

June 2025

250 Years of Us

**How a Divided America
can Explore the Truth
about the Past – and
Imagine a Shared Future**



JOHNS HOPKINS
STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION
SNF AGORA INSTITUTE



ABOUT THE SNF AGORA INSTITUTE AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University is an academic and public forum dedicated to strengthening global democracy through research, teaching, and practice. Founded in 2017 with a visionary \$150 million gift from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the institute draws inspiration from the ancient Athenian agora—a space for open debate and deliberation—to bridge divides, expand civic engagement, and foster informed, inclusive, dialogue as the cornerstone of robust democracy.

SNF Agora organizes its work around three pillars:

- **Discovery:** Advancing transformative, multi-disciplinary research to address democratic decline and identify sources of resilience.
- **Design:** Collaborating with practitioners to develop usable knowledge that transforms academic insight into real-world impact.
- **Dialogue:** Creating spaces for inclusive civic discourse, public convenings, and educational programs that empower citizens to engage meaningfully in democracy.

Through its work, the SNF Agora Institute empowers citizens with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and ideas to participate meaningfully in civic life. Its scholars and practitioners collaborate to address challenges to democracy, bridge divides, and cultivate democratic resilience through research, innovative interventions, and public engagement.

For more information about the SNF Agora Institute, visit www.snfagora.jhu.edu.

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Executive Summary

In 2026, America will celebrate its 250th anniversary. Anniversaries can allow a country to reflect on its history – celebrating its achievements, honoring its sacrifices, reflecting on its mistakes – and ultimately, imagine its shared future. Yet this anniversary falls at a time when many feel the nation is deeply divided. When history has become not just a subject of intense debate- a healthy sign in a democracy- but a tool in political warfare.

This research is designed to help critical storytellers – from TV and film producers to museum curators, cultural events organizers, journalists, academics, publishers, peace-makers and online influencers- foster a discourse that unflinchingly recognizes the past, and explores what it means for the present and future. All the groups in this project work in practical ways to foster a new public sphere. [Arena at the SNF Agora Institute](#) at Johns Hopkins University explores the role of media; [More in Common](#) uses social research to find the commonalities between different groups in society; [Millions of Conversations](#) works at the level of local counties to bring people together around common values, online and offline.

In this study, we draw on a N=2,002-person nationally representative poll, a N = 300 qualitative survey panel, a values-based segmentation, and 12 in-depth interviews to explore how views on history divide and unite Americans, what influences these attitudes, and what it means for how Americans can engage with their past (full methodology section below).The in-depth interviews were led by Millions of Conversations oversight in partnership with Worthy Strategy Group, a behavioral science consulting group specializing in using insights into how people think and feel to support democratic values. The mix of qualitative and quantitative methods provides a complementarity to explore questions with both statistical precision and emotional depth. Below, we detail our findings on Americans’ state of mind – and what drives their beliefs.

1 Americans doubt that their country is on a trajectory of progress

Popular storytelling about American history has rested on a narrative of progress. From statesmen such as President Obama to history documentaries and popular movies, storytellers typically portray American history as on an upward trajectory. Yet such optimism would struggle now. In 2023, 78 percent of Americans said their children’s generation will have it worse off, compared to 42 percent holding that view in 2001.¹

Similarly, our quantitative research shows 54 percent of Americans think “life in the United States has declined” and 54 percent also think “America’s status on the world stage has declined.” Any public engagement around history has to face up to this flagging sense of confidence.

2 Americans are united in saying they yearn to overcome division

When asked about their concerns around the nation's 250th anniversary and its future in general, participants in qualitative work worried that the country was becoming too divided to function successfully. They complained about the vitriolic nature of online debates, and how the sense of community and working for the common good has decreased. This was often partnered with a sense of a loss of agency and global standing.

As a counter-weight, respondents in our qualitative survey and in-depth interviews coalesced around moments in history where Americans showed they could collaborate in order to overcome challenges and in facing adversity. Participants across the political spectrum cited the Moon Landing and D-Day as great achievements.

3 Americans widely admire mid-twentieth century social movements, but split on America's founding and recent political movements

When we asked what social movements they most admire, Americans across all generations include the Civil Rights movement and Women's rights movement in their top three. Yet generations diverge when it comes to foundational versus contemporary movements. Older generations most admire America's origins. Meanwhile, younger generations are drawn towards contemporary movements – and are more likely to say no movement represents their values.

These gaps reveal a more precise problem: Americans have agreed on the importance of intermediate historical events of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as the Women's Rights movement or Civil Rights movement. Yet the most polarizing events are those that occurred at the foundation of America or those that have recently occurred.

4 Americans have diverging attitudes towards the Constitution

Americans' commitment to the Constitution remains steadfast, yet when it comes to how the Constitution should be used, Americans' responses sharply diverged. Partisanship and ideology were main factors in this divergence.

Moreover, the group with the lowest faith in the Constitution was younger Americans, who are less sure and proud of their country's history. 51% of Gen Z respondents said the Constitution was either "unfit to govern" or that they "didn't know enough" to have an opinion.

5

Americans' polarization on history does not primarily correlate with their ideology, but from their media diets

Media consumption, rather than deeply held ideology, correlates more with the position people take on deeply politicized historical debates. We found, for example, that 46 percent of the followers of conservative commentator Dinesh D'Souza support that history is taught "in a skewed way towards minorities". However only 24 percent of people who think that being 'white', 'Christian' and supporting Confederate symbols are an important part of American identity support the idea that history is taught in "a skewed way towards minorities."

It's not just what media Americans consume that sets them apart, but how they consume it. Gen Z and Millennials both cited YouTube as their most-favored source for historical information, while only 13% of Baby Boomers say they use YouTube for learning about history.

6

Americans may agree on more than the media driven memory-wars suggest

36 percent of people surveyed say they oppose Critical Race Theory. Yet only 13 percent disagreed that "policies and laws in the past that unfairly disadvantaged some groups may continue to have their effects felt today." This includes self-declared Republicans: 49 percent say they oppose CRT, yet only 24 percent oppose the idea that groups can't be disadvantaged by the past.

Conclusions and Next Steps

As we prepare for 2026, we should pilot media and real-world projects that explore the role of:

1 Explore historical root causes, successes and failures to overcome division:

At its 250th anniversary, Americans are focused on one of the original questions that confronted its founders and has returned ever since: how can the people of such a diverse and disparate nation co-exist and collaborate?

There is much to gather from history about this aspiration. The aim should not be to merely relate comforting moments of ‘coming together’, but to reveal the whole complexity of how Americans can, and why they often can’t, work together.

This question needs to be explored at multiple levels. For example: what is the role of democratic institutions in helping Americans act together even when they do not think alike? What are the roles of government, the private sector and civil society for successful collaboration? And, on the flip side, what are the underlying prejudices and other barriers that have undermined Americans’ coming together for a greater aim?

It’s also important to look at how different generations, people with different values and from different backgrounds have functioned together in the past and what we can learn from these experiences for the future.

2 Connect historical narratives to people's distinct values in order to provide entry points to US history:

Our research shows some Americans are more drawn to values such as self-reliance and hard work, while others to authority and rules, and still others to collaboration. These values are currently exploited to exacerbate political polarization, rather than inspiring common good. We should find examples of events where different values contributed to an achievement, such as the first Moon landing and the feelings of national unity around the Super Bowl, regardless of what team one is rooting for.

Our research also shows that terms like “hard work”, “sacred” and “freedom” are important to all Americans. We need to continue to understand what stories from history go into these powerful, binding terms that make up the vocabulary of American identity.

Leverage the digital agora to connect with Americans across generations:

Different generations are getting their information about history on different platforms with different messengers, making a common conversation difficult. But technology also offers opportunities. Examples include producing captivating content that reaches different audiences, hosting communal events online through citizen assemblies/town halls or interactive news services where journalists follow up on editorial questions posed by the public.

As next steps, we propose to:

- Create a working group of film and TV producers, social media content creators, journalists, offline event organizers, speechwriters and educators to create and test short content based on our findings. Our aim is to see which content engages audiences across the political and generational spectrums, rather than what just ignites one group.
- Hold a series of online and offline gatherings to show the content we create, test the findings of this research and to develop engaging history initiatives for the general public.
- Collaborate with local media to create content based on our findings. By using technologies such as Hearken, which analyze which issues audiences most care about, we can see which agendas are most salient for people, and by analyzing which framings yield the deepest feedback. Another model is Millions of Conversations' show on News Channel 5 in Nashville, which focuses on finding solutions to concerns that impact all sides of society.

This three-pronged approach over a 6-month period will give us tested narrative and discursive strategies that can then be scaled as we approach 2026.

Background and Rationale

As America approaches the 250th anniversary of its founding in 2026, the topic of history has become a subject of fierce political warfare. In some states, certain history books are being banned in schools. Political candidates stand on platforms to “protect patriotic history” from the country’s own department of education.

In these polarized conditions, how will the country make sense of our history in light of an important anniversary? This is the question our research sets out to explore. We use a mix of surveys and focus groups in order to explore how Americans currently view their history and how one can bring diverse audiences to explore the country’s past. As we approach 2026, we aim to learn how to build a robust, nation-wide conversation about a common future. We are hardly alone: journalists, museum curators, historians, peacemakers, organizers of cultural events, speech writers and many others will need to confront how to engage the public on American history.

To give a sense of perspective on how others have approached the challenge in the past, and how much has changed, let us look back to 2010 when The History Channel released *The Story of US*. This epic documentary series covered a sweep of American history, from the Founding Fathers through to the attacks of September 11th. The series sought to bring the nation together through a common narrative of progress and a cast who were meant to represent different parts of the nation.

At the time, it was one of the most expensive and most watched American television documentary history series, featuring dramatic reenactments and CGI. A star-studded cast of showbiz celebrities, academics, and politicians weighed in on the common values reflected throughout American history. Eminent historians gave commentary next to Donald Trump and Rudy Giuliani. Republican politicians spoke next to Democrats. They all repeated how US history showed the apparently essential qualities of US character: entrepreneurship; innovation; perseverance.

The series was praised for confronting some of the darker, racist parts of American history, but its overall message reflected the rhetoric popular with then-President Obama. In this paradigm, American history was a story of progress, of hard-won but ever more expanding rights being made available to more people. *The Story of US* has since then become an educational tool; now, it’s shown in high schools throughout America. The Story of US was a difficult task when crafted, and some criticized it for sanitizing American history.

Today it would be hard for any contemporary storytellers find a cast of politicians and celebrities who are trusted by all Americans. More importantly, can and should we affirm that America remains on an arc of progress? As our research shows, 54 percent of Americans think that life in America “has declined” and 54 percent believe “America’s status on the world stage has declined.” When talking about American history today, the first thing we must engage with is this sense of disappointment.

Americans aren’t just disappointed – they are divided. Our research shows that Americans are divided on their attitudes to history by race, political ideology, social values, media consumption and, most strikingly, age. Such diversity of views can be a sign of a healthy democracy. We maintain that in many ways, it is. Yet the challenge, as we shall see, is to foster a pluralistic discussion at a time when history is being weaponized for political tactics, and where a fractured media environment is shrinking the space for a common debate.

About the Research Team

The challenge for those who mediate the public's engagement with history – whether through media, movies, town halls, debates, museums and other fora – is to motivate people to engage with historical evidence. This is where the organizations involved in this research come in: we all focus on ways to bring diverse audiences together in the public sphere. [Arena at the SNF Agora Institute](#) at Johns Hopkins University experiments with media's role and has conducted similar research projects in Europe; [More in Common](#) studies America's political landscape through segmentation based on core beliefs and social psychology; [Millions of Conversations](#) creates county-focused efforts centered around building civic infrastructure to bring people together around common values for a shared future, online and offline.

In this project, we do not look to develop falsely comforting stories about the past, nor do we aim to impose a 'shared narrative.' We want to explore how to communicate historical truths to audiences who don't necessarily want to hear them. We want to understand how to bring diverse audiences into a common exploration of the past, analyze how it informs the present, and open up a debate about how the lessons of history can inform a common future.

Methodology

Our methodology was designed to understand how peoples' background, values, politics, and media consumption contribute to how they perceive history, and to propose media strategies that can bring diverse audiences to engage with America's past. To do this, we deployed an exploratory study in two stages.

National Survey

First, we created a nationally representative, digitally administered survey. We partnered with Morning Consult to conduct online survey interviews with N = 2,005 adult US citizens from December 15-17, 2022. The data was weighted to be representative of Americans across gender, age, race, education, and region. The margin of error is +/- 2 percent at a 95 percent confidence level for the US average. Survey questions focused on five key areas, including:

- 1. Political Affiliation, Political Sentiments, and Civic Participation** - Questions focused on both self-attested politics as well as actual civic engagement. For example, we asked respondents if they voted in the last election and if they attended political activities such as protests. Information on civic engagement served to illuminate the different segments of Americans who are often the loudest voices in places like school board meetings, social media, and other collective settings.
- 2. Personal Values** - Questions related to core beliefs and underlying values, such as views on justice, freedom, equality, and ethics. As More in Common's previous work has shown, value questions can be much more predictive of worldview than mere party preferences. For example, we asked participants if the world is generally just or unjust, and the role of respect for authority.
- 3. Media Consumption** - Questions related to general media consumption and behaviors, as well as uniquely history-oriented media consumption.
- 4. Knowledge of – and Pride in – American History** - Questions about Americans' knowledge of history, and how they felt about it. Included questions asking respondents what they considered the most positive periods

in American history; which figures, movements, and achievements they most value; whether they feel pride in their history and national identity, as well as questions about nostalgia.

Large-scale Qualitative

To supplement the national survey, More in Common conducted a qualitative study with N = 300 through its “Americans in Conversation” (AIC) panel from January 25 to 29, 2025. Quotations from those activities with respondents are included in this report. Where provided, names have been changed to protect their privacy. Quote attributions include respondents’ demographics, location, political party ID, and Hidden Tribes segmentation from More in Common. Grammar and punctuation may have been lightly edited for clarity.

In-Depth Interviews

The second stage of our research consisted of 12 in-depth interviews. We applied a segmentation to our survey results that defines four social groups by the types of narratives they are drawn to, how this reflects underlying world views and the media they consume. There were four total segments (defined below), so three interviews were conducted for each segment. The purpose of the interviews was to give emotional texture and more depth to the evidence in the polling. Our questions focused on the key areas reflected in the initial survey, as well as additional inquiries into interview-selected metaphors, imagery, and motifs surrounding America, American history, and current issues.

Segmentation

The large-scale quantitative survey also contained a battery of 8 questions that served as inputs for replicating communication company Harmony Labs’ segmentation. Developed by the Narrative Observatory at Harmony Labs to support culture change work, the segmentation is inspired by Shalom Schwartz’s Theory of Basic Human Values, which looks at such qualities as ‘openness to change’, ‘self-enhancement’, ‘conservation’ and ‘self-transcendence’ to create what its creators call “basic psychological goals that inform how people engage with social issues”. The methodology involves a series of questions about such issues as work ethic and sexual morality (see full methodological description [here](#)). This segmentation defines Americans into four groups, and has been used widely by communications companies to better understand audiences’ psychology and behaviors for more effective content development and engagement strategies.

The strength of this approach is that it avoids a priori definitions around what a ‘Republican’ or ‘Democrat’ thinks, or whether the representative of an ethnicity or social class should think and act in a predefined way. As the 2024 election starkly showed, categorizing people in these rigid models can significantly misread society. What makes a Republican or Democrat can change, and each party includes very different social groups. As we outline below, these segments are all mixed race, some more than others. They also give much more psychological nuance: black men, for example, are “more likely to endorse values associated with autonomy than black women, who endorse more security and community values.”

As the segmentation has been used frequently by Harmony Labs, we have a strong understanding of what media, music and entertainment each segment consumes, which we can now partner with what our own survey tells us about their attitudes to history. This opens up the opportunity to think in more concrete ways about how to communicate on historical topics to different segments and how to unite them.

Note that the names of the segments were defined by Harmony Labs.

1 People Power

Americans in the People Power segment value compassion, fairness and equality. They believe that people coming together in a community can fix the system, and it's time for America to live up to its ideals, especially for the oppressed.

They are more likely to:

- skew under 45, be female, and have some college education.
- admire Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and George Takei
- get news from CNN, Rachel Maddow, the *New York Times*, Jimmy Fallon, TED talks and Stephen Colbert
- listen to Lil Nas X and Dua Lipa
- watch sitcoms with diverse casts like *Kim's Convenience* or soothing, communally minded shows like *Queer Eye* and *Bake Off*
- admire artists like Lin-Manuel Miranda

The "People Power" group are drawn to narratives that emphasize how people can work together for a greater good. They see the victory of the Union in the Civil War and the Women's Suffrage Movement as among the most significant moments in American history, but also put great importance on foundational moments, such as the Constitution's ratification. They see historical narratives as biased, primarily in favor of White people and men. The People Power group are highly interested in local and family history and learn about history primarily via college and higher education, as well as documentaries.

2 "If You Say So"

The "If You Say So" label needs to be understood ironically. This is an individualistic segment,

including a tendency towards contrarianism and enjoying being out of the 'mainstream'. They believe that "the system" can't be trusted, and in a corrupt world you need to look after yourself- and have fun doing it.

They are more likely to:

- skew under 45, be an ethnic minority (especially black men), and not vote
- play video games and watch gamers like CoryXKenshin
- watch Youtubers like Mr. Beast and *Rick and Morty* cartoons
- listen to Drake and Cardi B
- use social media for news, especially podcasts (The Breakfast Club with Charlamagne tha God, Joe Rogan), rather than legacy news (except for financial news)

The "If You Say So" group often finds historical information online, on YouTube and Wikipedia. Their primary interest is the history of their ethnic group, and they view the current discussion of American history as skewed towards White Americans and men. The narratives they relate to tend to see the world as a series of challenges that need to be overcome in an unfriendly landscape, where you will need innovation and tactical alliances to make it through. They are the group most likely to connect the American Dream with personal financial success.

They see progressive movements and their leaders as among America's best role models, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. However, "If You Say So" has among the least pride in American history of any segment.

3 Tough Cookies

The Tough Cookies segment value order, respect for authority, institutions and the rule of law. They strongly believe in the American Dream as defined by hard work and family values. Life may be tough and never fair, but you need to keep going.

They are more likely to:

- be over 45
- watch mainstream news from Anderson Cooper to Shawn Hannity, CBS and CNN
- listen to Rihanna and Guns N' Roses
- watch Oprah Winfrey, crime shows (*NCIS* and *Law and Order*)
- follow celebrity gossip
- use Snopes for fact checking

Tough Cookies relate to narratives that emphasize the responsibility the powerful have in protecting others, and the responsibility each has to protect each other.

Tough Cookies are interested in local and family history, and they want to learn about history primarily from family and documentary films/television. They respect the Founding Fathers and historical presidents generally – particularly Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. Overall, they hold the Founding Era to be among the most important in American history, such as the Constitutional Ratification and the victory of the Revolutionary War.

4 Don't Tread on Me

The Don't Tread on Me segment values authority, leadership and strength. They believe in traditional gender roles, self-reliance and are the most proud of American history. They believe race is not a factor in determining your future, and that with blood, sweat and tears anyone can achieve the American Dream—though the 'mainstream media' want you to believe otherwise.

They are more likely to:

- be over 65 years of age and be white (80 percent)
- follow Tucker Carlson and Benny Johnson
- rely on Breitbart, Epoch Times, Fox News, and History Channel
- listen to ACDC, Kenny Rogers
- watch NFL, Golf Channel, and Band of Brothers
- prefer action and apocalypse movies

The "Don't Tread on Me" segment supports keeping confederate monuments and admires American victories in the Revolutionary War and World War II. They are the least likely to say the civil rights movement inspires them, as well as the least likely to cite the Women's Suffrage movement as being significant to American history. Their favorite presidents are George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Ronald Reagan – all figures whom they hold to be more representative of American ideals than the likes of progressive movement leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr. The narratives they lean towards focus on the role of enemies and the need for strong leadership to defeat them.

When we look at the survey data about the four segments, we see clear similarities in their attitudes to history, the past and future of America.

The segments were united in agreeing that the American Dream means freedom, opportunity, and financial security (even as they were divided on whether it meant equality). All segments also felt that life in America had declined and that the sense of community was in retreat. People Power and Don't Tread on Me, who one might think were the most polar opposites, were the most united in feeling that America used to be a kinder place. All agreed that America's status on the world stage had gone down.

When it came to historical events, all segments came together on the importance of the constitution, WWII, victory in the Cold War, the Moon Landing and the immediate response to 9/11 at Ground Zero. In other words, moments where the country could show it can work together to overcome vast challenges. It is this vision and narratives that Americans want to see themselves through.

Part 1 Research Findings

1 Americans doubt that their country is on a trajectory of progress

The narrative of the *Story of US* was grounded in an idea that America's history is one of progress. It implied self-confidence in a society that was ever-improving. Our research, however, shows 54 percent of Americans think that America is in decline. Respondents across the political spectrum report feeling pessimistic: 53 percent of self-identified liberals believe this, as do 59 percent of conservatives (rising to 67 percent for 'very conservative' Americans). It's a feeling shared across ethnicities, too: 43 percent of African Americans think life in the United States has declined, and only 21 percent believe it has improved; 59 percent of White Americans think it has declined versus 14 percent saying it has improved.

Perhaps most critically, Americans are divided in their national pride. We asked respondents whether they agreed with the following: "When I think of American history, I feel proud to be an American." Older generations report high levels of pride – 89 percent of Silent Generation respondents and 77 percent of Baby Boomers agreed with the statement. Yet support sharply drops off within the youngest Americans: only 40 percent of Gen Z'ers agreed with the statement, far lower than any other generation.

Respondents from our qualitative sample elaborate on the sense of mixed progress:

"While its population has grown which would indicate more resources and a better quality of life, our culture, courts, and politics have spiraled completely out of control and been implemented as a means to oppress us."

Zac, 24-year-old white man, Devoted Conservative, Independent from Winston-Salem, North Carolina²

"In some aspects life improved a lot, especially when we are talking about technology and comfort of living, on the other hand I think we are more divided politically and socially [than] when we were fifty years ago."

George, 54-year-old white man, Politically Disengaged, Independent from West Caldwell, New Jersey

While Republicans in our Americans in Conversation panel tend to be more optimistic about divisions in America, respondents across party affiliations envision a divided America in 2035:

"Will we bend or will we break? I suspect that we will continue to bend, and tensions will just go greater."

Jean, 35-year-old white woman, Traditional Liberal, Democrat from Lakeland, Florida.³

² We asked respondents the following: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? *Life in America has improved over the past 50 years.* Please elaborate on your response to this question.

³ We asked respondents the following question: What do you imagine America would look like in 10 years if our divisions only get worse? Please be as specific as you can.

2

Americans widely admire mid-twentieth century social movements, but split on America’s founding and recent political movements

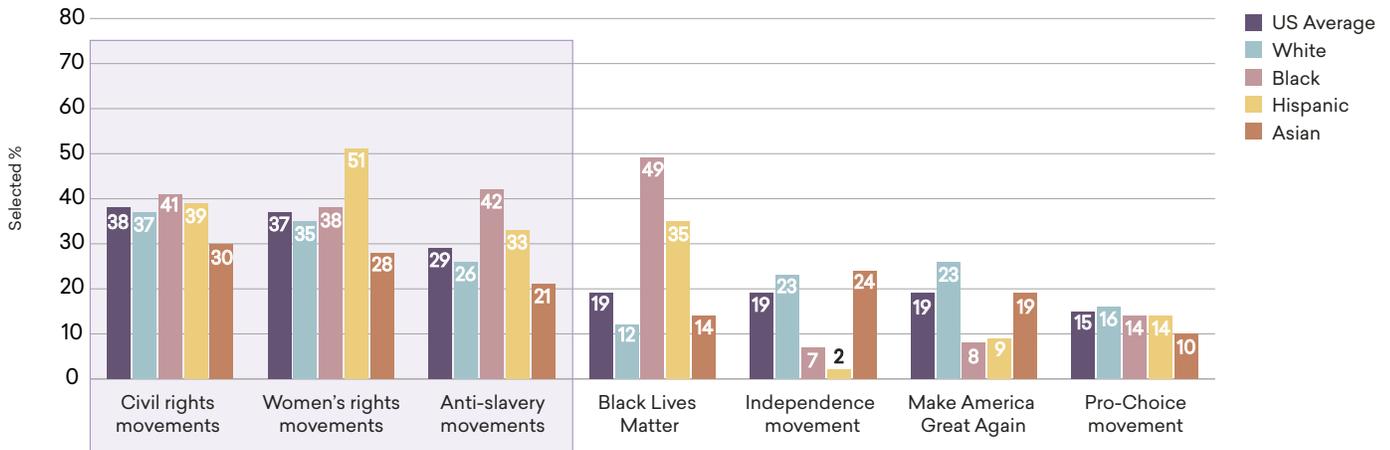
We expected to find divides about historical topics along ideological and racial lines – and unsurprisingly, found them.

For example, minority groups were more tepid in their celebration of the U.S. Constitution: 21% of African Americans, 25% of Hispanic Americans and 28% of Asian Americans called the Constitution “sacred”, as opposed to 47% of White Americans. Meanwhile, 28% of Americans who identified as liberal thought the constitution “sacred”, as opposed to 68% of conservatives.

When asked about their pride in being American, 33% of self-identified very liberal respondents agreed that they were proud, compared to 65% of those self-identifying as very conservative. Meanwhile, 43% of White Americans said they were proud of being American, compared to 23% of African Americans, 30% of Hispanic Americans and 33% of Asian Americans.

Racial divides also appear when looking at some of the most popular movements in history. African Americans (42%) and Hispanic Americans (33%) lead the support for the anti-slavery movement, while White Americans and Asian Americans are the most supportive of the Independence movement.

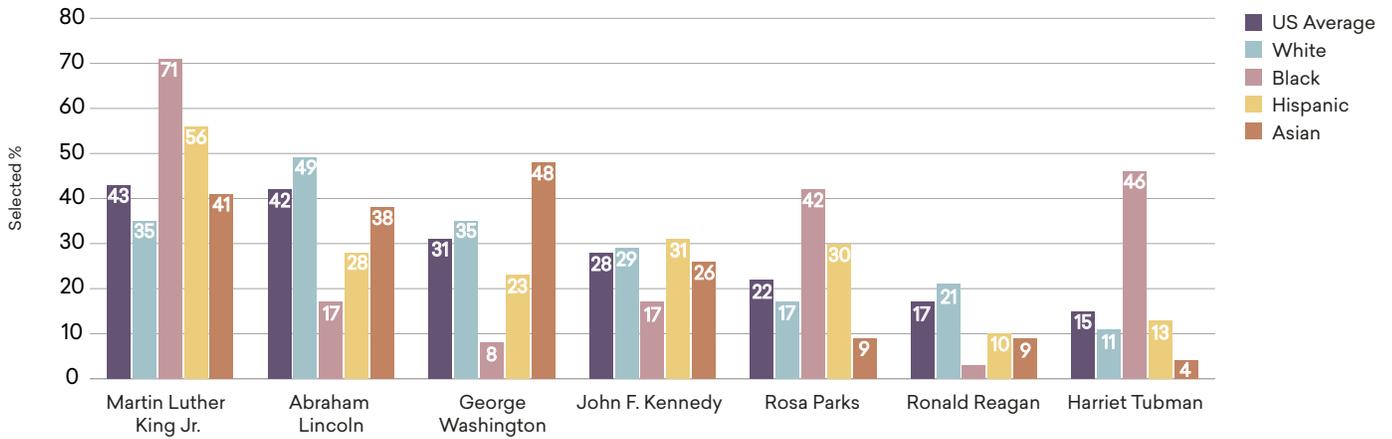
Which of the following social movements and campaigns do you think had the most positive impact on America today?



Survey question: Which of the following social movements and campaigns do you think have had the most positive impact on America today? Please select up to 3.

When it comes to the historical figures that different ethnicities think best represent the ideals of America, racial divides also exist beyond the relatively unifying figure of Martin Luther King, Jr. African Americans admire Rosa Parks and Harriet Tubman, but only 8% cite George Washington and 17% cite Abraham Lincoln as among their most revered historical figures. White Americans admire Lincoln the most (49%), while Hispanic Americans unite the divide: admiring both Lincoln and Parks. Asian Americans are Washington’s biggest supporters (48%).

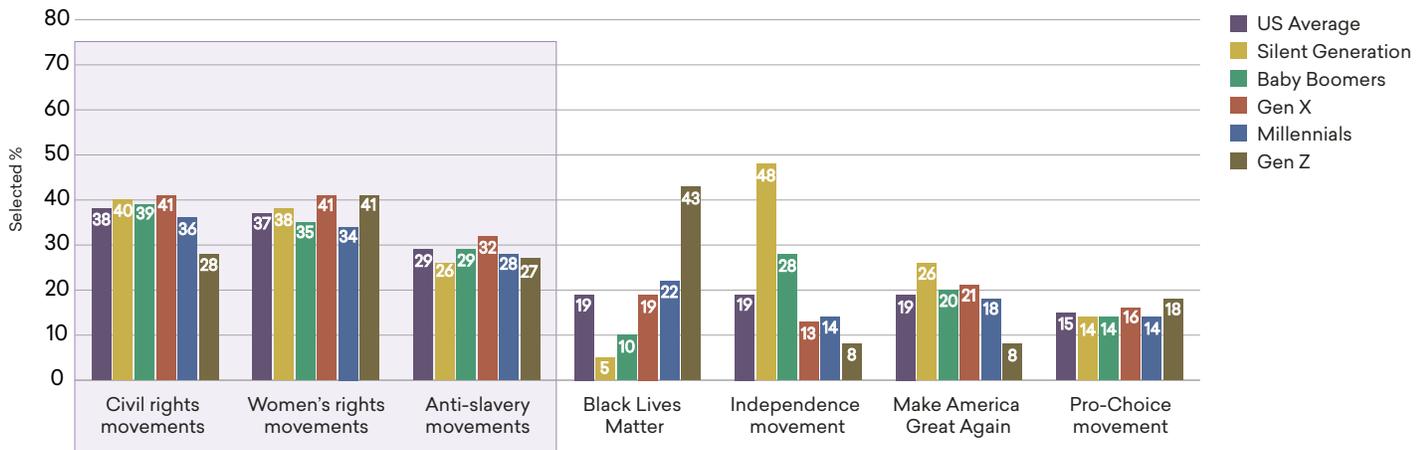
The following is a list of figures who have played an important role in America's history. Which ones do you think best represent the ideals of America? Please select up to 3.



The following scored lower than 15%: FDR, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Malcolm X, Susan B. Anthony, Christopher Columbus, Robert E. Lee, Gloria Steinem.

What surprised us, however, is the strong divides along generational lines. Younger and older Americans live in different visions of history, especially when it comes to the endpoints of American history.

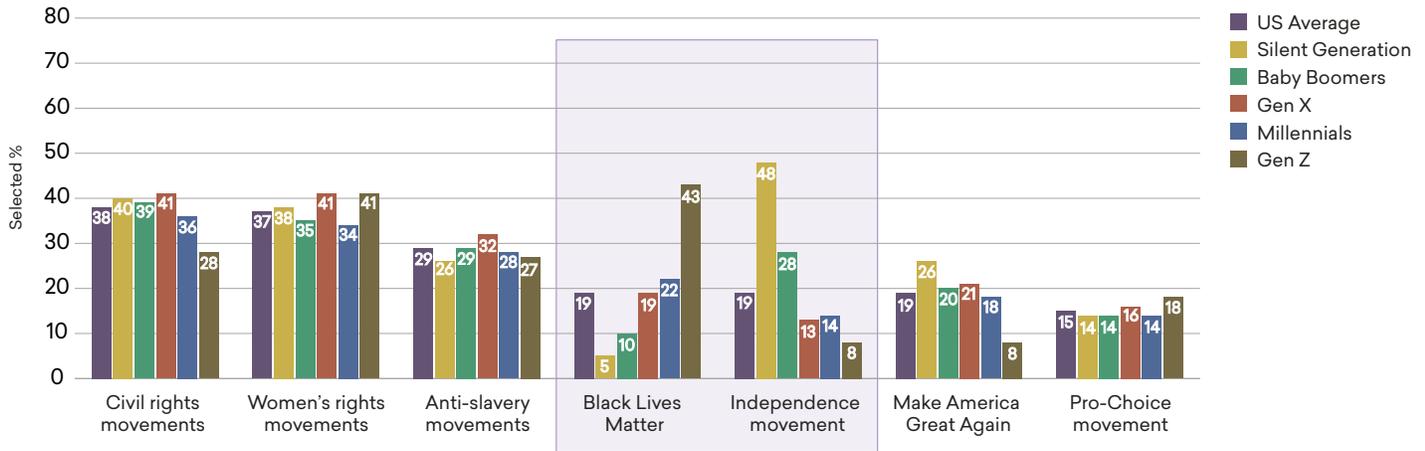
Which of the following social movements and campaigns do you think have had the most positive impact on America today?



Survey question: Which of the following social movements and campaigns do you think have had the most positive impact on America today? Please select up to 3.

We asked respondents which movements had the most positive impact on America. Across generations, Americans displayed support for civil rights movements, the women's rights movement, and anti-slavery movements. As soon as we move away from the civil rights movement and other achievements of the 19th and 20th centuries, however, things begin to get more divisive. Older and younger Americans diverged sharply in their attitudes towards the founding of America and contemporary social movements, such as the Independence movement and Black Lives Matter.

Which of the following social movements and campaigns do you think have had the most positive impact on America today?



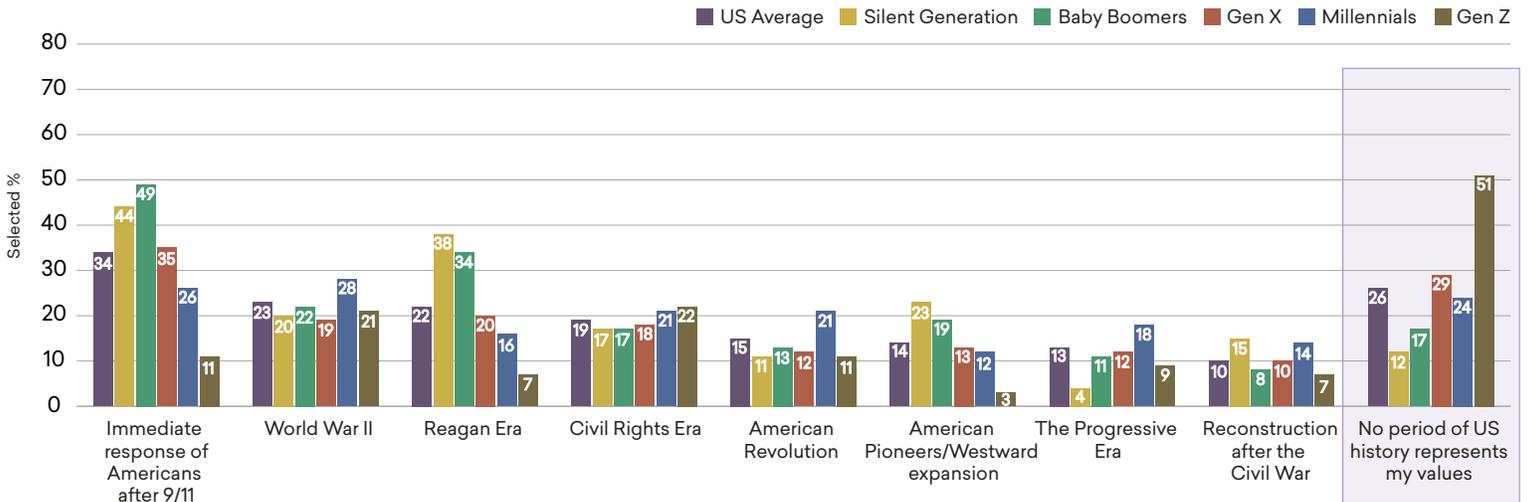
Survey question: Which of the following social movements and campaigns do you think have had the most positive impact on America today? Please select up to 3.

Older generations overwhelmingly expressed support for founding movements, such as America's independence from British rule. Within the Silent Generation and Boomers, a plurality recognize the Independence movement: 48 and 28 percent, respectively, thought the movement for American independence from British rule was an outstanding American achievement. This support sharply drops off in younger generations: only 13 percent of Gen X and 14 percent of Millennials said the same. Gen Z displayed the lowest levels of admiration, with only 8 percent recognizing the Independence movement for its positive impact.

Younger generations are drawn towards contemporary movements. For instance, Black Lives Matter was the most popular movement among Gen Z Americans: 43 percent selected Black Lives Matter as a movement that had the most positive impact on America. Additionally, 25 percent of Gen Z selected LGBT rights as a movement with the most positive impact. Millennials and Gen X were also drawn to these movements, albeit at lower rates: 22 percent and 19 percent (respectively) selected Black Lives Matter as a top three movement, and 18 percent selected LGBT rights. Yet very few members of older generations recognized the impact of these movements: only 5 percent of Silent Generation and 10 percent of Boomers thought Black Lives Matter was a top three movement. Similarly, only 3 percent of the Silent Generation and 8 percent of Baby Boomers thought LGBT rights were a top three movement. These differences are larger than any partisan gaps.

Relatedly, Gen Z Americans tend to eschew the past when envisioning America's future: 51 percent of Gen Z say no period in American history represents the values they would like to see Americans embody, the highest of any generation. Most other generations see the American reaction to September 11 as reflective of their values, though the least polarizing periods are World War II and the Civil Rights movement.

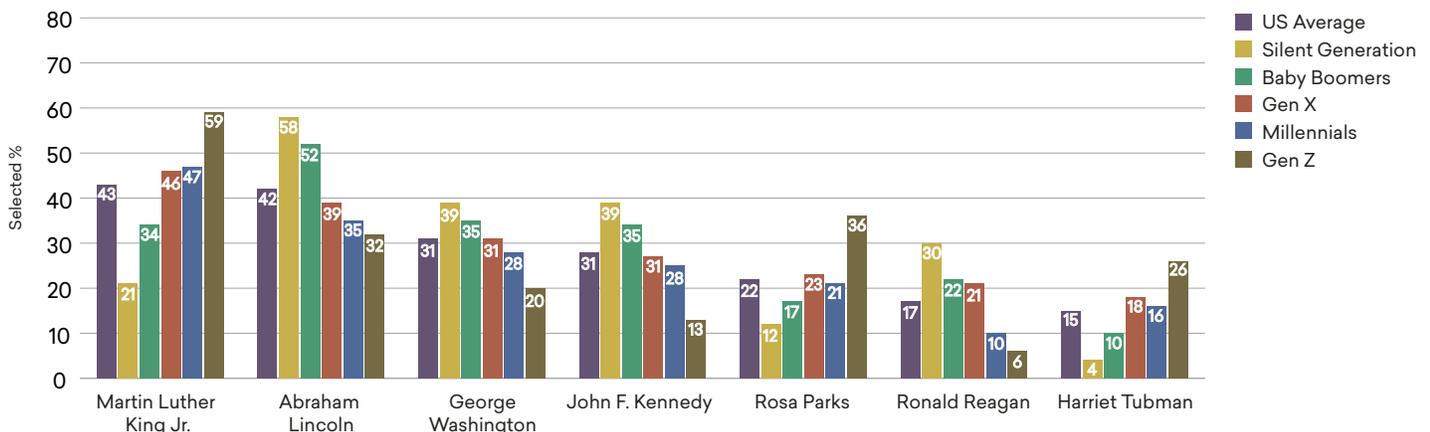
Which of the following historical periods, if any, represent the values you would like to see Americans embody today and in the future?



Survey question: Which of the following historical periods, if any, represent the values you would like to see Americans embody today and in the future? Please select all that apply.

Generational schisms on respect towards America's founding and its contemporary movements persist when it comes to which individuals various Americans admire. Following institutionalist tendencies, older generations tend to support Presidents: for example, 35 percent of Baby Boomers and 39 percent of Silent Gen Americans listed Washington as one such figure. Younger Americans are moving away from admiring historical heads of state, drawn instead towards admiring activists and thought leaders. For example, 59 percent of Gen Z respondents listed Martin Luther King, Jr as one ideal figure, compared to 21 percent of Silent Generation respondents. Younger generations support the leaders of progressive social movements – 18 percent of both Gen Z and Millennials listed Malcolm X, as compared 3 percent of Silent Generation and 2 percent of Baby Boomer respondents. Overall, the popularity of Lincoln, Washington, Kennedy, and Reagan decrease with each generation, while Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Harriet Tubman increase.

Which figures best represent ideals of America?



The following scored lower than 15%: FDR, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Malcolm X, Susan B. Anthony, Christopher Columbus, Robert E. Lee, Gloria Steinem.

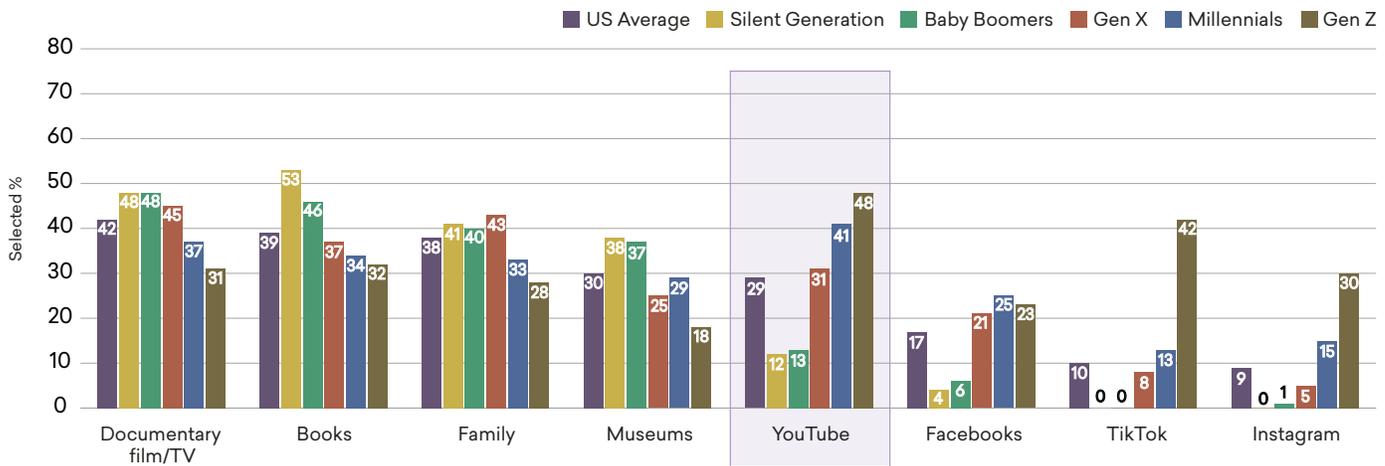
There is, of course, nothing unusual or ‘wrong’ with a new generation seeing history in a new way. The challenge will be to find ways for different generations to talk to one another. If television once claimed to provide a common ‘fireplace’ around which generations could gather in a common conversation about our history, then what we have now are scattered campfires over a darkening media battlefield. The old media model is [not worth idealizing](#), as it suppressed and ignored multiple points of view. A return to this is both undesirable and impossible. But the new landscape throws up new challenges as well, and is rife for exploitation.

Americans’ toxic polarization does not primarily come from their ideology, but from their media diets

The deeper we went into our data, the more we found the importance of media in informing peoples’ views on history and shaping our collective memory.

We found stark generational divides in media consumption, primarily along lines of legacy versus social media. Younger Americans are far more likely to consume news about government and politics from social media: 43 percent of Gen Z and 30 percent of Millennials, respectively, report doing so. Gen Z and Millennials both cite YouTube as their most-favored source for historical information, with Gen Z ranking TikTok as their second-choice. For younger generations, books only slightly beat Instagram (32 percent vs 30 percent, respectively) as a source of history.

From which of the following sources do you learn about history, if any? Select all that apply.



Survey question: From which of the following sources do you learn about history, if any? Select all that apply.

As for older Americans, 2 percent of the Silent Generation and 7 percent of Baby Boomers report using social media to learn about politics. Only 13 percent of Baby Boomers say they use YouTube for learning about history, and 0 percent say the same of TikTok. Instead, Baby Boomers typically consume historical information from books (46 percent) and family (40 percent). This media consumption gap may be a product of skepticism in legacy media outlets. Gen Z are also most likely to say that no news personalities understand the views of people like them. More than a third (36 percent) of Gen Z say they feel unrepresented, compared to 28 percent of the Silent Generation and 30 percent of Baby Boomers.

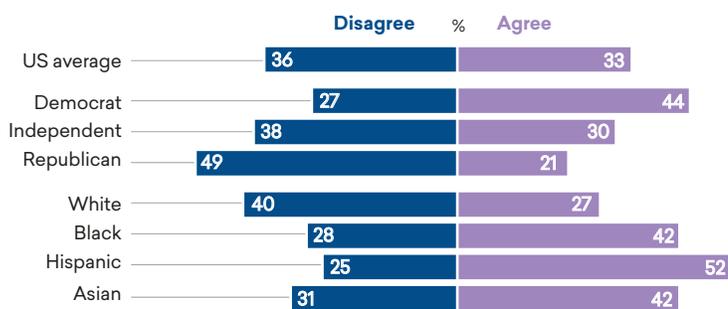
Beyond generational gaps, we explored additional explanatory factors for frustration towards a critical teaching of US history. We examined both racial resentment and conservative media consumption and found that the latter has the higher correlation with peoples' views on the teaching of history. For example, we asked participants whether history is being taught in a manner "skewed towards minority groups." On average, 20 percent of Americans agreed with this statement.

To see whether ideology correlated with support for this statement, we approximated racial attitudes through proxy variables. One proxy was people's positive views of Confederate symbols. One in four (24 percent) Americans who support Confederate symbols believe that the way history is told today is "skewed towards minority groups" – just 4 percent above the national average. Another proxy was participants' views on whether being White, speaking English and being Christian is an important part of American identity, given that this idea is the basis of contemporary Christian Nationalism. We found 24 percent of these clearly ideologically driven individuals think that US history is taught in a skewed way, and 30 percent say it is balanced. These numbers do not diverge significantly from national averages.

Yet when we examined media consumption, we found sharp upticks in support. Americans who watch high-profile, self-described conservative media personalities are far more likely to think that history is taught in a skewed way towards minorities: 46 percent of the followers of Dinesh D'Souza support this statement, as well as 41 percent of respondents who watch or listen to Charlie Kirk, and 36 percent of Tucker Carlson viewers. There appears to be an important distinction between the media-driven controversies around historical topics, and the substance of what people believe when they can perceive historical issues free of hyper-partisan echo chambers.

Another salient example is Americans' attitudes towards critical race theory (CRT). More than a third (36 percent) of people surveyed say they oppose CRT. Yet when we tested its underlying premise, only 13 percent disagreed that "policies and laws in the past that unfairly disadvantaged some groups may continue to have their effects felt today." This includes self-declared Republicans: 49 percent say they oppose CRT, yet only 24 percent oppose the idea that groups can't be disadvantaged by the past. It's the term that people appear to be put off by, rather than the underlying ideas.

Some Americans use the following concepts to describe features or aspects of American society. Do you agree or disagree with each of the following concepts? [Critical Race Theory]



Survey question: Do you agree or disagree with [Critical Race Theory]? Response: Agree (33%), Disagree (36%), Not familiar (31%)

Policies and laws in the past that unfairly disadvantaged some groups may continue to have their effects felt today



Survey question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? Response: Agree (59%), Disagree (13%), Not familiar (28%)

Beneath the heat of partisan media driven culture war discourse, Americans may be more open to an evidence-driven engagement with the past. So how might a different media strategy offer a counterbalance?

Americans have divergent attitudes towards the Constitution

The bedrock of our nation – and as a result, any story about our nation – is the Constitution. Americans’ commitment to the Constitution remains steadfast: only a fraction (9 percent) see the Constitution as a “flawed document that should have little relevance to our lives today.” Yet when it comes to how the Constitution should be used in contemporary society, Americans’ responses sharply diverged.

We asked respondents what they thought about the Constitution, with four options:

- a sacred document which we should seek to protect and uphold;
- an excellent document with some imperfections that need to be addressed;
- a flawed document which should have little control over American lives today;
- I don’t know enough about the Constitution to say.

Partisanship and ideology was a main factor in differing opinions. In our large-scale survey, 65 percent of Republicans described the Constitution as “sacred,” yet only 28 percent of Democrats and 36 percent of Independents said the same. Meanwhile, a plurality of Democrats and Independents described the Constitution as “an excellent document with some imperfections,” at 45 and 39 percent, respectively. This gap is also linked to ideology: 28 percent of self-described ‘very liberal’ respondents describe the Constitution as “sacred”, while 68 percent of ‘very conservative Americans’ describe it that way.

The group with the lowest faith in the Constitution? Younger Americans. We found that nearly a quarter of Gen Z respondents (22 percent) described the constitution as a “flawed document which should have little control.” Millennials were less skeptical than Gen Z’ers, with 14 percent similarly describing the constitution as deserving “little control.” Both groups remain far more doubtful than older generations – only 1 percent of Silent Generation respondents and 3 percent of Baby Boomers described the Constitution so negatively. Concerningly, another quarter of Gen Z respondents (26 percent) reported that they “didn’t know enough about the US constitution to say.” Roughly half of Gen Z Americans therefore either view the constitution as a document unfit to govern, or don’t know quite enough about it to form an opinion.

Of course, it is important to note that the plurality of young Americans describe the Constitution as “an excellent document with some imperfections”, with 32 percent of Gen Z’ers and 42 percent of Millennials agreeing. Yet these numbers are strikingly low, especially compared to the 53 percent of Baby Boomers and 64 Silent Generation who agreed as such. Overall, younger Americans are also less proud, and less sure of their knowledge of American history, in stark contrast to older Americans, who are prouder and overall more confident in their knowledge of history.

Americans are united in overcoming division

We do find that certain American achievements largely unite people. As mentioned earlier, the civil rights movement was cited nearly equivalently across generations as among the most positive periods in American history. This was complemented by nationwide support for pivotal figures from the era, such as Martin Luther King Jr. The same is true of the Women's Rights Movement, a period which nearly ties with the Civil Rights Movement as among the most popular periods in American history.

Moreover, Americans coalesce around moments where they came together to achieve success against harsh odds, such as World War II (66 percent of Americans rating it as 'significant' or greater), the Cold War (64 percent) and the Moon Landing (62 percent) – each of which a majority of Americans call a “significant achievement” in our country's history.

“I feel like if we could get that civil solidarity, we could get that goal, it would help us... We would have to grow up. I don't want it to have to be another catastrophic event like 9/11, [but] honestly something like that.... that's the only thing that I could think of that would make everybody put down their weapons and be like, Hey, I don't need to fight her right now. I need her on my side so that we can fight whatever is happening... If we all could all come together, we would be more united.”

Jessica, People Power

People felt that when Americans come together – whether in times of adversity or even success – they can remake history:

“... We are the first one who conquered the moon... That's the pride, that's the point of the pride for every person in the country... We explore the ways we improve the technology so we can go beyond our own earth and go in space and explore more things.”

Mohammad, Tough Cookie

“The first thing I thought about ironically was September 12th, 2001. And I hate that because it's obviously connected with such [a] tragedy. That being said, I feel like it brought us together. Everybody was throwing their flags out in front of their house. We were all about unity.”

Rachel, People Power

Critically, Americans are also united in their unhappiness over the nation's division. In January 2025, More in Common [found](#) that the most common word Americans use to describe the country is “divided,” yet when asked what they wanted for America's future, participants overwhelmingly responded “united.” Critically, Americans underestimate *each other's* commitment to unity – Republicans and Democrats alike assume that the other party has differing priorities.

These same trends were evident in our in-depth interviews. Participants complained about the vitriolic nature of online debates, and how the sense of community and working for the common good has decreased. This was often

partnered with a sense of a loss of agency and global standing. All interviewees say the country used to be more united and that people used to be more focused on family and community. In interviews, we heard how people in different segments repeated similar laments:

“A lot of what we're seeing on social media are these emotionally driven conversations, these outbursts rather than controlled dialogues... [It] creates a bigger divide within us Americans.”

Ryan, People Power

“Our country is not cohesive now and... it's more splintered, fractured... Everyone is involved. From the politicians to the people themselves, companies... When I was a kid and growing up and as a young adult, we weren't nearly as splintered.”

Carlton, If You Say So

Participants expressed a sense that people are no longer interested in the “common good”, and often referenced how powerful forces limit their opportunities. This especially seems to sting for segments who believe in self-reliance:

“It always seems like there's deals made behind closed doors that don't reflect what we want - it's really not in the hands of the normal American. It's kind of in the hands of politicians what happens a lot.”

Marc, Don't Tread On Me

“They're standing in food lines. That's what it means to be an American today. The lower class and middle class are struggling and nothing's changing for us... We just want it fixed.”

Mary, Tough Cookies

“It's the politicians that are causing the strife, that are causing the disharmony, the disunity and the fighting... What will eventually happen is that as a nation, we lose our power.”

Rachel, People Power

Many make the connection between the loss of community and opportunity at home with the loss of standing abroad:

“Even though we're the United States of America, we're not number one and we should be. So we're not proud of that. Could you imagine being... in Finland hearing the news about the argument of our government going on, the election? This is embarrassing. We are shameful.”

Mary, Tough Cookies

“All of the unrest and fighting and absolute chaos is embarrassing because other countries can see that. It's like seeing mom and dad fighting. It doesn't make us look like we're strong or united. It makes us look weak.”

Jessica, People Power

Part 2 How to Approach Engaging Americans With History in the run up to the 250th Anniversary

A Focus on Historical Examples of Successful and Failed Collaboration

It is likely no longer possible, let alone accurate, to promote a version of linear history with a clear 'arc'. There might be many reasons for this. Our research, and those of many others, suggests that many Americans don't feel that life is getting better. We cannot ignore people's sense of disappointment and loss of a sense of purpose and global standing. But there may be other reasons too. The coherence of single, linear narratives may belong to an older, less fractured media age, when the 'one-to-many' media model made it easier to tell one story to the whole nation. Whatever the reasons, the narrative model exemplified by the History Channel's epic series 'The Story of US' would likely not be credible.

However our research clearly shows that Americans are united by their sense that the nation is disunited, and by their desire to find historical examples of successful collaboration. In a sense it's not a new question, it goes back to the essential American challenge of bringing so many confessions and communities into a greater whole. It's an archetypal American question, and the 250th anniversary presents an opportunity to investigate it.

Currently, people across the political spectrum and in different segments gravitate towards well-known events such as the Moon Landing or the nation's reaction to September 11th. Many more stories and examples are needed, both from the national level of American history as well as the local, in order to provide positive and negative models from the past. Engaging in this manner can help stimulate a discussion about how Americans can imagine a common future together.

The aim should not be to tell stories that create comforting moments of 'coming together', but to reveal the whole complexity of successful and failed collaboration. We need to explore when 'polarization' is a positive part of a generative process of disagreement, tension, persuasion, democracy and evolution –and where it simply contributes to societal breakdown. At a time of decreasing trust in government, we need to explore the role of America's democratic institutions to create "out of many, one." What has been the historic role of civic groups, churches, educational institutions? What is the role of media, entertainment and the arts? How have the private sector and the state worked together for greater goals, as with the development of the internet.

We need to examine the different social dynamics involved in achieving change. Our research shows that younger generations are more likely to be drawn to 20th century movements as their most admirable moments in history, while older generations are more attracted to great statesmen like Lincoln or Washington. Could younger generations be engaged with 18th and 19th century histories by focusing on movements that impelled great social change in those periods?

And for all the differences between Americans' values, our research also shows that there are common ideals that are important to all: a respect for hard work; a belief in the sacred, and a reverence for our freedom are repeated by all groups. We need to understand what stories and histories go into these powerful, binding terms that make up the vocabulary of American identity. What, for example, do Americans consider as "sacred" - especially in a time where so many taboos in political communication have been broken? What has made "hard work" feel productive and rewarding over history? What has made freedom possible in America- is it merely the removal of barriers or also the creation of social systems that give people freedom to pursue their ambitions? Such questions can sound theoretical, but the job of the skilled public story-teller is to bring them out through engaging formats.

B

Apply Values-Based Segmentation Methodology to Storytelling

While it is important to examine how different political forces, institutions, demographics and ideologies have succeeded and failed to work together, we should also bear in mind how different psychological preferences and values interact, as explored in the segmentation we applied. We imagine the segmentation being used in several ways:

- i. Explore how different psychological types and value sets interact in American history:** Rather than seeing these segments as purely adversarial, one can investigate how innovation flourishes when supported by common efforts that are focused on action with measurable outcomes. In a sense many Hollywood movies have always contained elements of this approach in ensemble casts where different people come together to achieve an aim: think of a movie like *The Goonies* for instance. We of course do not advocate for such a fairy tale approach to American history. But when examining stories of collaboration in American history, it is important to also look at the dynamics between different psychological types and their values. How did what we label 'Tough Cookies', 'People Power' and so on interact in the development of the Constitution? Or in exploring the West?
- ii. Employ values-based narratives to overcome knowledge resistance:** Our research shows that certain segments lean towards a form of story-telling. How can these insights be used to engage audiences on parts of historical evidence they are currently reluctant to give a hearing to?

'Don't Tread on Me', for example, are fixated on enemies, strength and leadership. They are the strongest believers in people being able to 'pull themselves up by their boot straps' and are the least likely to agree that ethnic minorities are held back by historical iniquities. They are also most inspired by TV series about World War II.

How would this audience react to stories about Afro-American soldiers who served with honor in World War II, but who were then disenfranchised from the full benefits of the post-war GI Bill, which lead to African Americans being far less likely to obtain mortgages than White veterans.

This is just one small example of how one can apply the insights from the values based segmentation in story-telling about historical issues to overcome epistemic divides.

iii. Cross-Fertilize Across Media: The values-based segmentation provides a media mapping that inspires more innovative approaches to reaching audiences. To engage ‘If you Say So’ for example, one clearly needs to reach outside legacy media, and think, for example, about the possibilities of reaching gaming communities.

It also opens up the possibility of identifying media that cross-pollinates between segments.. For example, Don Lemon is a media personality that bridges ‘Tough Cookies’ who are into law and order with ‘People Power’ who are drawn to communitarian values. Anderson Cooper is found to be relatable by most segments apart from ‘Don’t Tread on Me’, as is Dave Chappelle.

When it comes to news, you can unite ‘Don’t Tread on Me’, ‘Tough Cookies’ and ‘People Power’ through ABC News. ‘NPR’ will only get you to the People Power segment.

Beyond news, there can be more space for cross-pollination. *Seinfeld* is a show that brings together both ‘Tough Cookies’ and ‘Don’t Tread on Me’, while sports is a bridging topic among several groups. Cop shows like *NCLIS* also straddle different groups.

Our polling shows that YouTube is the platform most likely to bring different segments together, while local media remains highly trusted and also a favored place to explore history. Our research shows that there is scope for new voices: between 25 and 30 percent of people in all segments feel unrepresented in the media.

Next Steps

Media and Civil Society Narrative Testing

The findings of our research now need to be tested in the wild. We propose a three-pronged approach that will see what works through testing stories, topics and framings in county-level town hall debates; in partnership with local media; and in national level online testing.

The work would be coordinated through a working group of historians, history TV producers, social media content creators, journalists, offline event organizers, speechwriters and educators who will mine American history for stories that explore the dynamics of collaboration and division, define knowledge gaps among the public and investigate the relationship of historical events to values.

1 **County Level Engagement through 3412 Project**

As our segmentation shows, some people are more drawn to values such as self-reliance, others to authority and rules, and others to empathy. Currently these values are often played upon in public discourse to divide people for tactical political aims. Some political voices, for example, will promote a history of America that claims anyone can “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps”: a historically far-from-accurate narrative but impactful with audiences whose value set it reinforces.

Millions of Conversations have seen this at work through the 3142 Program. Named for the number of counties in America, the 3142 Program works at the hyper-local level to help rebuild a local sense of agency and guide communities toward shared visions of cooperation. It does this in part by gaining a common understanding of the past, analyzing how we arrived at this present moment and envisioning together how we move forward. This type of engagement at the hyper-local level helps to reconcile our experiences with the past, develop a common narrative that includes an exploration of shared values, and then build an action plan from the strong foundation anchored in a common narrative. Once this part of the work together has been intentionally set, it becomes possible to catalyze a process with local leaders that builds an infrastructure centered on a task force concept. These task forces hold discussions and foster consensus around what to do, and how to do it, together. Success at the local level not only drives lasting change but restores faith in the functionality of our national democratic system.

2

Partner with a local media to create and test content on local history

Our research shows that local media is trusted by different segments, and that even ideologically distant groups all have a thirst for local history. Building on this, Millions of Conversations has recently partnered with a local media outlet in Tennessee, [NewsChannel5](#). Through this partnership, they have produced together The Millions of Conversations show and collaborate on three other shows that explore different aspects of life in Tennessee. Building on this, we are in the process now of working with the Metro Human Relations Commission and local media in a socially diverse county or region in the south to test how local history content fares with different segments. We will experiment both with topics and genres. What are the pieces of local history that engage different segments? Do info-graphics or fact-checking work best? Human interest stories or debate formats? Such a project can also include a common aim, such as a debate on how the area should commemorate the 250th anniversary, what local history it should celebrate and how.

While the concrete stories we develop will likely have meaning only to local audiences, the methodology, formats and principles of how we approach the research, content production and testing will serve as best practices that can be scaled in other areas.

