of trust in America, encompassing both trust in institutions and interpersonal trust. Drawing on both More in Common's research and those of other credible sources, the data underscore the extent to which the nation faces a trust deficit across all levels. Among national institutions – government, media, and business – none earned the trust of a majority of Americans. Levels of interpersonal trust were similarly low, with a majority of Americans saying you “can't be too careful in dealing with other people” and one in three Americans saying there is no community outside of friends and family where they feel a strong sense of belonging.

## Institutions

### TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

*“I still do not trust the government to do a good job running basically anything, so I'm not really sure that we can make these institutions of government run successfully.”*

—Carol, age 25–34, white woman, *Politically Disengaged*

In 1958, the National Election Study began polling on trust in government and found three-quarters of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing almost always or most of the time. In the 1960s with the Vietnam War, and the 1970s during the Watergate scandal, trust in government began declining. While there were ups and downs in trust levels, usually tracking economic growth, public trust reached a three-decade high after 9/11. However, since 2007, trust in the federal government has peaked at 30%.<sup>17</sup> Today, trust in government is currently near historically low levels and that distrust is found across generational, racial and ethnic lines.<sup>18</sup> For example, fewer than one out of five Americans – and one out of ten Black Americans – say that they trust the government to do what is right.<sup>19</sup>

More than half of Americans (56%) say they feel like the federal government is always dishonest, or more dishonest than not, with a third of Americans (33%) saying it is equally honest and dishonest, and only 11% saying it is

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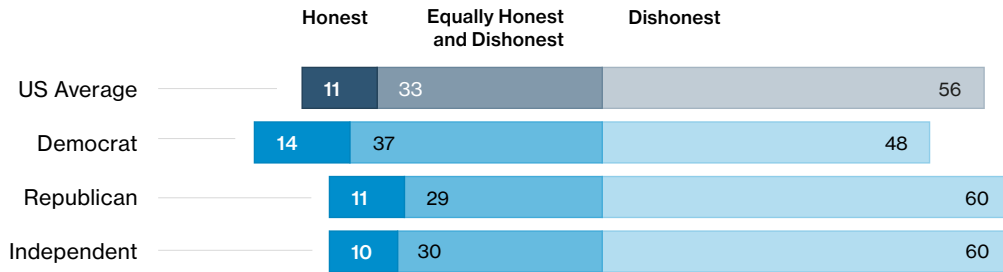
<sup>17</sup> Pew. (2019). “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019.”

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Bollyky, T., Crosby, S., and Kiernan, S. (2020).

always or mostly honest. The numbers are low across the ideological spectrum – with 14% of Democrats, 11% of Republicans, and 10% of Independents believing that the federal government is honest. (See Figure 3.1.)

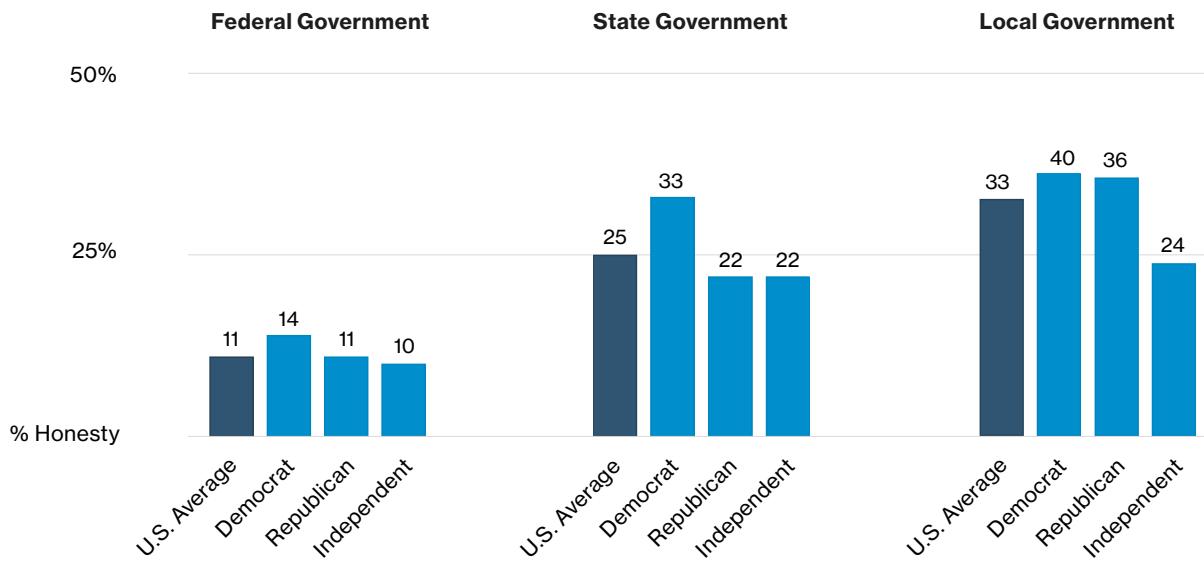
**Figure 3.1** Perceived Honesty of Federal Government



Survey Question: "In your personal experience, do you feel like the federal government is always dishonest, more dishonest than honest, equally honest and dishonest, more honest than not, or always honest?"  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

More Americans have trust in their state and local government officials, as compared to federal elected officials. A quarter of Americans (25%) feel their state government is honest and a third (33%) of Americans feel their local government is honest. (See Figure 3.2.)

**Figure 3.2** Perceived Honesty of Government: Federal vs. State vs. Local



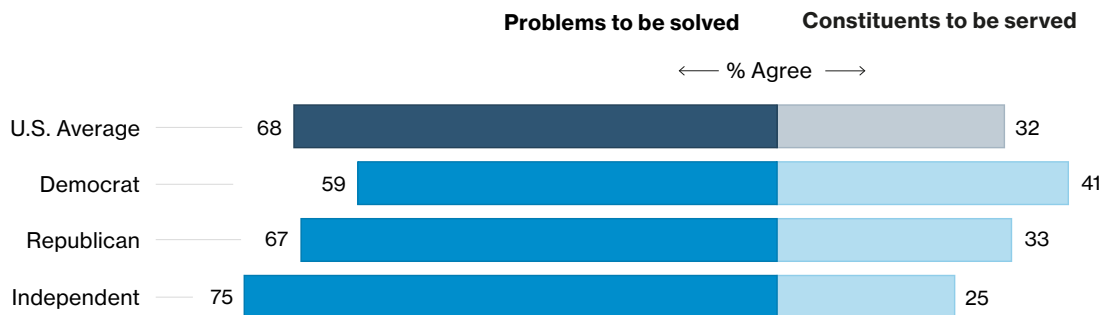
Survey Question: "In your personal experience, do you feel like...is always dishonest, more dishonest than honest, equally honest and dishonest, more honest than not, or always honest?"  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

*“Most people in power tend to listen to those who pay money to them, not so much the little guy. At the community level, people listen more often because a lot of decisions affect the community as a whole.”*

—Josh, age 25–34, Hispanic man, Moderate

One potential reason for Americans' low levels of trust in government may be the skepticism they have that political leaders value the input of those who elect them. 68% of Americans believe that elected officials see them as problems to be solved, as compared to constituents to be served. (See Fig. 3.3.)

**Figure 3.3** How People Feel Politicians View Them



Survey Question: “Which statement do you agree with more? ‘Politicians view people like me as problems to be solved.’ ‘Politicians view people like me as constituents to be served.’”  
Source: More in Common, December 2020.

### TRUST IN MEDIA

Media is another institution that is critical to our working democracy but has low levels of trust. A 2020 survey by the Knight Foundation and Gallup shows that Americans agree that the media is an important part of democracy, however, their faith in the media as it currently operates is low. Eighty-one percent of Americans say that the news media is critical or very important to democracy. However, a majority of Americans say the media is performing poorly.<sup>20</sup>

Americans have always had a certain level of distrust in the media, but the situation has worsened in recent years. The percentage of Americans who say they have “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of confidence in the media to report the news “fully, accurately and fairly” was 41% in 2019, down from 55% two

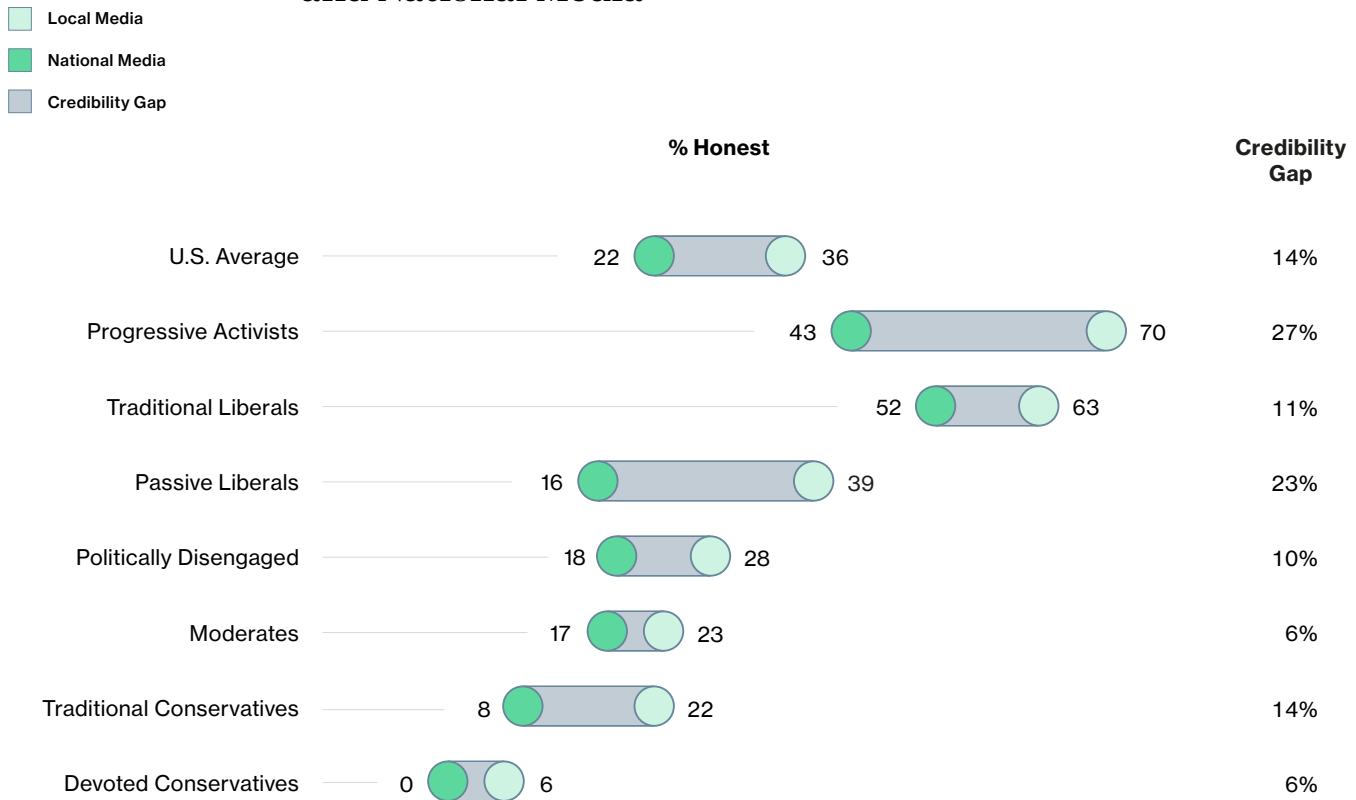
<sup>20</sup> Knight. (2020). “American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy”. Knight Foundation. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2020-trust-media-and-democracy/>.

decades earlier.<sup>21</sup> Sixty percent of Republicans and 32% of Democrats believe that mistakes in news stories are because of an intentional desire to mislead audiences.<sup>22</sup>

More in Common found a significant credibility gap between national and local media. More than half of Americans (53%) feel the national media is mostly dishonest. Only one-fifth of Americans (22%) feel national media is mostly honest. One-third of Americans feel local media is mostly dishonest. Thirty-six percent of Americans feel local media is mostly honest. (See Fig. 3.4.)

Figure 3.4

### Credibility Gap Between Local Media and National Media



Survey Question: "In your personal experience do you feel like the national media / local media is always honest, more honest than not, equally honest and dishonest, more dishonest than honest, always honest?"  
 Showing: % 'always honest' and 'more honest than not.'  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

The good news is that 75% of Americans say it is possible to improve the level of confidence Americans have in the news media.<sup>23</sup> While a majority of Americans believe the media is responsible for political divisions, they also believe that it is the media that can take steps to heal those divisions.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>22</sup> Gottfried, J, Mitchell, A, and Walker, M. (2020). "Americans See Skepticism of News Media as Healthy, Say Public Trust in the Institution Can Improve". Pew Research Center. <https://www.journalism.org/2020/08/31/americans-see-skepticism-of-news-media-as-healthy-say-public-trust-in-the-institution-can-improve/>.  
<sup>23</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>24</sup> Knight. (2020).



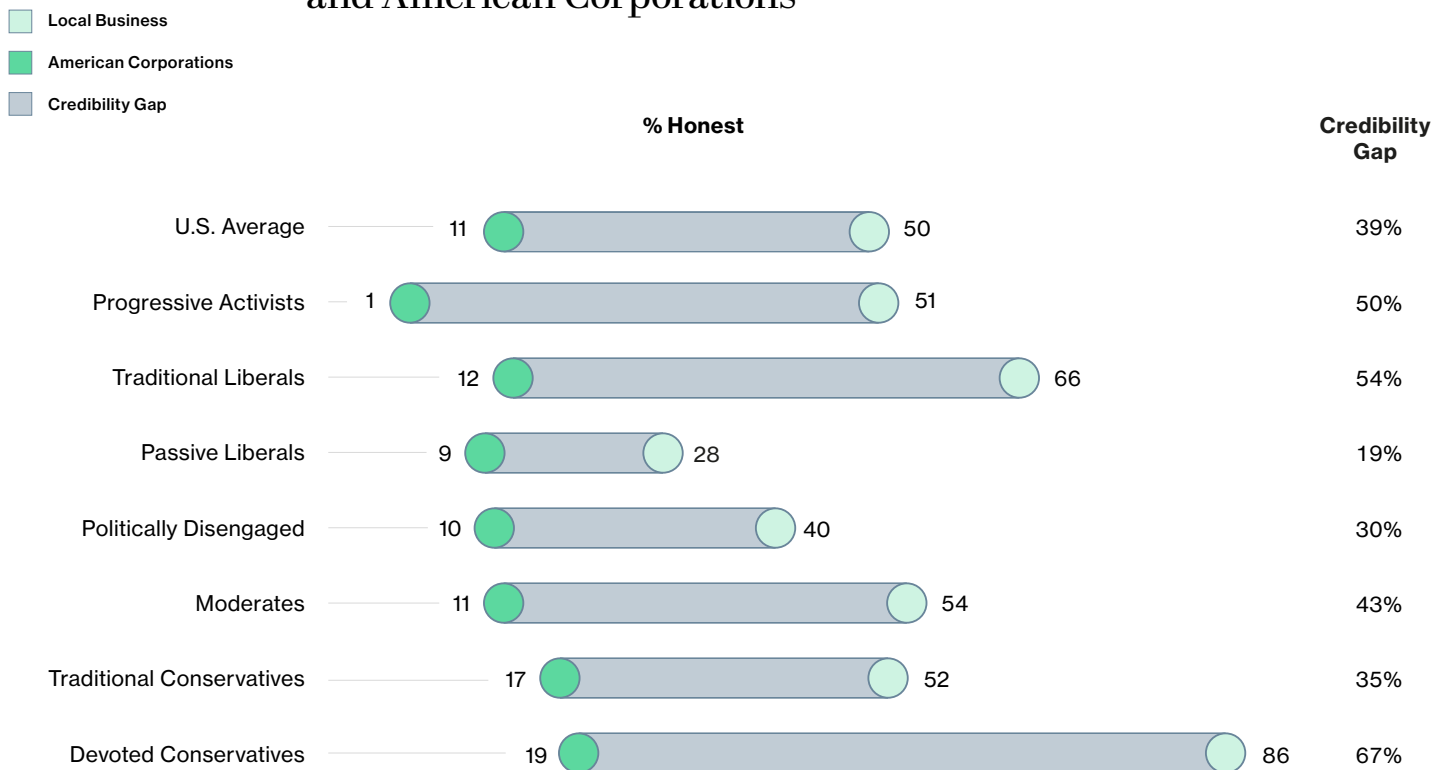
When looking for news sources they trust, Black Americans, for example, see representation in the news and newsroom as a way to connect with news sources.<sup>25</sup>

### TRUST IN BUSINESS

Trust in business is another important indicator of America’s state of trust. In the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, businesses emerged as the only major institution – across government, NGOs, media, and business – trusted by a majority of both Biden and Trump voters.<sup>26</sup> In More in Common’s research, a distinction was found among types of businesses. Only 11% of Americans said American corporations are honest but 50% found local businesses to be honest. Nearly half of Americans (49%) said American corporations are always or mostly dishonest, with only eight percent of Americans saying the same of local businesses. (See Fig. 3.5.)

Figure 3.5

## Credibility Gap Between Local Businesses and American Corporations



Survey Question: “In your personal experience do you feel like American corporations / local businesses are always honest, more honest than not, equally honest and dishonest, more dishonest than honest, always honest?”  
 Showing: % ‘always honest’ and ‘more honest than not.’  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Gottfried, J, Mitchell, A, and Walker, M. (2020).  
<sup>26</sup> Edelman. (2021).

## Trust in Each Other

*“I feel that others do not value my opinion or don’t believe that what I have to offer is worthy.”*

—Portia, age 25–34, Black woman, Politically Disengaged

**INTERPERSONAL TRUST BEGETS SOCIAL AND COLLECTIVE TRUST,** both of which are critical to a successful democracy. The trust we have toward other people influences the levels of trust we have in the social groups and communities to which those others belong. Breakdowns in trust at the interpersonal level thus can negatively affect societal trust.

Seventy-one percent of Americans believe interpersonal confidence has gotten worse over the past 20 years and 70% believe that low trust in each other makes it harder to solve the country’s problems. When asked what has contributed to this change the most, 49% of Americans think this decline is due to people being not as reliable as they used to be while others believe societal and policy problems have also contributed. Sixteen percent of those who were worried about a decline in personal trust blame government’s poor performance, gridlock and polarization and 11% blamed the news media’s performance.<sup>27</sup>

More in Common found relatively low levels of trust among individuals. Sixty-three percent of Americans believe “you can’t be too careful in dealing with people” and only 37% agree “most people can be trusted.” Seventy-four percent of Americans agree “I feel like we can’t count on the people around as much as we used to.”

---

63%

of Americans believe  
“you can’t be too careful  
in dealing with people.”

37%

of Americans agree  
“most people can be  
trusted.”

74%

of Americans agree  
“I feel like we can’t count  
on the people around as  
much as we used to.”

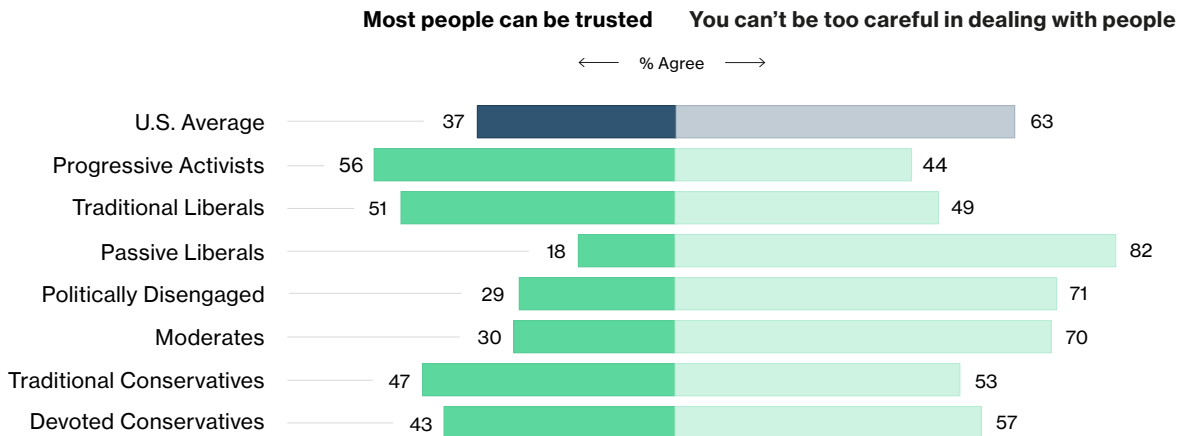
Source: More in Common (2020)

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<sup>27</sup> Keeter, S., Perrin, A., and Rainie, L. (2019).

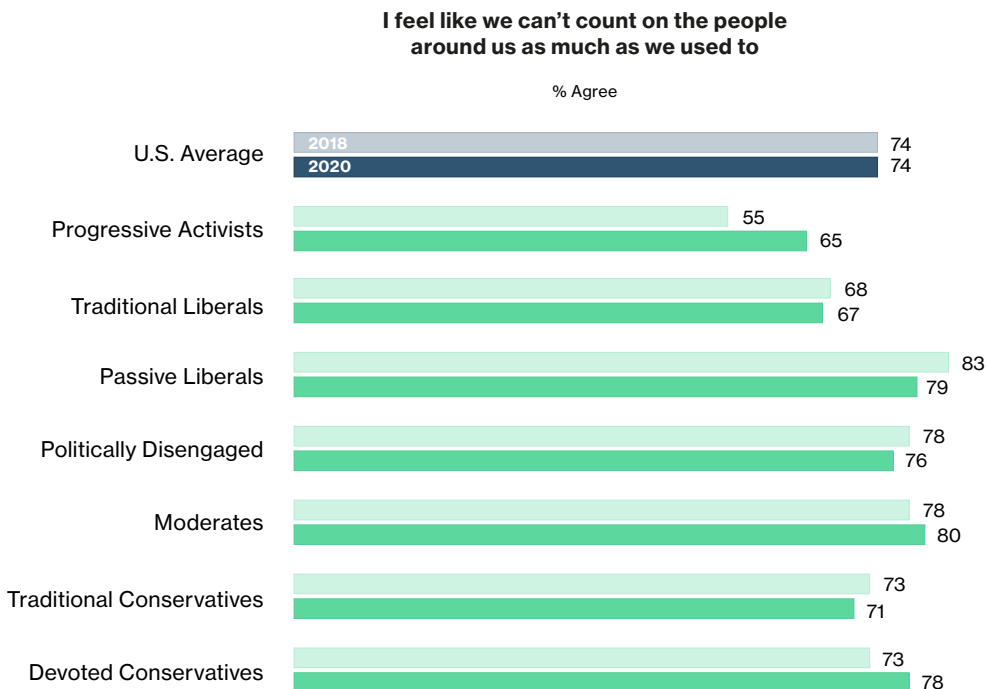
Significantly, the most ideological segments – Progressive Activists, Traditional Conservatives, and Devoted Conservatives – have higher levels of interpersonal trust even as they have the most polarized views towards institutions. It is the Passive Liberals, Politically Disengaged, and Moderates who express the highest levels of distrust in other people. (See Figures 3.6 and 3.7.)

Figure 3.6 Trust in Other People



Survey Question: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?"  
 Source: More in Common, August 2020

Figure 3.7 Reliability of Other People: 2018 vs. 2020



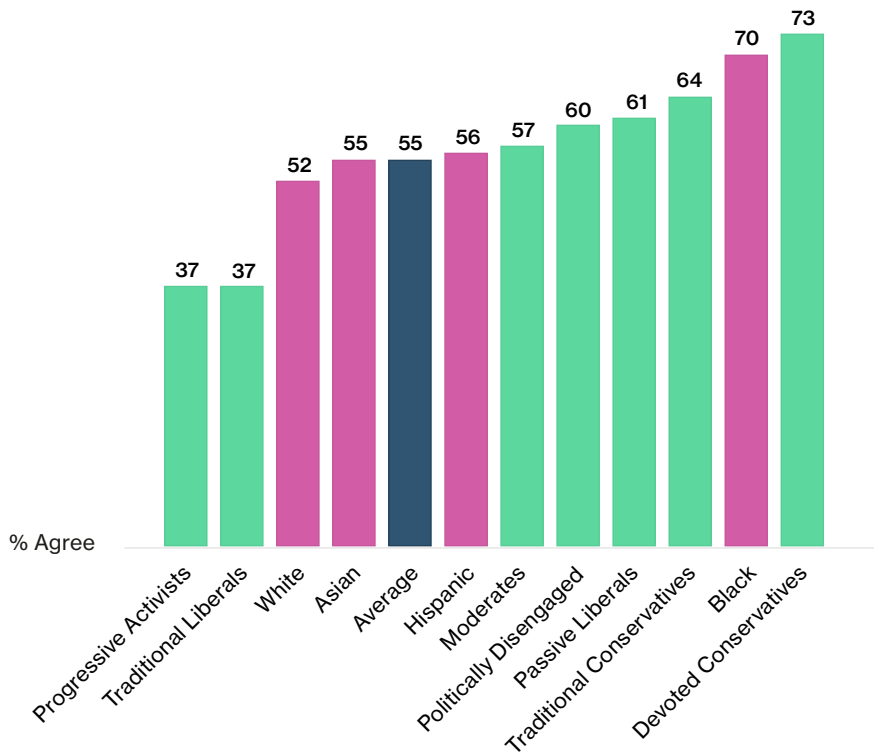
Survey Question: How much do you agree with the following statements..."  
 Source: More in Common, January 2018 and December 2020

Similarly, when we compare the extent to which Americans feel we can't count on the people around us as much as we used it, from 2018 to 2020, even though it is the Progressive Activists who show the largest decline (10 percentage points), the less-ideological Exhausted Majority segments consistently report higher levels of distrust in the reliability of other people. (See Fig. 3.7 on previous page.)

More in Common's research also found a concerning perception among most Americans (55%) that other Americans are either with them or against them. (See Fig. 3.8.) There is significant variance when looking at this in terms of both race and ideology. 70% of Black Americans agree with this sentiment, as compared to 52% of white Americans, 56% of Hispanic, and 55% of Asian Americans; and 73% of Devoted Conservatives but only 37% of Progressive Activists agree with this sentiment.

Figure 3.8

### Other Americans Are Either With Me or Against Me



Survey Question: "How much do you agree with the following statements..."  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

**OVERALL, MORE IN COMMON'S RESEARCH** over the past year shows alarming levels of distrust between Americans and most institutions and at the interpersonal level as well. Although the picture is less daunting at the local level, it remains concerning. The next section more closely examines two distinct stories of distrust evident within the data.

# Two Stories of Distrust

## CHAPTER 4

Much of today’s conversation around trust is framed as a consequence of political polarization. Disinformation and a fractured media landscape are also frequently cited—both as standalone drivers of distrust and as accelerants of polarization.

**MORE IN COMMON’S RESEARCH INDICATES** that while there are commonalities in Americans’ low trust levels in institutions, the root causes go deeper, and that in order to find solutions and rebuild trust, it is critical to understand how trust and distrust manifest across different segments of the American population.

Two distinctive “stories” of distrust are evident in the data – an ideological ‘us versus them’ distrust and a social distrust that tracks interactions and feelings of belonging, dignity, and equality. These are not fully comprehensive of the myriad drivers of distrust in America, but they capture the distinctive ways distrust relates to ideology and experience.

### Story No. 1 — Ideologically-Driven Distrust: “Us vs. Them”

*“I have no trust for our current administration and I feel it is my duty to keep an eye on where the country is headed during what I consider to be very dark times.”*

*—Margie, age 65+, white woman, Progressive Activist*

The first story of distrust, in terms of both institutions and other people, evident in the data is an “us versus them” distrust that corresponds to ideology and partisanship. This story is most characteristic of the ‘wing’ segments of the Hidden Tribes: Progressive Activists, Traditional Conservatives, and Devoted Conservatives.

**Progressive Activists (8% of Americans)** have strong ideological views, high levels of engagement with political issues, and tend to have the highest levels of education and socioeconomic status. Their own circumstances are secure, which perhaps frees them to devote more attention to larger issues of justice in society around them. They are highly sensitive to issues of fairness and equity in society, particularly with regards to race, gender and other minority group identities. Their emphasis on existing power structures leads them to be very pessimistic about fairness in America, and they are uncomfortable with nationalism and ambivalent about America's role in the world.

**Traditional Conservatives (19% of Americans)** value patriotism and what they perceive as America's Christian foundations. They feel that those foundations are under threat from a liberal political culture that emphasizes diversity and devalues America's achievements. They believe in values such as personal responsibility and self-reliance, and think that too much emphasis is given to issues of gay rights, sexual harassment and racism. They have a clear sense of identity as American, Christian and conservative, but they are not as strident in their beliefs as the Devoted Conservatives.

**Devoted Conservatives (6% of Americans)** are the counterpart to the Progressive Activists, but at the other end of the political spectrum. They are one of the highest income-earning groups, and feel happier and more secure than most other Americans. They are highly engaged in social and political issues, valuing patriotism and loyalty to the flag. They feel that traditional values are under assault and that Americans are being forced to accept liberal beliefs about issues such as immigration, racial inequality, Islam and the role of women. They believe that American values are being eroded rapidly and they see themselves as defenders of those values.

These segments include the most politically engaged Americans, people who are most active with political content on social media. These segments are ideological opposites and their patterns of trust and distrust reflect this, with institutions that earn higher trust among Progressive Activists, for example, earning higher distrust among the conservative wing segments.

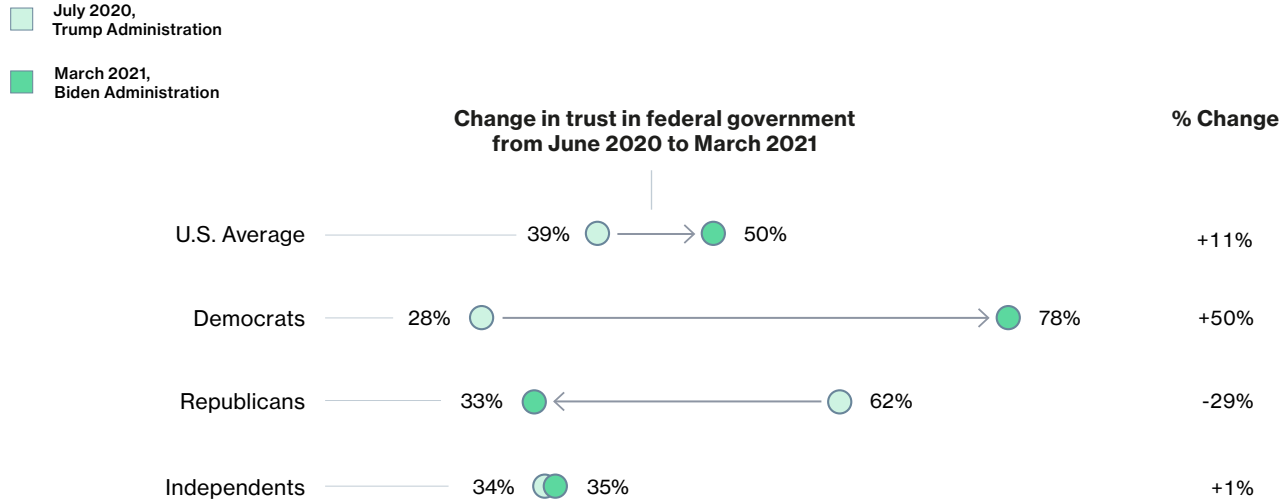
#### **IDEOLOGICALLY-DRIVEN TRUST IN GOVERNMENT**

One of the elements of the ideological story of distrust is the extent to which confidence in the federal government swings significantly based upon which party is in power. In July 2020 we found that only 28% of Democrats were confident that the federal government would do the right thing; in March 2021 that number was 78% – an increase of 50 percentage points. Over the same time period, Republicans' confidence in the federal government fell to 33% from 62%, a drop of 29 percentage points. Underscoring how this is a story of ideology, the confidence levels of Americans who identify as independent remained basically unchanged at around 35%. **(See Figure 4.1 on following page.)**

Figure 4.1

## Party Affiliation and Confidence in Federal Government

For Partisans, confidence in federal government shifts with party control. Clear partisan reversals track the change in administrations. Notably, Independents are basically unchanged.



Survey Question: "Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, some confidence, hardly any confidence, or no confidence at all in the federal government to do what is right for America?"  
 Showing: % 'great deal of confidence' and 'some confidence.'  
 Source: More in Common, July/August 2020; More in Common, March 2021.

### IDEOLOGICALLY-DRIVEN DISTRUST IN THE MEDIA

Ideology is the most salient lens to consider trust and distrust in the media. Numerous recent studies have found an intense partisan split on trust in various media sources, with liberals distrustful of conservative-leaning media and conservatives distrustful of liberal-leaning media.<sup>28</sup> In More in Common's research, this polarization is evident; however, the picture is even more stark, with the more ideological segments feeling an intense "us versus them" dynamic with media in terms of perceived bias and in terms of how media portrays people.

- **68% of Progressive Activists versus 2% of Devoted Conservatives** feel a sample of liberal-leaning media (MSNBC, CNN, and the New York Times) tell the full story.
- Conversely, **38% of Devoted Conservatives but only 12% of Progressive Activists** feel a sample of conservative-leaning media (Fox News, Wall Street Journal, and the Daily Wire) tell the full story.

<sup>28</sup> See Jurkowitz, M et al. (2020). "U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided". Pew Research Center. <https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/>; Hawkins, S et al. (2018). "Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape". More in Common. [https://hiddentribes.us/media/qfpekz4g/hidden\\_tribes\\_report.pdf](https://hiddentribes.us/media/qfpekz4g/hidden_tribes_report.pdf); Knight. (2020).

The intensity of distrust is made more evident when looking at whether people feel those media sources have a bias towards “people like me” and whether they feel these sources “portray people like me harshly”.

- **93% of Devoted Conservatives** feel the liberal-leaning sources have a bias towards them and **94%** feel people like them are portrayed harshly by these outlets.
- **71% of Progressive Activists** feel the conservative-leaning outlets have a bias towards them and **69%** feel they are portrayed harshly by these media sources.

The story is also more nuanced than a pure left-right split. Conservatives express higher levels of distrust in conservative-leaning media relative to what liberals express in liberal-leaning media.

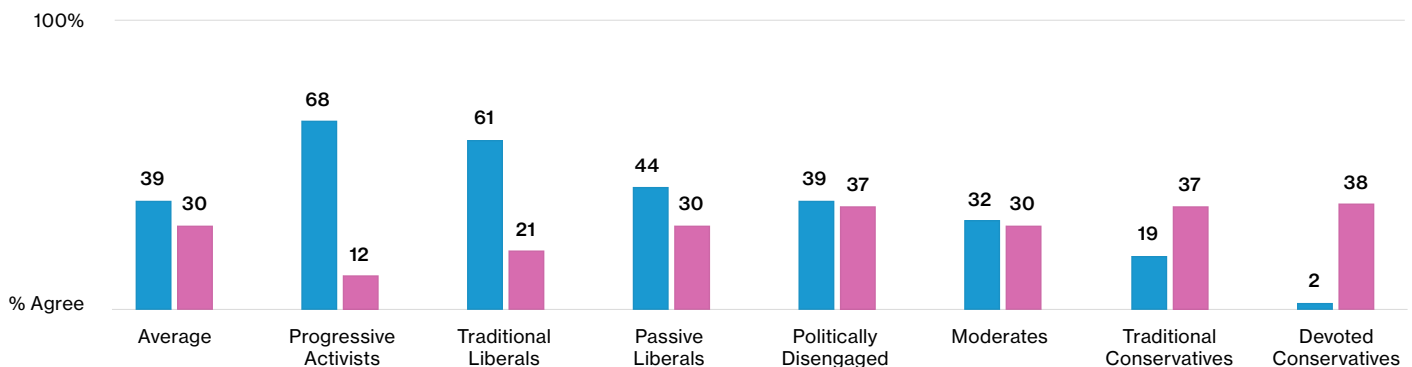
Underscoring the more complex ways ideological identities interact with media, 52% of Devoted Conservatives feel the conservative-leaning media have a bias against them and 30% feel these outlets portray people like them harshly. This is significantly higher relative to the sentiments expressed by Progressive Activists towards liberal-leaning media. (See Figure 4.2.)

## Figure 4.2 Ideological Distrust: Liberal vs. Conservative-Leaning Media

The following four graphs display the attitudes of Hidden Tribes segments towards liberal-leaning and conservative-leaning media outlets.

■ MSNBC, CNN, The New York Times      ■ Fox News, Wall Street Journal, Daily Wire

“I feel that these media sources tell the full story.”



Source: More in Common, July 2020.

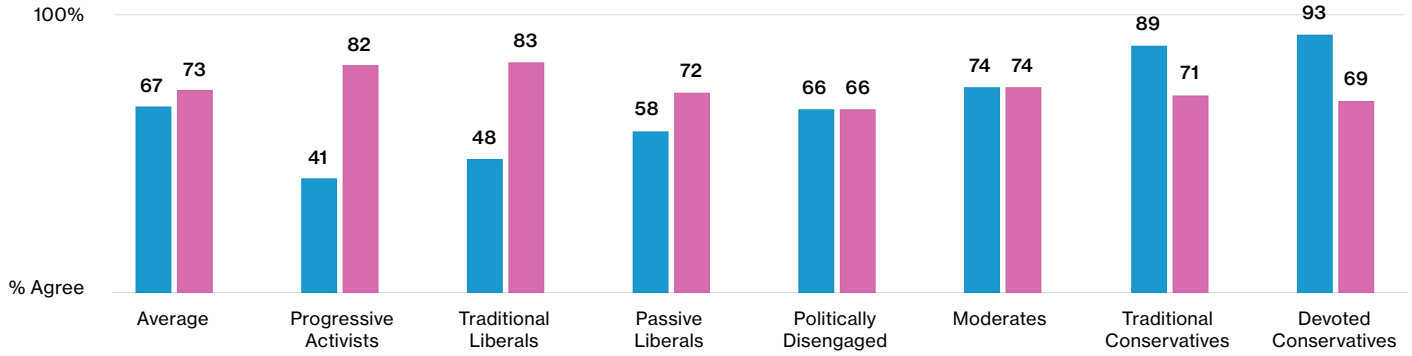


Figure 4.2

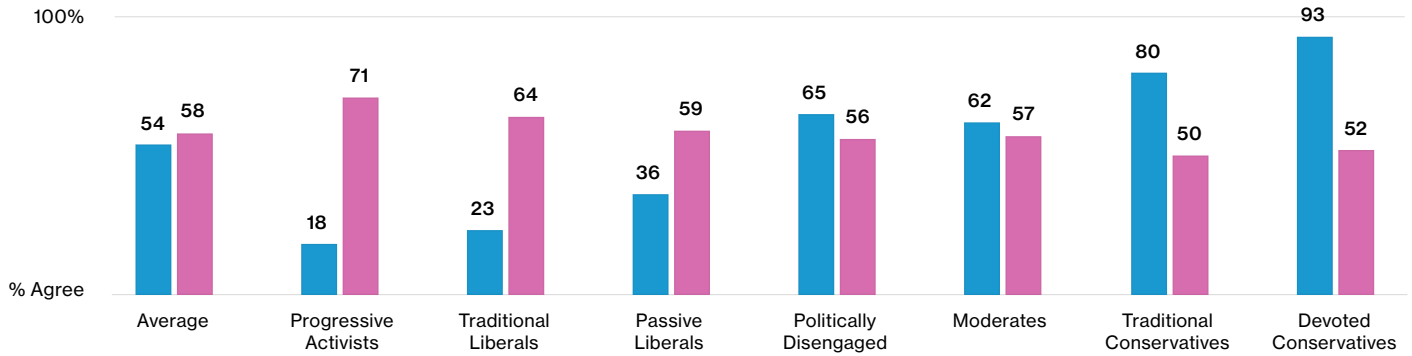
## Ideological Distrust: Liberal vs. Conservative-Leaning Media

■ MSNBC, CNN, The New York Times      ■ Fox News, Wall Street Journal, Daily Wire

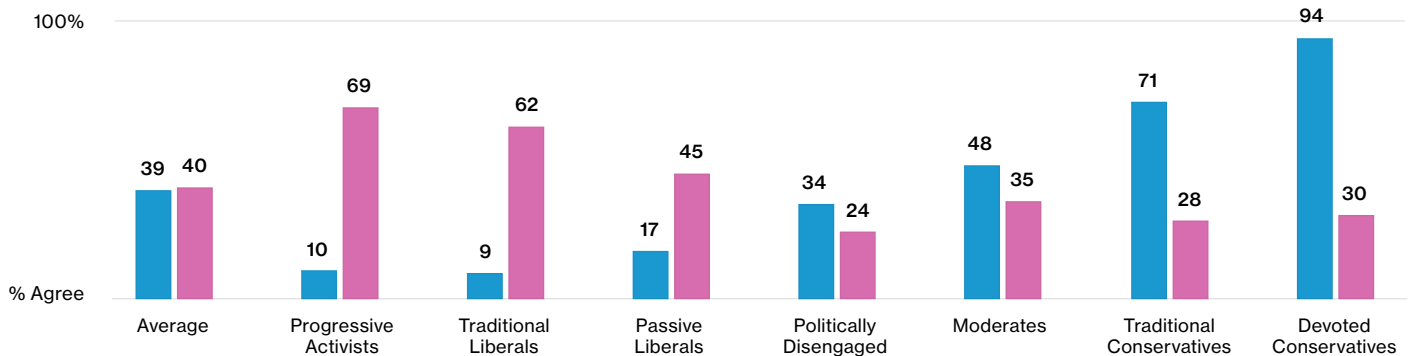
**“I feel that these media sources are trying to persuade me to think like them.”**



**“I feel that these media sources have a bias against people like me.”**



**“I feel that these media sources portray people like me harshly.”**



Source: More in Common, July 2020.

## IDEOLOGICALLY-DRIVEN DISTRUST IN OTHERS

*“I agree the democrats are playing dirty. They want to play the game but only if they can win and they can’t so they will do everything they can that is illegal to get that win.”*

*—Lucy, age 45-54, white woman, Politically Disengaged*

For the most ideological segments, there are clear ideological patterns in how warm or cold they feel towards various groups. Such ‘feelings thermometer’ scores serve as a proxy for the extent to which individuals perceive other groups as in-group or out-group. (See Figures 4.3–4.4 on following page.)

- Americans on average assign a score of 49 (on a scale of 0 to 100 with 0 being very cold and 100 being very warm) towards Democrats. Progressive Activists report a score of 75 and Devoted Conservatives a score of 12 – a gap of 63 points.
- Similarly, Americans on average assign a score of 44 towards Republicans. Progressive Activists report an 11 and Devoted Conservatives an 84 – a gap of 73 points.

The pattern extends beyond groups clearly associated with an ideology. As shown in Figure 4.3, the scores reported by the wing segments regarding journalists and religious leaders both follow the same pattern.

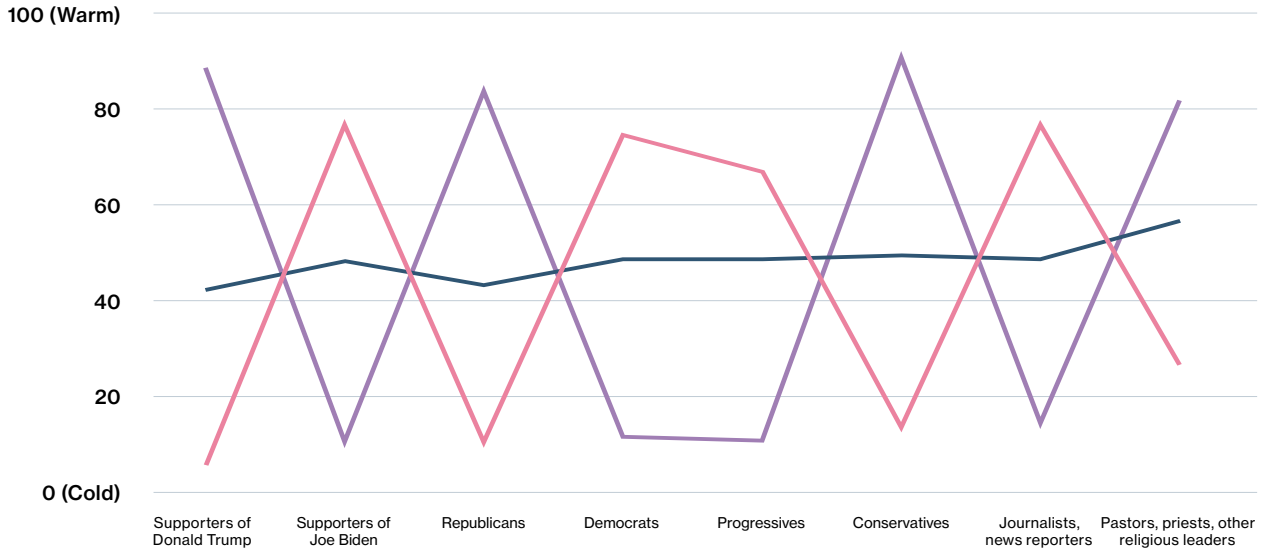
The intensity of the ideologically-associated spread is clear when contrasting Figure 4.3 with Figure 4.4, which shows Americans’ temperature scores towards the same groups, but broken out by gender and race. Although there is some variation, it is considerably less pronounced relative to that seen between Progressive Activists and Devoted Conservatives.

Figure 4.3

### Ideology and Feelings Towards Groups of Americans

Among the two most partisan segments, ideology strongly predicts views towards political groups – and even some non-political groups.

- Progressive Activists
- Devoted Conservative
- Average



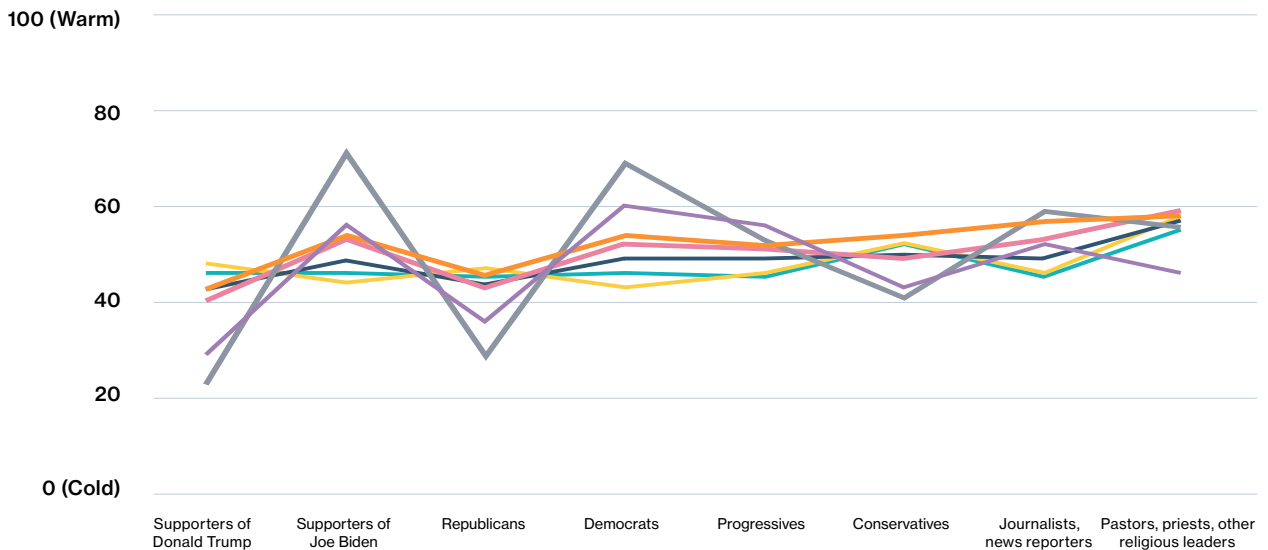
Survey Question: "For each of the following groups, indicate how cold or warm you feel towards them, where 0 means very cold and 100 means very warm."  
 Source: More in Common, July 2020.

Figure 4.4

### Feelings Towards Groups of Americans by Gender and Race

Views towards other groups show less variation when broken out by gender and race.

- Male
- Female
- White
- Black
- Hispanic
- Asian
- Average



Survey Question: "For each of the following groups, indicate how cold or warm you feel towards them, where 0 means very cold and 100 means very warm."  
 Source: More in Common, July 2020.

## IDEOLOGY AND POST-ELECTION PERCEPTION GAPS

The start of this chapter noted that the story of ideological distrust featured a strong ‘us versus them’ dynamic. This was evident in attitudes towards media as well as in the temperature scores assigned to various groups. More in Common’s research underscores that this sense of conflict is animated by strong emotional feelings that show concerning signs with respect to dehumanizing one’s political opponents. As has been noted in other research, it seems to be the case that among more ideological Americans, distrust towards their political opponents is not just due to a lack of confidence in their integrity, but a feeling that they are a threat.<sup>29</sup>

In 2019 More in Common published a report, Perception Gap: How False Impressions are Pulling Americans Apart, which showed that the most ideological Americans were more likely to significantly overestimate the degree to which their political opponents held extreme views.<sup>30</sup> In this study, More in Common also found that such Americans were more likely to assign negative character attributes to their political opponents, identifying them as “brain-washed” or “hateful.”

In 2020, immediately following election day (November 3), More in Common fielded a perception gap type of survey, asking Biden and Trump voters how they felt towards the other side, and also asking them what they thought the other side felt towards them. The results reveal a stark divide between Biden and Trump voters – both sides overestimate the degree to which the other side is angry at them, but significantly underestimate the degree to which the other side is disgusted by them. (See Figure 4.5 on following page.)

**THE EMOTION OF DISGUST IS MORE CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH ONE’S MORALITY THAN ANGER IS**, and is a worrying precursor towards dehumanization. An increasing shift from anger to disgust may signal a shift towards more support for punitive or even violent responses.<sup>31</sup> These findings underscore the intense, moral sentiments animating the ideological story of distrust.

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<sup>29</sup> Cohn, Nate, (2021). “Why Political Sectarianism Is a Growing Threat to American Democracy.” New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/us/democracy-gop-democrats-sectarianism.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Yudkin, D et al. (2019). “The Perception Gap: How False Impressions are Pulling Americans Apart.” <https://perceptiongap.us/media/zaslaroc/perception-gap-report-1-0-3.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Giner-Sorolla, R., Kupfer, T., & Sabo, J. (2018). What makes moral disgust special? An integrative functional review. *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 57, 223-289.

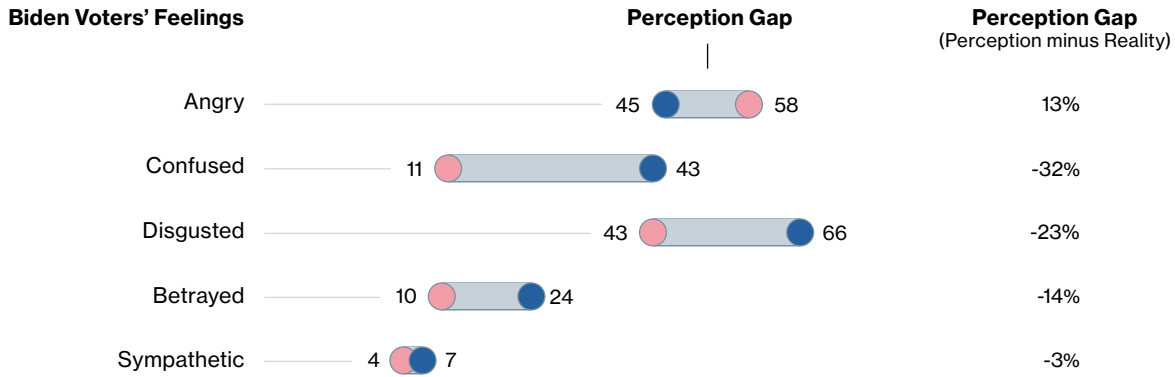
Figure 4.5

# Perception vs. Reality: Trump and Biden Voters

## Biden Voters' Feelings Towards Trump Voters

**Perception**  
How Trump Voters **THINK**  
Biden Voters feel towards them

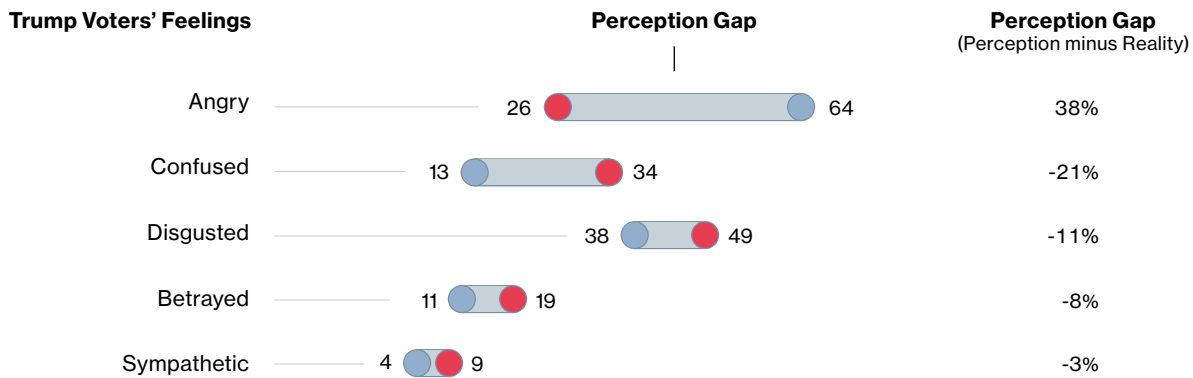
**Reality**  
How Biden Voters **REALLY**  
feel towards Trump Voters



## Trump Voters' Feelings Towards Biden Voters

**Perception**  
How Biden Voters **THINK**  
Trump Voters feel towards them

**Reality**  
How Trump Voters **REALLY**  
feel towards Biden Voters



Source: More in Common, November 2020

## Story No. 2 — Social Distrust

*“I just don’t have much trust with anyone or anything in this country.”*

*—Catherine, age 55-64, white woman, Passive Liberal*

The second story of distrust evident in the data is rooted in experiences of belonging, dignity, and equality. Understanding social distrust requires looking at interactions within neighborhoods and local communities and dynamics between people.

This story illuminates how our settings—the places, relationships, and feelings we have towards and with other people—strongly relate to the trust we place in various institutions and groups. With this story, looking at the data through race, age, gender, and education level provides a more useful lens to understand where and how social distrust manifests among Americans.

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10%

of Americans say they feel the strongest sense of belonging with their local neighborhood.

22%

of Americans say they feel the strongest sense of belonging with their faith group.

34%

of Americans say there is no community where they have a strong sense of belonging.

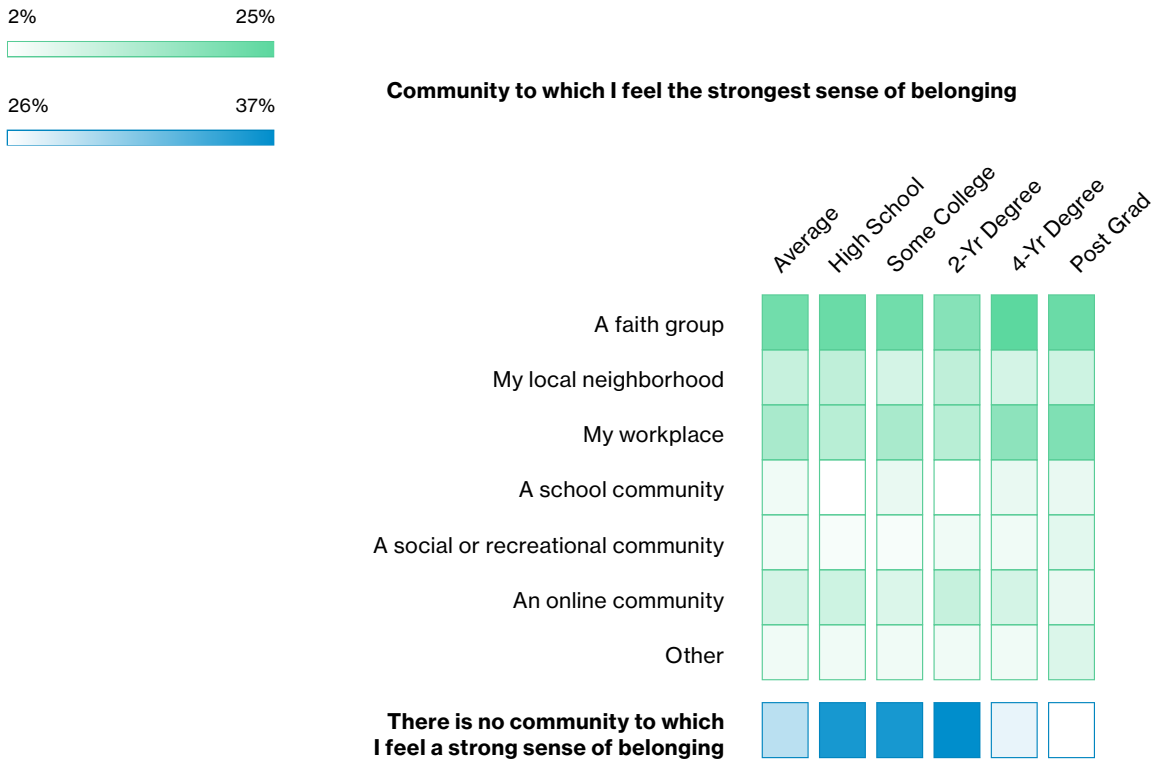
Source: More in Common (2020)

**SENSE OF BELONGING**

Humans have an innate need for belonging and when this need is not met, it has significant implications for trust. When asked about communities where they feel a sense of belonging, 36% of Americans with a high-school degree compared to 26% of those with postgraduate degrees said there is no community where they feel a strong sense of belonging. (See Figure 4.6.)

Figure 4.6

**Where Americans Find a Sense of Belonging Outside of Family and Friends**



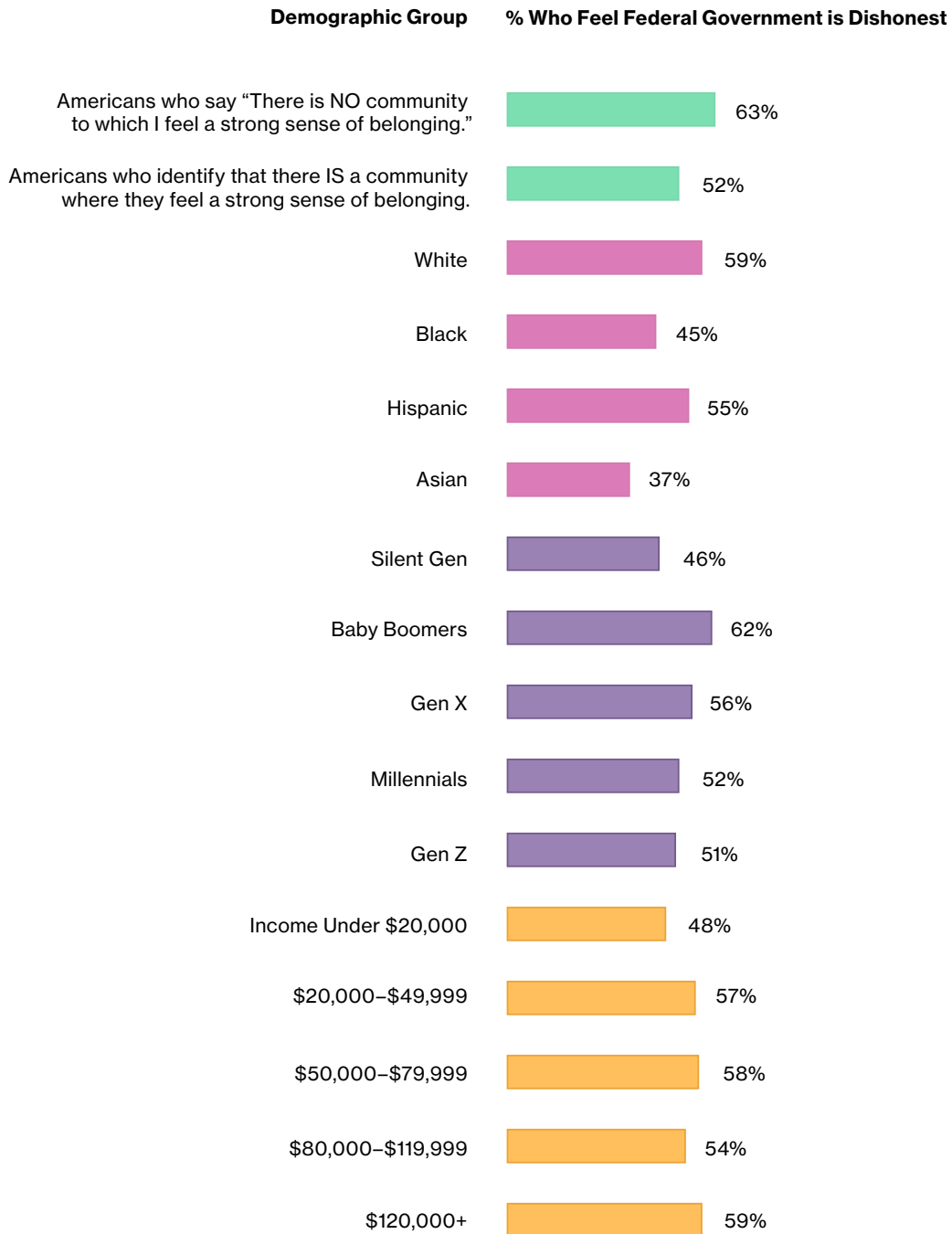
Survey Question: "Having a sense of belonging means you feel accepted and valued. Outside of your family and friends, please select the community to which you feel the strongest sense of belonging."  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

As shown in Figure 4.7 on the following page, More in Common performed a regression analysis looking at perceptions of the Federal government as honest and found that a lack of belonging was a stronger predictor than race or age. This speaks to the ways social distrust affects Americans' trust in institutions.

Figure 4.7

## Lack of Belonging and Trust in Institutions

Americans who don't feel like they belong have the highest distrust toward the federal government, higher than any demographic category.



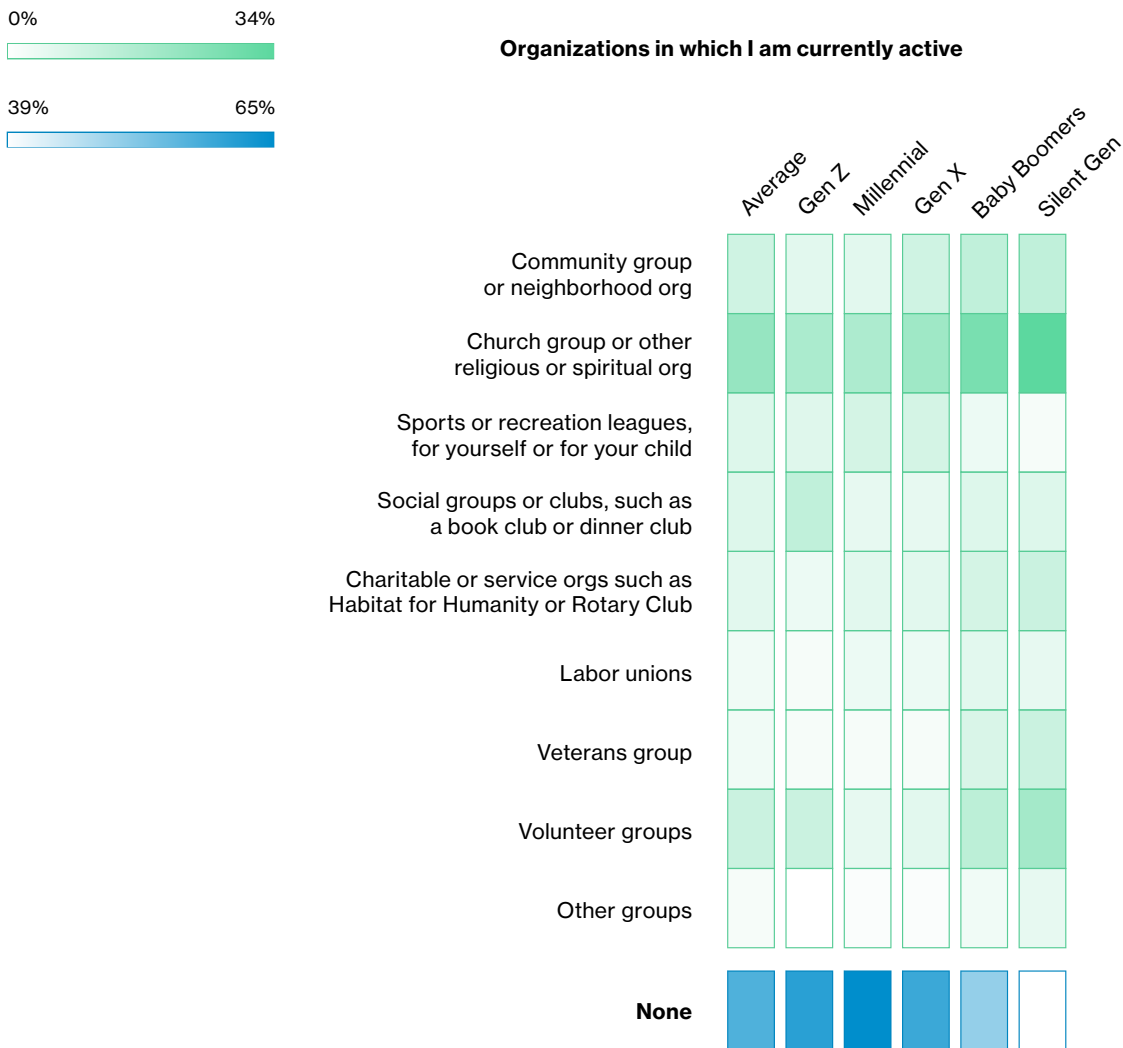
Source: More in Common, December 2020



**Figure 4.8** shows the types of organizations respondents indicated they were active in. Responses track closely with reported feelings of belonging, though variation by generation is more acute in this data. There is a significant variation by age in the extent to which individuals are active in their local communities. 62% of Generation Z but only 39% of Silent Generation respondents selected “None.” Even when considering that this data, collected in December 2020, likely reflects changed behaviors due to COVID-19, the difference in relative scores among the groups underscores the lack of community connection experienced by some Americans.

Figure 4.8

## Where Americans Are Active in Their Local Communities



Survey Question: "In which of the following types of organizations are you currently active? (Select all that apply.)"  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

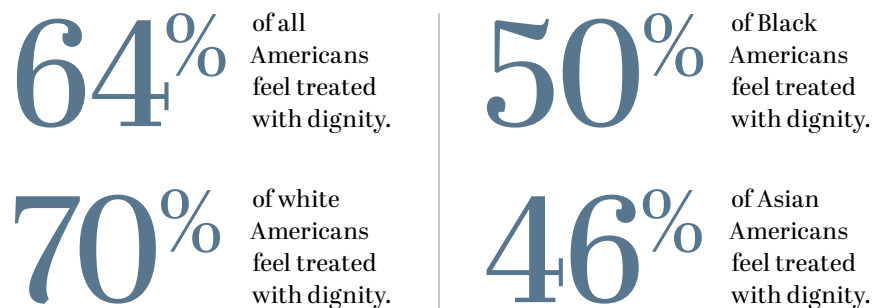
## SENSE OF DIGNITY

When looking at experiences of dignity, the overall picture shows stark contrasts across various groups of Americans. For example, much higher proportions of Black Americans reported not being treated with dignity at work, when out in their local neighborhood, and in interactions with law enforcement.<sup>32</sup> (See Figures 4.9 and 4.10 on following page.)

- While 64% of Americans overall and 70% of white Americans feel treated with dignity when they are out in their local neighborhood, only 46% of Asian Americans and 50% of Black Americans indicated they feel that way.
- When asked about experiences with dignity in interactions with law enforcement, 65% of white Americans say they feel treated with dignity, as compared to 27% of Black Americans, 40% of Hispanic Americans, and 40% of Asian Americans.

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### When out in their local neighborhood ...



Source: More in Common, December 2020.

Differences also exist by gender, education levels, and age.

- 57% of men say they are treated with dignity at work, as compared to 46% of women.
- 38% of respondents with a high school diploma say they feel treated with dignity at work, as compared to 68% of those with a 4-year degree and 61% of those with postgraduate degrees.
- Across all settings except for at work, Americans are more likely to report being treated with dignity the older they are.<sup>33</sup>

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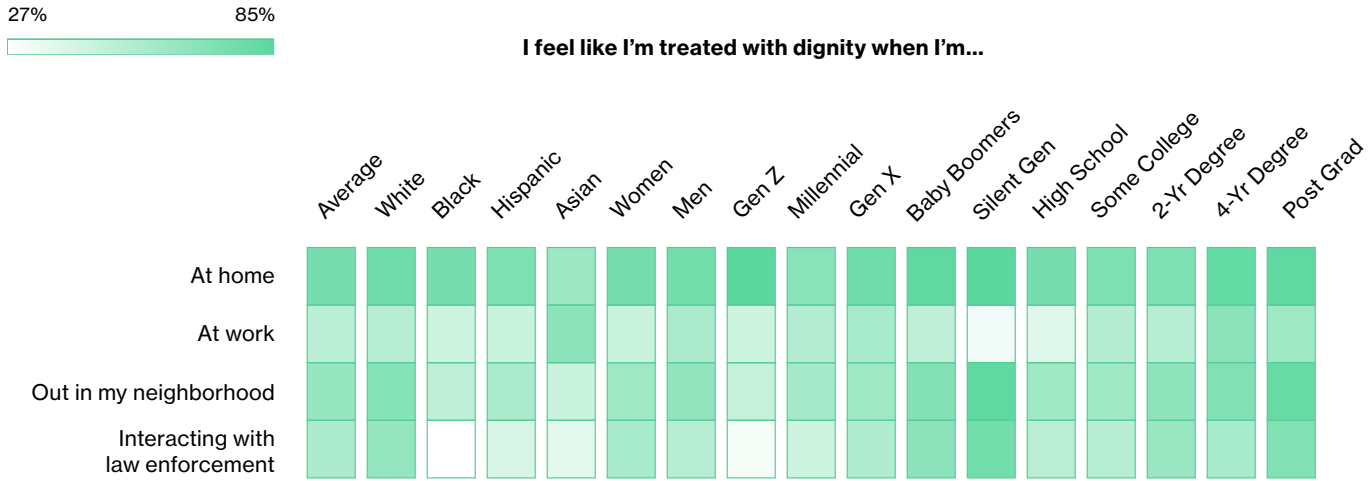
<sup>32</sup> As More in Common was finalizing this report, a jury in Minnesota returned guilty verdicts on all charges against Derek Chauvin related to the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The case underscored the extent to which levels of trust towards various institutions can intersect with how Americans feel they – and others like them – are treated differently by institutions based on their race.

<sup>33</sup> 67% of Silent Generation and 44% of Baby Boomers responded “neither agree nor disagree” with regards to experiences of dignity at work.

Figure 4.9

## Americans and a Sense of Dignity

The majority of Americans feel treated with dignity at home, work, in the neighborhood, and when interacting with law enforcement, but there is significant variation by race, gender, and age.

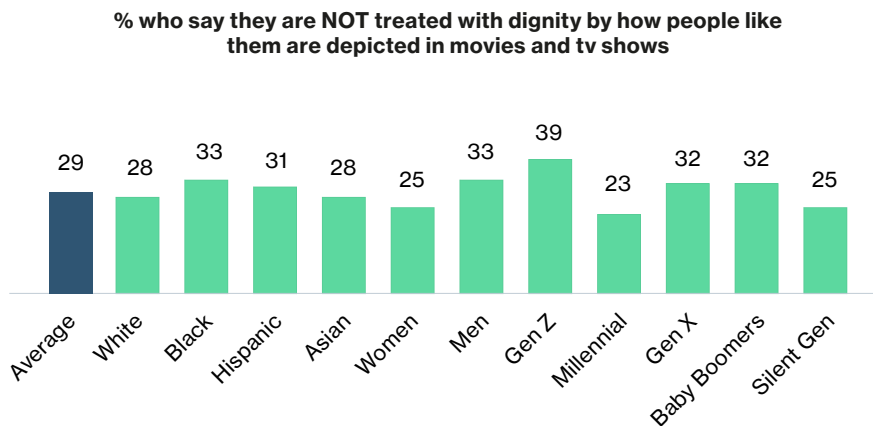


Survey Question: "Being treated with dignity means feeling that you have value and worth as a human being. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about dignity. "I feel like I'm treated with dignity when I'm..."  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020.

Figure 4.10

## Frustration With How Movies and TV Depict People Like Me

Many Americans are frustrated by how they see people like them depicted in movies and television. This cuts across race, ideology, gender, and age.



Survey Question: "Being treated with dignity means feeling that you have value and worth as a human being. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about dignity: People like me get treated with dignity in the way we are depicted in movies and tv shows."  
 Source: More in Common, December 2020

## SENSE OF EQUALITY

When we look at dynamics of equality, power, and authority we find a bright spot, with 79% of Americans saying they feel a sense of equality in most of their daily interactions. At the same time, there is notable variation by age, with 26% of Generation Z respondents, compared to 13% of Americans overall, saying that in most of their daily interactions with people the other party has the position of power or authority. (See Fig. 4.11 on following page.)

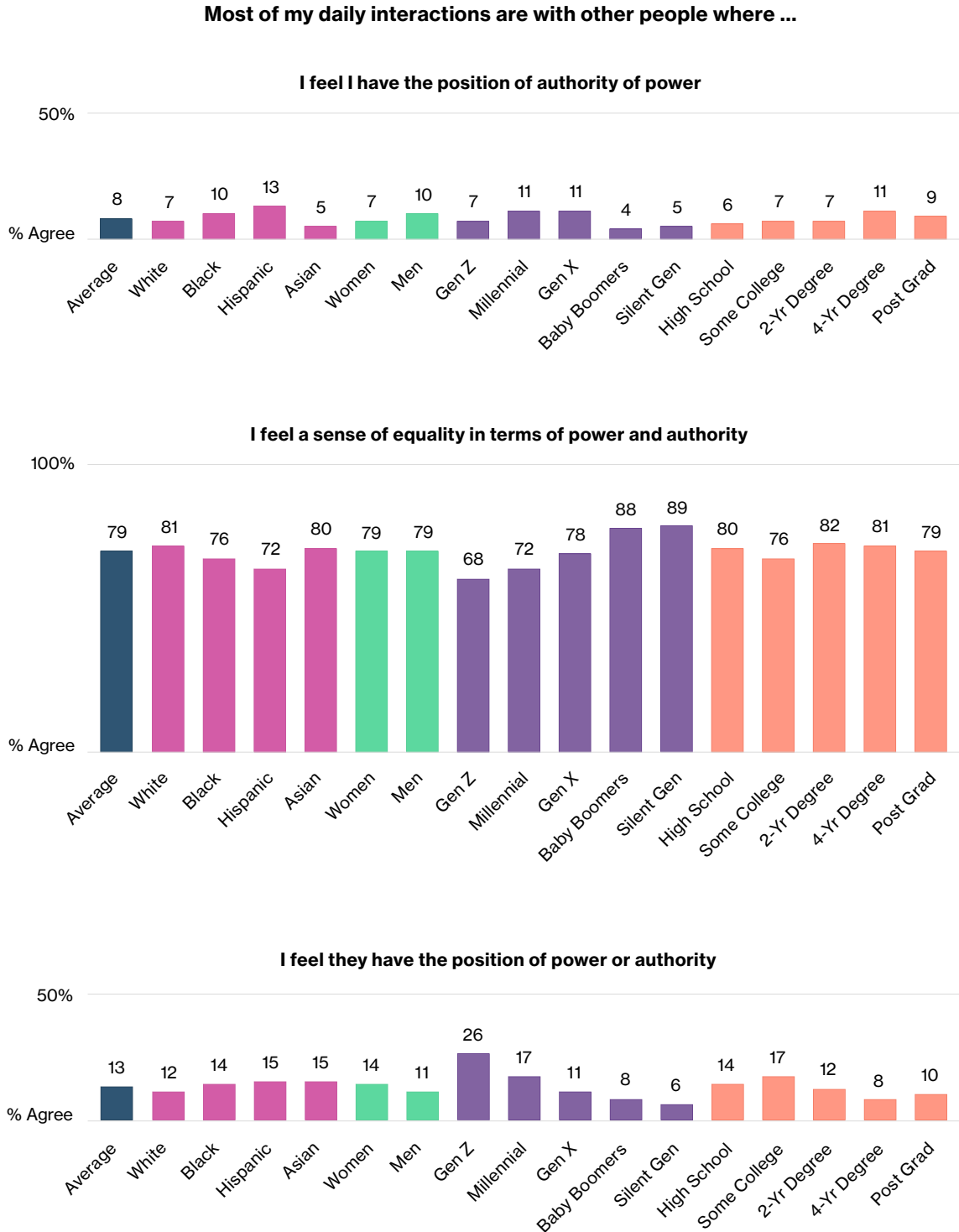
## Important Distinctions

**ALTHOUGH TRUST LEVELS MAY BE LOW IN GENERAL, THE TWO STORIES OF DISTRUST REVEAL IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS.** For the most ideological segments, trust depends on the perceived ideological orientation of institutions and people. Further, although they may have intense distrust along ideological lines, Progressive Activists and Devoted Conservatives indicate their personal settings are filled with strong feelings of interpersonal trust, community, and connection. In contrast, trust levels among less ideological Americans show much less variation along ideological lines and a much stronger connection to experiences of belonging, dignity, and equality (or lack thereof). These distinctive elements within each story may help illuminate more impactful pathways to build trust. In the next chapter we delve into research and strategies for strengthening trust at both the institutional and social level.

Figure 4.11

## Americans and a Sense of Equality

The majority of Americans say they feel a sense of equality in power with most of their daily interactions.



Survey Question: "Which of the following statements do you most agree with?  
Most of my daily interactions are with people where I feel..."  
Source: More in Common, December 2020.

# Strengthening Trust

## CHAPTER 5

This section outlines some strategies policymakers and leaders across society can use to start rebuilding trust among Americans. These recommendations are rooted in More in Common’s research findings—through polling and focus group conversations—and social science research that has helped explain how social trust can be strengthened.

### Strengthening Trust in Institutions

IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND AT THE OUTSET where trust sits in relation to other factors in the democratic process: namely, as one element in a complex and self-reinforcing causal network of psychological, historical, and structural forces, or a “system of trust.” Accordingly, it is no surprise that there is no single solution to rebuilding trust. Instead, it may be more helpful to think of solutions as possible “pressure points” in the system: areas where a given investment of energy would yield the greatest change.

#### **Belonging.**

As we have noted in this report, feelings of social trust are deeply intertwined with feelings of belonging. So a natural place to start when examining the ways of shoring up trust in a polarized climate would be to increase people’s sense of belonging in their country, community, and neighborhood. A critical insight for how to do this comes from existing research in social science. Research shows that the more people have an opportunity to actively participate in civic life, the more they are likely to trust the institutions of which they are a part.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the mere act of being involved may counterintuitively increase people’s trust in the system. Conversely, research on the effect of “social capital” on trust suggests that declining involvement and participation in civic life has led to a corresponding decline in trust in the US government over the last 40 years.<sup>35</sup> This again underscores the interconnected nature of participation, belonging, and trust, and shows how participation in civic life is both a cause and a consequence of a healthier and more trusting democracy.

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<sup>34</sup> Kwon, K. H., Shao, C., & Nah, S. (2021). Localized social media and civic life: Motivations, trust, and civic participation in local community contexts. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 18(1), 55-69.

<sup>35</sup> Keele, L. (2007). Social capital and the dynamics of trust in government. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51(2), 241-254.

**Integrity.**

A core source for increased or decreased trust are the perceived motivations that lie at the heart of a government institution. For example, people may seek to know whether a politician or administration has their best interests at heart or whether they have some ulterior motive. Accordingly, it can be beneficial for leaders to demonstrate their integrity so as to provide citizens evidence to allay their suspicions. By taking steps to build up their credibility with citizens, policymakers can earn more respect from their constituents. Research bears out these claims. For example, in a study on managers in business organizations, researchers found that the more business leaders were perceived to have integrity, the more they were afforded trust by their employees.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, another study found that perceptions of character and integrity were a critical predictor of people's trust in corporate settings.<sup>37</sup> One case study to consider on this front is the Army, which in the aftermath of Vietnam elevated integrity as a core value to be inculcated within the force and communicated to the broader American society.<sup>38</sup>

**Stakes.**

Another important ingredient in building trust is instilling in people a personal investment in community outcomes. Personal investment is reflected in the degree to which constituents care about, attend to, and feel a stake in policies. An important place that policymakers can start is ensuring their communication strategy actively conveys how their policies will directly impact people's wellbeing. In other words, a clear communication strategy about how and why policies matter is a necessary condition for creating a sense of personal investment, which in turn can increase participation, which can subsequently boost trust. Such a communications strategy would also seek to close the gap between Americans and their democratic institutions, emphasizing the extent to which everyday Americans inform, shape, and serve in government.

**Participation.**

As noted above, participation impacts trust, just as trust impacts participation. The more people have an opportunity to voice their views, participate in civic life, and feel as though their voice has been heard, the more likely they are to trust the institutions of which they are a part. Participation can take on many forms, including online participation. Researchers found that online civic engagement – methods of reaching out to people and drawing them into the political and social processes through digital means – is in turn effective at increasing citizen trust.<sup>39</sup> Community members should be educated about the policymaking process, kept informed throughout, and be given concrete ways to get involved before policy solutions are rolled out.

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<sup>36</sup> Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709-734.

<sup>37</sup> Kang, J., & Hustvedt, G. (2014). Building trust between consumers and corporations: The role of consumer perceptions of transparency and social responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 125(2), 253-265.

<sup>38</sup> United States Army Center for the Army and Professional Leadership. (2018). "A Brief History of the Army Values". Online publication. <https://caccapl.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/web/character-development-project/repository/a-brief-history-of-the-army-values.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Warren, A. M., Sulaiman, A., & Jaafar, N. I. (2014). Social media effects on fostering online civic engagement and building citizen trust and trust in institutions. *Government Information Quarterly*, 31(2), 291-301.

### **Staying Local.**

One difficulty of promoting trust in the current political climate is a distrust in the national institutions – people have less trust in the federal government, in national media and in American corporations as compared to local government, local media sources and small business. It follows then that deemphasizing the role of the federal government and instead empowering local community leaders and governances will have a positive effect on people's general trust in their representatives. By using local media as a messenger and local leaders and community members as messengers, policymakers can get more buy-in and increase the credibility of their communications. In other words, trust is increased by encouraging people to focus their activities and engagement around more local initiatives.

## **Strengthening Social Trust**

There are a wide range of structural and societal issues at play when it comes to strengthening social trust. The institutional mechanisms for building trust may take many forms: housing or education efforts, initiatives from the business community to support under-invested localities, or projects that bring neighborhoods more closely together for example. Regardless of the specific type of intervention, there are a few key concepts policymakers and other institutional actors should bear in mind when considering social trust.

### **Collective Identities.**

Interpersonal distrust stems from an uncertainty around someone's motivations and predictability. The root of this uncertainty is the perception that the other person is different and does not share opinions, worries, or goals. An effective way to address interpersonal distrust is to close this perceived difference gap. One way to do this that research has shown to be effective is by emphasizing an inclusive superordinate identity. Research in college campuses show that emphasizing a strong university identity for students was related to increased positive attitudes and likelihood of forming cross-race friendships among Black and white students.<sup>40</sup> In a similar experiment, Democrats and Republicans experienced less threat when their shared American identity was made salient. It is important to note that promoting a common identity does not entail reducing or erasing other identities, but rather shifting the focus. For instance, two people can be from different parties or religious communities, but still connect and share common goals through a shared and salient identity of being a parent.

### **Intergroup Contact.**

Rebuilding social trust starts with people getting to know those from outside their own groups. This is possible only if people encounter and interact with those whom they view as different. Indeed, there is abundant scientific evidence supporting the contact hypothesis, which simply stated, posits that

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<sup>40</sup> Riek, B. M., Mania, E. W., Gaertner, S. L., McDonald, S. A., & Lamoreaux, M. J. (2010). Does a common ingroup identity reduce intergroup threat?. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 13(4), 403-423.



increased interaction with people who we perceive as different from “us” also increases trust toward “them” and the general groups to which they belong. Research studies have shown that increased contact with people we consider as part of the outgroup, whether in casual encounters around the neighborhood, in targeted dialogues in a community organization, or in institutions such as the military or the Peace Corps, leads to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the other. This in turn begets positive attitudes and a warmer perception, a reduction in prejudiced thinking, and stronger agreement on the idea of a shared fate.<sup>41</sup> There is nuance within the research that is relevant, as not all interactions between different groups produce positive outcomes in terms of trust and connection; however, efforts to build broader social trust will need to consider how to catalyze ways for Americans to develop positive relationships with those from different backgrounds.<sup>42</sup>

### **Inequality.**

Whether perceived or real, inequality provides fertile ground for social distrust. When people feel that the gap between them and someone else is widening and unjust, they are more likely to adopt a scarcity mindset and are more likely to view others as a resource threat. For instance, in a laboratory study that involved a modified public goods game, starting the game in a state of inequality, with researchers endowing some participants with more money than others and disclosing to everyone the amount held by all participants, resulted in an experiment economy with sparser growth, lower overall cooperation, and higher distrust among players, compared to conditions that had a more equal starting field.<sup>43</sup> This result plays out in communities around the country. In states with higher inequality, residents are also less likely to participate in social groups (e.g. book clubs, service organizations). One way that inequality undermines trust is by making salient a class identity, such that class differences are essentialized and people see those from different social classes as outgroups.

**A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY TO STRENGTHEN TRUST WOULD RECOGNIZE THAT BUILDING TRUST WILL BE AMONG THE MOST IMPORTANT SOCIETAL DESIGN CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY.** America has long confronted the difficulties in building trust across diverse populations and often trust among certain groups of Americans has come at the expense of justice for others. Strategies to build trust going forward will need to address these longstanding issues as well as newer dynamics such as the reality that many of our interactions with one another are intermediated by some form of technology or media platform. Such strategies would benefit from more institutional actors – especially government – organizing resources more intentionally to build the knowledge base for how to cultivate trust in an interconnected, inclusive, and vibrant multi-ethnic democracy.

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<sup>41</sup> Al Ramiah, A., & Hewstone, M. (2013). Intergroup contact as a tool for reducing, resolving, and preventing intergroup conflict: Evidence, limitations, and potential. *American Psychologist*, 68(7), 527.

<sup>42</sup> For more information on applications or intergroup contact theory, see More in Common’s *Psychology of Authoritarian Populism*, [https://www.moreincommon.com/media/5mcjfn4t/yudkin-daniel-2018-the-psychology-of-authoritarian-populism-a-bird-s-eye-view\\_june2018.pdf](https://www.moreincommon.com/media/5mcjfn4t/yudkin-daniel-2018-the-psychology-of-authoritarian-populism-a-bird-s-eye-view_june2018.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> Nishi, A., Shirado, H., Rand, D. et al. Inequality and visibility of wealth in experimental social networks. *Nature* 526, 426–429 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature15392>.

# Conclusion

Many of the findings in this report are consistent with prior research showing weak trust levels across American society. The magnitude of distrust Americans hold towards various institutions and each other is significant and poses a serious challenge to our democracy. Without trust in each other, cooperation necessary for progress becomes impossible, and without sufficient trust in our institutions, policy change cannot be implemented in a way that benefits all sectors of our society.

Among the most notable findings in this report are the distinctions between the two stories of ideological distrust and social distrust. These findings underscore the importance of thinking about trust as a function of systems and settings that vary significantly across individuals and groups. It can be difficult to appreciate these nuances when the overall picture is so bleak, but there are significant implications for how to build trust dependent upon the underlying drivers.

These two stories also suggest caution in how we interpret public conversations about trust and distrust in America. The voices most active in social and mainstream media, especially on issues related to trust and democracy, disproportionately come from the more ideological wing segments. If America is to strengthen trust both in its democratic institutions and among its people, it will be critical to view and understand the current situation from the perspectives of those more accurately captured by the story of social distrust.

The intent with this report is to contribute to a new conversation about trust in America. As stark as the landscape of trust may be right now, there are compelling reasons to believe it can be improved in the coming months and years. There has been a stronger call for unity from national political leaders and as America more fully opens up from the COVID-19 pandemic, there may be new energy behind initiatives that foster connection, community, and celebration.

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