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## Rebuilding Common Purpose for the 21st Century with New Civic Infrastructure

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## **REBUILDING COMMON PURPOSE FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY WITH NEW CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE**

Dowell Myers\* and Karen Trapenberg Frick†

### **ABSTRACT**

Increasing polarization and division are the greatest challenges to the U.S. today, because they prevent cooperation in decision making about growing problems of major consequence. The related long swing in rising individualism is assessed for how it undermines common purpose. We survey the ideological divide and how it intersects with preferred urban development patterns, negotiation styles (compromise or hard line), and diverse views on mitigations for stemming the COVID-19 pandemic. An especially potent factor was rapidly changing racial projections, the reckless framing of which led to exaggerated perceptions of “demographic threat” and a widened partisan divide. Renewed civic infrastructure is needed for public communication that spans diverse groups to build shared understanding and new sense of common purpose. A broad suite of strategies is identified at different interpersonal scales of interaction and engagement for narrowing the divide. The overarching strategy redirects attention to commonalities and hopeful outlooks, instead of spotlighting festering division for sensational news or to promote separate interests via wedge issues. Solutions involve narrative construction and rhetorical devices for highlighting interest connections and shared benefits, as well as structured small group meetings for humanizing opponents, taking small steps toward finding common ground, and building small bridges toward mutual understanding. These endeavors seek to build social capital for further strengthening shared middle ground in other deliberations that may follow.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Successful planning depends on broad public belief in the shared benefits to cooperation. That background condition persisted for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but began to unravel in the 1980s, further shredding in the early decades of the new century. Forces of polarization have eroded middle ground and left the nation teetering between opposing visions of our nation and its future course. This is a great threat to the long-range planning needed to solve our major problems. Solutions to epic impacts of oncoming climate change, unprecedented housing shortages and soaring prices, and mounting inequality and racial injustices cannot

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proceed without greater consensus amid the polarization. In essence, we need to restore the civic infrastructure for cooperation, but how might that be done, and how would that work?

Make no mistake, the forces of division and stalemate are deeply entrenched. Political journalist Ezra Klein recently offered a broad-based diagnosis of our predicament in his book, *Why We're Polarized*, integrating individual motivations and systemic forces that carry great momentum. He describes this as a feedback system which we can see has ever-tightening knots. As Klein outlines, here is "...the feedback loop of polarization: institutions polarize to appeal to a more polarized public, which further polarizes the public, which forces the institutions to polarize further, and so on."<sup>1</sup>

Our most recent, urgent case of polarization on solutions to a shared problem is found in the divides over mask and vaccine use, a lack of consensus that plagues efforts to quell the COVID-19 pandemic. This is well highlighted in a Pew Research Center survey that is startling in its revelations. In a second, large-scale Pew survey of polarized opinion more broadly, we find that over one-third of the public holds mixed views that are characterized as neither liberal nor conservative. Additional insights from this survey address sharp, asymmetric differences in preference for compromise in policy making, and also reveal even sharper differences in preferred development patterns of physical communities. However, once again, the large group in between the ideological extremes is much less rigid in their development preferences. In the competition for speaking to this neglected middle, planners have the opportunity to sharpen their own attention and better focus their messaging.<sup>2</sup>

Most observers are trapped in the present moment, from which there may seem to be no escape, but a longer historical view can shed light on the changing balance between core American values of individualism and community. Lessons conjured by longtime Washington observer, E. J. Dionne, Jr., in *Our Divided Political Heart*, can open the door to more proactive efforts to restore balance.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, political scientists Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett have offered us a grand synthesis of 125 years of trends, covering economics, politics,

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<sup>1</sup> Pages 136-137 in Klein, Ezra (2020) *Why We are Polarized*. New York: Avid Reader Press

<sup>2</sup> Trapenberg Frick, Karen, and Dowell Myers (2018) "Speaking with the Middle 40% to Bridge the Political Divide for Mutual Gains in Planning Agreements," *Planning Theory & Practice*, 19:4, 609-615, DOI:10.1080/14649357.2018.1507884

<sup>3</sup> Dionne, E.J. (2012) *Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent*. New York: Bloomsbury.

society and culture, in their epic book, *The Upswing*.<sup>4</sup> They show how sentiment for shared community outcomes in all four of these spheres rose from a low-point during the Gilded Age, reached its heights in the late 1960s, but then fell back steeply to what are now the current circumstances. Putnam and Garrett argue that “an apocalyptic worldview” dominates Americans’ views for the future with much agreement that “this is the worst of times.”<sup>5</sup>

Projections of the future are central to demography and urban planning. Within this context, such projections are enlisted by those holding or seeking power because they confront contemporary audiences with very large amounts of change aggregated from future years. Whether intended, or sometimes not, this can manipulate opinion by promising great opportunity or great threat. In fact, Klein finds that a major link in polarizing the public has been the trend in ongoing racial change that he terms “the demographic threat.” He accepts this general trend as a given, while a clear case can be made that the Census Bureau projections in question exaggerated and overdramatized the actual changes. Moreover, we find the narratives used to convey the findings were heedless of the audience and potential impacts. Other narratives that used the same future data could highlight racial change very differently, shifting attention from images of doom (for some subgroups) to inclusive outlooks on the future that are more broadly hopeful.

Planners often carry responsibility for projections related to transportation, housing and land use, but after (or before) encountering resistance from local residents who try to block future change, planners are unable to offer persuasive narratives. Planners can be faulted, in general, for a certain institutional complacency. They seem to presume that the importance of planning goals is self-evident because of their greater benefits. Of course, it might seem obvious, but it is unwise to skip over the necessary persuasion in competition with individualism, which is even more powerfully self-evident. The reason why planners may be complacent is because the profession is rooted in the long span of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when there was such agreement particularly by those in leadership positions and at a time when even Republican presidents sponsored major infrastructure plans.<sup>6</sup> Today, before any planning initiatives can be successful, there seems to be a need to shore up a necessary precursor, namely, to restore belief in cooperation among members of the public. The development of such basic *civic infrastructure* should

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<sup>4</sup> Putnam, Robert D., and Shaylyn Romney Garrett (2020) *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We can Do it Again*. New York: Simon And Schuster.

<sup>5</sup> Putnam and Garrett, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> None could be bigger than the interstate freeway program launched under the Eisenhower Administration.

not be an obligation for planners or local governments, nor was it for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but now is different in our era of polarization.

This essay will close with the outline of a toolkit to help with the task of rebuilding civic infrastructure necessary to support community agreements, a platform with several disparate planks, each of which can contribute in particular ways to rebuilding a sense of common purpose. At the broadest scale we need to change the public rhetoric that currently centers on highlighting divisions and conflicts, replacing that with stronger public attention to the many positive interconnections and mutual gains to come. At the scale of specific meetings, ample experience has highlighted the many practical benefits of sharing conversations between fellow humans who happen to come from different camps, finding common ground and building small bridges across differences.<sup>7</sup> It is also important to speak to the neglected middle third or 40% of opinion holders via Pew results or similar 40% of independent voters via a 2021 Gallup survey,<sup>8</sup> rather than solely to the strong activists on opposing extremes. We summarize these practical steps in the conclusion.

So, let's get on with the effort to begin a stronger articulation for public understanding.

#### **THE CHANGING BALANCE BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY**

From its founding, the United States has treasured a balance between two core values, one of individual freedom and opportunity, the other a community-level concern for shared endeavors that foster the common good. Surely this originated through a white, Eurocentric debate among “founding fathers,” giving scant consideration for the Native Americans’ removal or African Americans being enslaved. However, as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. justly argued: “when the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir,” no matter their race or gender.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the twin values of individual and community would be absorbed by all who participated in American culture, values that sometimes appear to be in competition but are

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<sup>7</sup> powell, john a. (2021, February 15) “Bridging or Breaking? The Stories We Tell Will Create the Future We Inhabit,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/bridging-or-breaking-the-stories-we-tell-will-create-the-future-we-inhabit/>

<sup>8</sup> Jones, Jeffrey M. (2022, January 17) “U.S. Political Party Preferences Shifted Greatly During 2021” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/388781/political-party-preferences-shifted-greatly-during-2021.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> Passage from Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” speech delivered August 28, 1963, as part of the March on Washington to demonstrate support for civil rights legislation proposed by President John F. Kennedy.

mutually supportive. When Alexis de Tocqueville made his historic survey of American civic life in the 1830's, he reported the extreme independence of the rugged pioneers, which he labeled as "individualism" for the first time. But he also noted the high degree of community support that individuals contributed to one another, so much so that he judged this to be "self-interest rightly understood," even making that the title of a chapter in *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville 1840).

In his broad historical survey, E.J. Dionne, professed centrist and *Washington Post* political interpreter, found that a balance has existed between promotion of individual rights and community investment, from the founding of the nation to the present. Although that balance has always varied, subject to the politics of each era, some decades swing more one way or the other: "American history is defined by an irrepressible and ongoing tension between two core values: our love of individualism and our reverence for community."<sup>10</sup>

### **Individualism on the Rise**

Much of this was called into political question in the early 2010's when the Tea Party movement theatrically invoked the image of the Founders as promoting individual freedom to the exclusion of any community interests.<sup>11</sup> The Tea Party's political vision of America's founding, in Dionne's judgment, appeared to begin with the 1880s, the so-called Gilded Age, when unfettered individualism (and robber baronism) was at its very height. In fact, that golden standard was an aberration in the history of the United States. Dionne finds a more prosperous period of burgeoning strength and growing equality, leaning toward community more than individualism, beginning after 1900, in the Populist and Progressive eras, and continuing through about 1980. He terms this period the Long Consensus, a time when America was most successful in providing both community supports and private opportunities for its individual residents.

We now have a new quantitative and narrative accounting of the changing balance of individual and community interests over more than a century, from 1890 to 2017, newly produced by Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing*.<sup>12</sup> By combining multiple time series of indicator data covering the last century, they portray the relative upswing in community sentiment from 1900 to the late 1960s, followed by a steady descent to the present day. The remarkable

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<sup>10</sup> Dionne (p. 4)

<sup>11</sup> Trapenberg Frick, Karen (2013) The actions of discontent: Tea Party and property rights activists pushing back against regional planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 79(3), 190-200.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett (2020) *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

feature is that overall trends in four dimensions of social change (economic inequality, political polarization, social fragmentation, and cultural narcissism) follow the same timing and relative rate of change.

Thus, measured in multiple ways, these four streams of events...

“... Shaped an America that was more equal, less contentious, more connected, and more conscious of shared values than the America of the Gilded Age. But then, unexpectedly ... the diverse streams simultaneously reversed direction, and since the 1960s America has become steadily less equal, more polarized, more fragmented, and more individualistic—a second Gilded Age.”<sup>13</sup>

Putnam and Garrett express hope that the pendulum will turn and begin a rebalancing, because they find conditions were better before the great decline of all measures: “Americans since the Sixties have had *both* slow growth and less equality and community—the worst of both worlds.”<sup>14</sup> But there is no sign in their latest data (2017) that the rise of individualism is beginning to slow or level off. And they suggest no mechanisms or triggers that would shift this trend. Sadly, they can only assert that America had an upswing once before and it can happen again.

We might surmise that the COVID-19 pandemic that began in spring 2020 (after their book was in press) has a magnitude and geographic reach that might potentially prove a significant factor. Could this provide a prod to begin shifting the trend? We examine survey evidence below, which are not reported as trend data but still can shed light on potential forces (e.g., how do attitudes toward individualist behavior differ under conditions of higher or lower COVID deaths).

### **Individualism Weakens Urban Planning**

Tensions between individuals and community are familiar in urban planning, which faces perennial struggle to balance interests of individual property owners and the community as a whole. Development restrictions seek an orderly, efficient and fair pattern of development, preserving enough open space, or ensuring adequate parking, and making choices to permit enough commercial activity to serve residents’ needs and also bolster the local economy and tax base. Individuals who have ideas for increasing the intensity of use on their particular parcel may chafe at restraints on free use of their land, and yet they also seek protection from their neighbors’ intrusive use of their own property. In traffic planning we find a metaphor for ideal governance in the operation of the traffic light, which restricts individual drivers’ movements so as to preserve a greater good of orderly free movement, as well as individual protection from dangers of

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<sup>13</sup> Putnam and Garrett, p. 285-86.

<sup>14</sup> Putnam and Garrett, p. 340.

collision. Other virtues to traffic-light restrictions also are claimed, namely their short-term dictates and the object fairness that vehicles of rich and poor in theory are treated with equality by the mechanical traffic light.

Yet even the traffic light can be challenged by strong proponents of individualism and free choice, as anthropologist William H. Westermeyer learned: “These ideals are a foundational aspect of American cultural identity in general but are especially so for right-wing populists.... [One interviewee against Covid-19 related mandates] used an odd metaphor: **not yielding to a red light**. She argued that one makes a choice as to whether to stop or go through an intersection when the light turns red. The person risks injury or a legal penalty but it is *their* choice.”[first emphasis added]<sup>15</sup>

Land use restrictions may be much more politically fraught than traffic (but traffic impacts of land use change can be a center of disputes). Land use restrictions represent not only friendly protection from neighbors’ abuses, but also government control of “turf” that neighborhood groups may attempt to seize so they can preserve the local status quo and exclude newcomers. New development also holds prospects of profits by developers, which established residents resent as coming at the neighbors’ expense and view as unjustified.<sup>16</sup> Existing homeowners have a strong self-interest in the *status quo*, especially when suppression of new construction has the side benefit of increased house values due to shortages. Given that two-thirds or more of voters<sup>17</sup> are these advantaged homeowners, when does broader community interest to provide housing opportunity for all get factored in?

### **Planning Profession Needs to Shore Up Arguments for Community**

The closing of the Long Consensus in the balance between community and individualism poses a special challenge for urban planning, a profession that emerged in the Progressive era and rode the long wave of support for community investment. Planners may have taken this political context that supported the planning profession for granted. However, beginning with the rise of Reaganism, and also with the rise of citizen activism for environment, neighborhoods, and particular political movements, the social and administrative underpinnings of

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<sup>15</sup> Page 122 in William H. Westermeyer (2021) "Freedom over Fear: Fundamentalist Populism and the Challenge of COVID-19." *Open Anthropological Research* 1: 116-128.

<sup>16</sup> See Paavo Monkkonen and Michael Manville (2019) “Opposition to development or opposition to developers? Experimental evidence on attitudes toward new housing,” *Journal of Urban Affairs*, DOI: 10.1080/07352166.2019.1623684

<sup>17</sup> The Census Bureau does not report voting turnout by housing tenure status. However, 65% of households are homeowners, and homeowners are believed to register and turnout to vote more reliably than renters, so more than 65% of the voters are surely homeowners.



planning are much weakened. This is no longer the age of Robert Moses (thankfully) where power and authority is handed down from above. Instead, it's the age of democratization of planning where citizens can organize on social media, create sensational videos, and distribute their interpretations over the internet in real time faster than a public agency can write up the minutes.<sup>18</sup> Depending on one's point of view and where one sits on issues at stake, this can provide a range of opportunities or challenges. Planners, in particular, have shown weakness in response, because the Long Consensus led them to presume legal and moral authority in tandem with firm political support and dismissal of those with differing views. Planners never before needed a persuasive argument to justify a shared community emphasis.

### **IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES IN THE CURRENT MOMENT**

Planners and urban observers have practical awareness of deep ideological schisms that plague decision making in the way cities are planned. Recent polarization has widened the divides, and yet at the same time the potential of a large middle ground may be overlooked because of the attention claimed by ardent activists on the right and the left to their particular side of the political spectrum and their designated enemy on the other side. In 2014, the Pew Research Center conducted an in-depth survey of many issues in polarization, drawing on an exceptionally large sample (N=10,013) to delve into detailed groups and categories of belief.<sup>19</sup> Ideology was assessed by combining a 10-question sequence that probed a range of beliefs. What may be surprising is how many respondents (39%) expressed mixed opinions across the different queries, leaning toward neither liberal nor conservative views. Also surprising is that only 9% expressed strictly conservative views, with another 18% expressing mostly conservative views (a total of 27% conservative or leaning conservative). On the liberal end of the spectrum, 12% were classified as strictly liberal, while another 22% were leaning toward liberal (a total of 34% liberal or leaning liberal).

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<sup>18</sup> Trapenberg Frick, Karen. (2016). Citizen activism, conservative views & mega planning in a digital era. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 17(1), 93-118; Trapenberg Frick, Karen. (2013). The actions of discontent: Tea Party and property rights activists pushing back against regional planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 79(3), 190-200.

<sup>19</sup> Pew Research Center (2014, June) Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise and Everyday Life.

So, the upshot is that the political makeup of America is ideologically more centrist than one might think, judging from the vitriol exchanged from the opposite poles. The important question is how ideology intersects with specific outcomes of practical importance. Examples to follow include divisions about preferred urban development, negotiating strategies (compromise or hardline), and some key COVID related divisions of mask wearing and vaccines.

### **Preferred Pattern of Urban Development**

What kind of physical community do people want to live in? Pew Research Center asked this spectrum of citizens a question fundamental to urban lifestyles and the urban planning agenda:

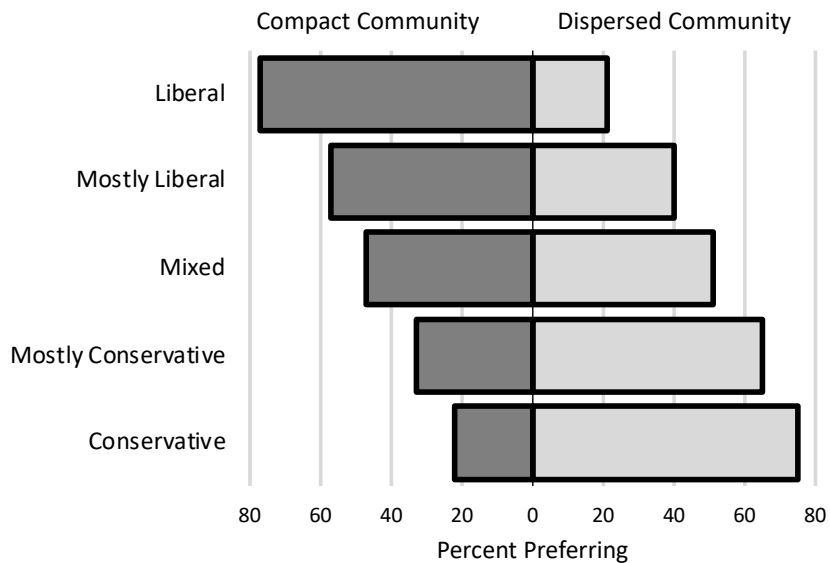
Imagine for a moment that you are moving to another community. Would you prefer to live in:

*A community where the houses are larger and farther apart, but schools, stores, and restaurants are several miles away [OR, randomizing the order of choices]*

*A community where the houses are smaller and closer to each other, but schools, stores, and restaurants are within walking distance. (Q.A8, Jan 23-Feb 9, 2014)*

We can refer to the first option as the “dispersed community” option, resembling conventional suburbanization and also generating more of the greenhouse gas emissions that threaten climate change (although the respondents were not told these consequences). The second option might be termed the “compact community” option, featuring greater density, proximity, and walkability (and potentially better served by transit). Overall, the respondents split 49-48 between these questions (remainder uncertain). But the split among liberals and conservatives as shown in Figure 1 was highly skewed, in fact, more so than almost any subject area Pew has surveyed.

Liberals were highly receptive to the kind of city that the planning profession seeks to promote for reasons of reduced land consumption, more efficient transit service and better environmental impacts, while conservatives were desirous of the decentralized land use patterns common to suburban development in the last few decades. It bears brief mention that older respondents in the Pew data, both liberal and conservative, were relatively more open to the compact city option, while adults 30-49 were least attracted. Within each ideology group there are lifecycle differences that suggest groups may not be as monolithic as appears, and so different features may be attractive for reaching agreements. Overall, it is noteworthy that sizable shares of conservatives preferred the compact alternative (and, likewise, liberals, the dispersed).



**Figure 1**  
**Preferences for Development Pattern, by Political Ideology**  
 Source: Pew Research Center (2014, June) Political Polarization in the American Public

### To Compromise or Negotiate a Hard Line?

A major point of caution revealed in the Pew survey of polarization is an asymmetry between liberals and conservatives in their support of negotiated decision making that might involve compromises. A question asked:

Thinking about elected officials in Washington who share your positions on the most important issues facing the nation:

*Should they work with elected officials they disagree with, even if it results in some policies you don't like [OR]*

*Should they stand up for their positions, even if that means little gets done in Washington. (Q.B12, Feb 12-Feb 26, 2014)*

Overall, 71% of liberals (either consistent or leaning) supported their elected officials working with those they disagreed with, compared to only 42% of conservatives. In fact, the most consistent conservatives espoused an especially hard line. Nearly two-thirds (63%) wanted their elected officials to stick to their principles and not compromise. In contrast, the most consistent liberals were far less strict: only 14% wanted their elected officials to stick to their principles rather than compromise, while 82% thought they should work with those they disagreed with to arrive at policies. In practice, such an unbalanced negotiation stance would pit pliable agreement seekers against hardline holdouts, thus either failing to reach

agreement or settling on one much more in line with preferences of conservatives than liberals.<sup>20</sup>

A different pragmatic conclusion might be drawn, however. If conservatives are less likely to support bending on terms, perhaps efforts might focus on reshaping the principles being upheld so rigidly. Or the very definition of what it means to “win” could be reworked by following Fisher, Ury and Patton’s (1991) negotiation strategy of inventing new options for mutual gain.<sup>21</sup> Compromise half-way is not their objective; rather, the aim is to stimulate creative collaboration in addressing a shared problem, designing a solution package that fully meets the needs of both parties. More leaders should recognize the depolarizing contributions of this negotiating approach.

### **Could the COVID Pandemic Establish a Common Purpose?**

Meanwhile, a major, new shared problem, the COVID-19 Pandemic has swept across the U.S. and the globe for two years. As we asked above, could this new emergency trigger a shift in public sentiment toward greater priority on community solidarity? Is this going to finally initiate the new upswing that Putnam and Garrett say we are due for? Certainly, we all share the same air, and the science is clear that the coronavirus is airborne and passed among infected people in close quarters, some of whom may actually be asymptomatic. The three principal tools recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) for fighting the contagion are social distancing, wearing masks, and taking a vaccine and subsequent boosters (although that was not an option in the first year of the pandemic). Amid all the conflicting information and disputes about the pandemic lie deep questions about whether the goal is protecting oneself or protecting others from contracting the virus. Said differently, if a person is unconcerned about the coronavirus threat to themselves, should they still be mindful of their potential impacts on the health of others in the community?

Rising above the medical technicalities and political theatrics, a commonsense analogy could be helpful, and the apt metaphor is of a brushfire. We urge property owners to conduct brush clearance so that risk of wildfire damage is reduced. The immediate risk is to the property owner, but every untended property is a stepping-stone that could allow a brushfire to travel through the whole community. In Smoky the Bear, public-safety parlance, “only you can prevent forest fires.” Nonetheless, some property owners remain defiant about absolute

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<sup>20</sup> Dionne (p. 11) notes something similar, calling this a “moment of asymmetric polarization” because Democrats are always more ready to compromise.

<sup>21</sup> Fisher, Roger, William Ury, and Bruce Patton (1991) *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. New York: Penguin.

control of their property, ignoring the inherent interdependence of proximity and presuming their actions are unconnected to the well-being of others.

Survey evidence asking about community cohesion in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic is disappointing. Pew Research Center reports, “When it comes to the importance of tight restrictions on public activity, 53% of all adults say there is a mix of views in their community on this issue,” making it contentious.<sup>22</sup> In fact, 47% report the coronavirus outbreak has “driven people apart in their local community,” while 13% report it has “brought people together.” (The remainder perceived it did not make much difference.) Very similar shares were reported across types of communities — urban (45%), suburban (48%) and rural (46%) — saying the pandemic has driven people apart in their local community. Republicans (50%) were slightly more likely than Democrats (45%) to say this.<sup>23</sup>

Perceptions of the risk from COVID might differ greatly with reported impacts in the respondents’ respective counties. Pew asked their survey respondents whether getting a vaccine is important and separately whether wearing a mask or face covering in stores/other businesses is important. They then compared the responses to death records from coronavirus recorded in the last 8 weeks in the respondents’ home counties, thus measuring the recent local risk of death.

Of those in counties with a lower risk (fewer than 10 deaths per 100,000 population), 34% said wearing a mask was important and 43% said getting a COVID-19 vaccine was important.<sup>24</sup> However, in counties with a higher risk of death (more than 25 deaths per 100,000 population), a lower share (14%) said wearing a mask was important and only 17% said getting a vaccine was important, expressing priorities directly opposite to the higher level of risk.<sup>25,26</sup>

Finally, a different survey organization asked whether people planned to make changes in their normal activities for reasons of safety and public health in view of the rising Omicron variant. Among Democrats, 65% said they would make changes, while 30% planned to “continue my normal activity.” These shares of

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<sup>22</sup> Pew Research Center (2021, December) “Americans Are Less Likely Than Before COVID-19 To Want To Live in Cities, More Likely To Prefer Suburbs,” p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Pew (2021), p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Pew (2021), p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> People living in counties with two-and-a-half times the risk of death from coronavirus took precautions less than half as often.

<sup>26</sup> In fairness, we should recognize that the coronavirus hit New York first (spring of 2020), well before descending on the red states in the interior and the south. That geographic difference in timing might have enabled a cultural divide to take root in the first months of the pandemic, after which, when deaths rose later in red states, local people stuck to their early COVID practices.

cooperation were reversed among Republicans: 30% planned to make changes and 65% would continue normal activity.<sup>27</sup> This underscores the Pew survey findings that the issue of COVID and public deliberations and government responses that surround it are driving people apart. Thus far there is little clear evidence that the COVID-19 Pandemic could mark a turning point toward greater community priority.

In considering these survey results, the divisive factor of responses to COVID is not so much the attitude toward one's individual health risk but the fact that, if other people take actions to suppress the spread of disease, that improves the health prospects for the whole community, including non-participants. Some might call them "free riders" because they are nonpayers in the community fight against virus spread. Respectful to the views of others who oppose mandates, we acknowledge many have a different moral calculus, including worries about vaccine safety or that each mandate is a step towards government tyranny and away from precious freedom of choice they vigorously defend. The public health science and prescribed mitigation strategies that depend on public cooperation are now drawn into the broader culture wars that battle over symbolism of language and approved behavior.<sup>28</sup>

#### **POWERFUL USE OF THE FUTURE IN PUBLIC DECISION MAKING**

Projections of the future are a central element when planning activities that have a multi-year lead time for execution or whose programs and facilities will have decades-long impacts. They are central to planners exercising leadership about the path ahead as Arthur C. Nelson has demonstrated.<sup>29</sup> Results of forecast models have such a powerful role in project approval that transportation planning expert Martin Wachs was famed for his ethical criticism of how assumptions could be manipulated before the results were shared with the public.<sup>30</sup> More generally, the capacity of projections to magnify numbers in the future, and then telescope those back to the present, makes even the future itself a very impactful tool for impressing audiences. Sometimes the impacts are planned, but oftentimes they amount to unintended collateral damage, even heavy backlash.

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<sup>27</sup> Morning Consult, survey of 4,411 people, conducted in January 2022, as reported by David Leonhardt, New York Times, Jan. 26, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> William H. Westermeyer (2021) "Freedom over Fear: Fundamentalism Populism and the Challenge of COVID-19." *Open Anthropological Research* 1: 116-128.

<sup>29</sup> Nelson, Arthur C. (2006) "Leadership in a New Era." *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 72, No. 4, pp. 393-407.

<sup>30</sup> For example, of his many related works, see Wachs, Martin (1990) "Ethics and Advocacy in Forecasting for Public Policy." *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* 9: 141-57.

## Present-Individualism versus Community-Future

In the contest between present and future in community deliberations, the future is always uncertain and also often not agreed on, even if hopeful. The present, however, is known and the status quo is protected by individuals through loss aversion. Essentially, given that many community investments are proposals for the future that will benefit others, planners face an unequal contest between an uncertain and unagreed community future on one hand, and on the other hand, a firmly ensconced present-individual perspective. Primacy granted individualism relative to community often reflects this unstated bias in favor of the present relative to the future.<sup>31</sup>

The association with future versus present is inescapable for proposals to benefit the community or world more largely, so planners or policy makers must accept a more explicit persuasive role with regard to future benefits. Certainly, those benefits could face opposition, as in the case of climate change, but other future changes are more proximate and undeniable. An underused factor where we have data readily at hand, whose changes are inexorable and undeniable, and which is well-known in every family is *age*. Age and future go together hand in hand, and reliance on this common denominator of society surely helps to reduce future uncertainties. We know that the baby boomers are growing older, and the millennials as well, and we know that children in preschool today will advance to high school in a dozen years or so and become prime age workers and taxpayers a decade after that. With all these cohorts guaranteed to grow older, including boomers who are certain to draw expensive retirement benefits, and with better educated young people likely to earn higher incomes and pay higher taxes, current spending on the young is not charity, or a consumption subsidy, but the wisest investment possible for the benefit of society and older people in particular. Reports from the National Academy of Sciences make clear these future societal benefits of reducing child poverty today<sup>32</sup> and promoting higher education among an increasingly diverse youth population.<sup>33</sup> It's the equitable thing to do and, important

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<sup>31</sup> Myers, Dowell (2007) "Promoting the Community Future in the Contest with Present Individualism," pp. 59-78 in Lewis D. Hopkins and Marisa A. Zapata, eds., *Engaging the Future: Forecasts, Scenarios, Plans, and Projects*, Cambridge, Mass.: Lincoln Institute for Land Policy.

<sup>32</sup> Chapter 3 in National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019) *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25246>.

<sup>33</sup> Chapter 8 and Figure 8.21 in National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017) *The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/23550>.

for gaining political support, it also promises mutual benefits for the whole of society.<sup>34</sup>

### **Demographic Threat and Loss of Common Purpose about the Future**

Since the early 2000s or earlier, an underlying driving force causing polarization among the public has been the reported trend in racial change. In his work, *Why We're Polarized*, political journalist Ezra Klein devotes a pivotal chapter to “Demographic Threat,” calling this “... the core cleavage of our politics, and it reflects a defining trend of our era: America is changing, and fast.” The principal expert he relies on is Jennifer Richeson, a Yale professor of psychology, who conducted pioneering experiments in 2014, with colleague Maureen Craig, testing reactions of white study participants to the facts of a projected decline of whites to become a minority of the U.S. population. In a word, they responded badly, reacting defensively and less generously, not only with regard to social policies related to race and immigration, but also with reduced support of defense spending and public service funding more broadly.<sup>35</sup> In fact, their broader conclusion is that growing diversity, instead of making America more tolerant, actually can increase intergroup hostility.<sup>36</sup> The notion of perceived threat from racial change is long-established in sociology and political science, but Craig and Richeson’s experiments provided laboratory proof of consequences from that threat. And they rightly surmised that the racial trend might lead to greater partisan divides.

Political backlash had already begun a decade earlier when a landmark book within the Washington beltway proclaimed the dawn of a lasting new progressive era based on expected racial demographic change and nonwhite voting patterns that leaned heavily Democratic. John Judis and Ruy Teixeira made sure in 2002 that every politician understood the consequences, by including “Democratic majority” in their title.<sup>37</sup> Their simple calculations underestimated the complexities of projections and presumed a strong persistence of racial voting patterns, including

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<sup>34</sup> Myers, Dowell (2015) “Mutual Benefits and Equity amid Racial Diversity: A Generational Strategy for Growing a Broader Base of Support for Social Equity.” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 35(3):369-375.

<sup>35</sup> Maureen A. Craig and Jennifer A. Richeson (2014a) “On the Precipice of a “Majority-Minority” America: Perceived Status Threat from the Racial Demographic Shift Affects White Americans’ Political Ideology,” *Psychological Science* 25: 1189-97.

<sup>36</sup> Maureen A. Craig and Jennifer A. Richeson (2014b) “More Diverse Yet Less Tolerant? How the Increasingly Diverse Racial Landscape Affects White Americans’ Racial Attitudes,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40 (6): 750-61.

<sup>37</sup> John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira (2002) *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, New York: Simon & Schuster.



that new immigrants would vote similarly. Yet the message undermined itself via backlash it generated.

Subsequent population projections by the Census Bureau proved to be rapidly changing from previous editions and unintentionally led to heightened perceptions of threat. The reality of racial change was inexorable, but its measurement and public communication was subject to substantial distortion. The date that the Census Bureau projected for the white population's fall to minority status was rapidly changing, speeding up the anticipated transition from 2059 (outlook in 2000) to 2050 (in 2004), and plunging even further to 2042 (in summer 2008).<sup>38</sup> To convey the sense of acceleration, when the projections were revised after 4 years, the coming date of the so-called "tipping point," was 12 years closer than it was 4 years earlier, and this acceleration was repeated *twice* before fall of 2008. This escalating decline of whites might be alarming to some and it was capped by a Black Democrat moving into the White House, seeming to prove out the prophecies of Judis and Teixeira. And *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow wonders where the fatalist, "white extinction anxiety," comes from?<sup>39</sup> Republicans, in particular, might feel a tremendous sense of doom from this turn of events.

The definition of "white" is crucial to the trend, and over the years the Census Bureau revised some assumptions and narrowed the definition of the "white" category, shrinking its numbers by subtracting out all white Hispanic people, and later taking out any multiracial whites.<sup>40</sup> Naturally that substantially increased the rate of decline in the reported "white" trend. The Bureau also could be faulted more generally for focusing on the binary of "non-Hispanic white alone" versus everyone else when that is very diverse itself.<sup>41</sup> Once put into a projection

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<sup>38</sup> Table 2 in Dowell Myers and Morris Levy (2018) "Racial Population Projections and Reactions to Alternative News Accounts of Growing Diversity," *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* 677: 215-228, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218766294>.

<sup>39</sup> Blow, Charles (2018) "White Extinction Anxiety," *New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/24/opinion/america-white-extinction.html>.

<sup>40</sup> On the census form people can select all the races they identify with, the most common being the race of both their parents (over 80% of people identifying as multiracial include white as one of their identities). When reporting the results, to keep things simple, the standard census practice after 2000 has been to list only the number of each race who selected one race alone, e.g. white alone, thus excluding people who might have selected white when only one choice was allowed and abruptly downshifting the white trend. For details, see Myers and Levy 2018 or, for new changes in 2020, Levy, et al. 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Craig and Richeson (2014b) expressed concern about this in the discussion section of their results. Further changes in the 2020 census have increased concerns about binary treatment of white and nonwhite even more, because the multiracial category is increasing so substantially, mostly from the growing number with white parents. See Morris Levy, Richard Alba, and Dowell Myers (2021) "The Truth About White America: an assessment of racial changes in the 2020

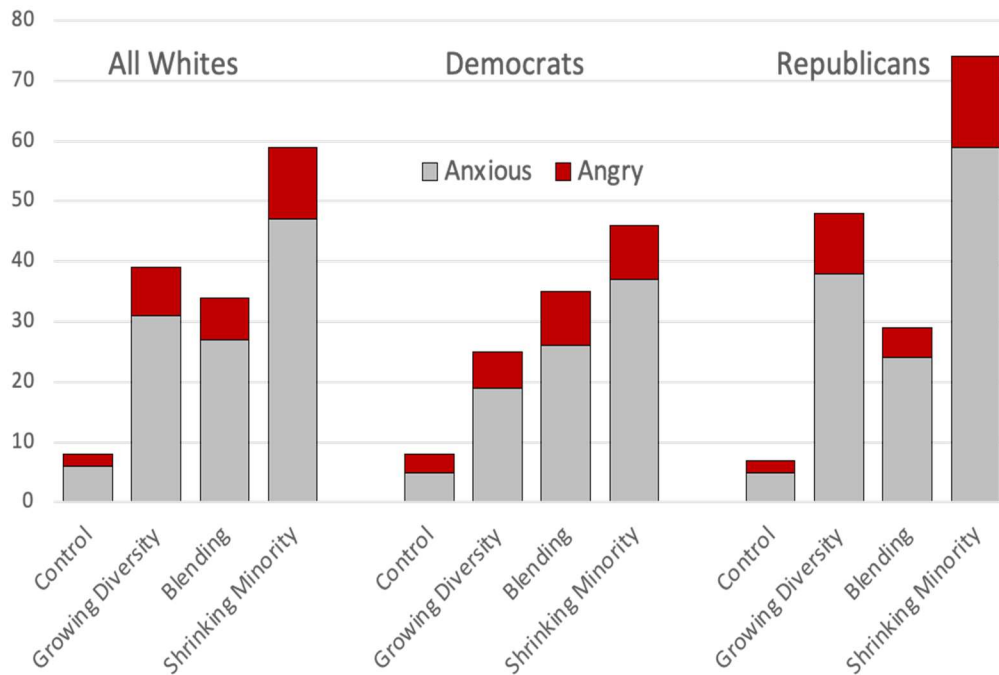
framework, these flaws are greatly amplified and surely had an impact on the audience for the reported projections. (Yes, there is an audience, and they vote defensively in response to fears.)

Fearful reactions undermine common purpose and are to be avoided if possible. More than one narrative can explain the same data about racial change in America. The effects that different narratives about changing racial demographics can have were tested in a survey experiment designed by Morris Levy, political science professor at USC, and Dowell Myers.<sup>42</sup> This was fielded in summer 2016, before the Trump election, and results were shared with top Census Bureau officials in a workshop meeting that December. Did our white audience of survey participants object to growing diversity itself or more to the idea that whites were destined to soon become a minority of the population? And how did these reactions differ between Democrats and Republicans? As shown in Figure 2, when white respondents were randomly assigned to read different simulated news stories based on these projection data, their expressed attitudes depended greatly on how the stories were framed, as packaged into three different storylines: the coming white minority, growing diversity, and a blending account that totaled all people who identified as white at least in part. (The control group read an unrelated environmental story.)

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census,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/2020-census-white-population-decline/620470/>

<sup>42</sup> Dowell Myers and Morris Levy (2018) “Racial Population Projections and Reactions to Alternative News Accounts of Growing Diversity,” *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* 677: 215-228, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218766294>



**Figure 2**  
**Percent Anxious or Angry after Reading Different Census News Stories, by Party Registration**  
*Source:* Dowell Myers and Morris Levy (2018) “Racial Population Projections and Reactions to Alternative News Accounts of Growing Diversity;” whites only; random assignment to read one of four different stories

Republicans, in particular, reacted with greater anxiety or anger after reading the standard account highlighting white residents becoming a minority by 2044, the shrinking or “coming minority”. In the “diversity” story, they read about rapid growth of Asian and Hispanic residents (82% and 74%, respectively),<sup>43</sup> but not stating that whites would be a minority at a coming date. The “blending” story featured whites holding a sustained majority to mid-century by including Hispanic residents who said they were white in the total of whites, while also explaining to respondents that this was due to “a major rise in the number of Americans with mixed-race ancestry that includes a white parent or grandparent.” Republicans were fine with all that, just as long as they were not told whites would shrink to a

<sup>43</sup> All other groups are slowly growing or maintaining a constant share, so they are not changing the composition of the population the way Asian and Hispanic resident growth does.

minority.<sup>44</sup> It should be noted that white Democrats also were made more anxious by the white minority story, but not to the extent of Republicans. Ample evidence subsequently has been reported that reaction to the perceived demographic threat was instrumental in Donald Trump's election.<sup>45</sup>

The conclusion to this discussion of demographic threat is that the narrative told to the public appears to be at least as important as the underlying reality of racial change. There are acute dangers from projections that telescope decades of future change into the present, so care must be taken lest audiences react as if all that change is occurring this year. A further lesson is that projections can be described in ways that elicit a more divisive reaction if change is described in a zero-sum fashion, but it is equally accurate, and more constructive, if change is discussed in a way that includes all groups so that they see themselves as having a place in the future.

As a final word on demographic threat, Klein wisely concludes: "... California and Texas [have already] transitioned into majority-minority status without falling to pieces. Politicians able to articulate a vision of this future that is inclusive, inspiring, and nonthreatening...will reap massive rewards."<sup>46</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Strengthening or restoring common purpose is essential to undergird collective decision making. We have touched on a number of topics on which opinions have polarized and yet we found bases for narrowing differences. We assemble those lessons here and draw additional lessons reported from related insightful studies. Effectively, we are *contributing to building a new civic infrastructure for growing social cohesion and mitigating harsh differences*. The six strategies presented here cover a variety of scales of interaction and engagement, from specific practices useful in small group gatherings, to broad narrative strategies useful in the public arena at a mass scale. In truth, there is a strong interaction between the two scales of activity. All share the common objective of closing the distance between the outlooks or positions of opposing groups. It is near impossible to traverse common ground and find solutions together, whether on low or high stakes issues, if different camps heap public scorn

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<sup>44</sup> These findings have been verified and elaborated in subsequent studies. See Morris Levy and Dowell Myers (2021) "Racial Projections in Perspective: Public Reactions to Narratives about Rising Diversity," *Perspectives on Politics*, doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720003679.

<sup>45</sup> For one authoritative assessment, see Mutz, Diana C. (2018) "Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115 (19) E4330-E4339 <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1718155115>

<sup>46</sup> Klein, p. 134.

and dehumanize one another, or when people are fixated solely on wedge issues of division and are driven by fear of hyped-up threats. All these elements feeding polarization must be mitigated if we are to restore common purpose.

### Strategies for Strengthening Common Purpose

1. *Closing the distance between groups by finding common ground.* You can't find common ground if you are standing in separate places or too far apart. Small steps are needed to partially close the distance to improve chances for later agreement. Legal scholar and professor John A. Powell recommends starting with small bridges related to our shared humanity that many can agree on, for example, goals related to child well-being such as the provision of nutritious meals.<sup>47</sup> In parallel, planning scholar John Forester provides hope for planners in suggesting there is ample room in that we can focus on smaller yet important topics.<sup>48</sup> Once trust and social capital are built on these issues, thornier issues can be tackled along both substantive and procedural lines for other shared efforts.<sup>49</sup> There is greater cooperation at the local level and less partisanship because local businesses and residents share real problems, and there is less political reliance on symbolic identity performance.<sup>50</sup>

2. *Countering the dehumanization of opponents.* In building small bridges, rehumanizing the dehumanizing aspects of one's perceived Enemy Other is mission critical. Planners can look to organizations such as Welcoming America, Braver Angels and Living Room Conversations. They actively work with residents from across the political spectrum to create "low stakes" opportunities for dialogues between people who otherwise would not be in the same spaces as our world is becoming even more polarized and siloed geographically, socially and digitally.

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<sup>47</sup> Powell, John A. (2021, February 15) "Bridging or Breaking? The Stories We Tell Will Create the Future We Inhabit," *Nonprofit Quarterly*. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/bridging-or-breaking-the-stories-we-tell-will-create-the-future-we-inhabit/>

<sup>48</sup> Forester, John. (2009). *Dealing with differences: Dramas of mediating public disputes*. Oxford University Press; Also see Foss, Ann. (2018) "Planning and Climate Change: Opportunities and Challenges in a Politically Contested Environment," *Planning Theory & Practice*, 19:4, 604-608, DOI:10.1080/14649357.2018.1507884; Whittemore, Andrew. (2013). Finding sustainability in conservative contexts: Topics for conversation between American conservative elites, planners and the conservative base. *Urban Studies*, 50(12), 2460-2477

<sup>49</sup> Trapenberg Frick, Karen. (2017). Plowshares or Swords? Fostering Common Ground Across Difference. *Urban Planning*, 2(4), 133-136.

<sup>50</sup> Katz, Bruce and Jennifer Bradley (2014) *The Metropolitan Revolution, How Cities and Metros are Fixing Our Broken Politics and Fragile Economy*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

For these interactions, the organizations provide discussion guides and tangible tips for uncovering the other side's humanity and ways to agree to agree, and importantly, ways to agree to disagree.<sup>51</sup>

3. *Reducing public scorn of competing groups' viewpoints and values.* Through the building of small bridges and "low stakes" conversations in informal spaces, we may begin to become more comfortable with less public facing scorn and dehumanization of others. As difficult as it may sound, this is vital for closing the distance and countering dehumanization. Ironically one of the largest shared areas of commonality across various sides is that they feel the other side demonizes them while also being dismissive and dogmatic in their approach.<sup>52</sup> This could even be a topic for conversation in smaller to larger gatherings to build social capital and common ground.

4. *De-escalating the perception of threat.* In both small groups and in the public arena, strategies are needed to reduce perceived "threat." Humanizing the Other and reducing public scorn certainly can help. Misinformation about the supposed threat also could be directly countered by trusted messengers within a side, but often new narratives can assuage fears better by reframing the context for receiving information.<sup>53</sup> Sometimes what was thought to be a threat can be transformed into a solution to a different problem, such as showing how immigration helps solve problems of an aging society with too few workers or how migration of a new group is revitalizing the main street of small towns losing population.<sup>54</sup> For lack of proactive narratives, the public assumes everything else is holding constant and this one new thing is threatening the old order (which is already past and gone). Crucial is the proactive de-escalation of threat in real time, such as occurring with racial demographic change discussed above, including starting now to develop proactive approaches to de-escalation from expected and,

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<sup>51</sup> [braverangels.org](http://braverangels.org), [livingroomconversations.org](http://livingroomconversations.org), [welcomingamerica.org](http://welcomingamerica.org)

<sup>52</sup> Forester, John. (2009). *Dealing with differences: Dramas of mediating public disputes*. Oxford University Press; Trapenberg Frick, Karen. (2013). The actions of discontent: Tea Party and property rights activists pushing back against regional planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 79(3), 190-200.

<sup>53</sup> See this bipartisan plea to stop "othering" those living on the economic margins. powell, john a. and Brooks, Arthur (2017, February 10) "America Can't Fix Poverty Until It Stops Hating Poor People," *CityLab*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-10/a-bipartisan-plea-to-stop-othering-those-in-poverty>

<sup>54</sup> Myers, Dowell (2015) Mutual Benefits and Equity amid Racial Diversity: A Generational Strategy for Growing a Broader Base of Support for Social Equity. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. 2015;35(3):369-375. doi:[10.1177/0739456X15596579](https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X15596579)

importantly, unexpected places. This is key as fear, anger and other emotions buttressed by threat are major deterrents to listening and understanding.

5. *Direct attention to connective issues, not wedge issues that are divisive.* With the shoring up of social capital and reduction of public scorn and threat, attention could begin to focus on connective issues rather than on wedge issues that divide us because of their inflammatory power. The debate stirred up on divisive issues preempts the public agenda as these become litmus tests to demonstrate loyalty to one's side. Instead, this time, attention, and emotional investment could be shifted to launching attention campaigns about topics that highlight connections and commonalities, and brainstorming together about shared problems, and invent new options for mutual gain following the wisdom of Fisher, Ury and Patton's *Getting to Yes*<sup>55</sup>, or also the premises of More in Common and Bridge Alliance.

6. *Building sense of common purpose through public rhetoric.* Social strategist Suzette Brooks Masters calls for advancing new narratives of the future, with less focus on policy details and more on a motivating vision. Among her summary recommendations: "Advance visions of abundance and interdependence to combat a scarcity, zero-sum mentality that fuels resentment ... Adjust the narrative to affirm unity and a shared vision ... [and] Complicate the narrative about immigrants and demographic change and embrace the messy middle where most American public opinion resides."<sup>56</sup>

Citizens and leaders need to rebuild a foundation of commonsense support for cooperation in local and regional communities. We can use narrative, analogy, and metaphor to direct attention and *remind people of beliefs they already hold* about interdependence and mutual benefits. All in together, we must shift the focus from zero-sum protection of present, individual interest to expanding the longer-range benefits flowing broadly with equity for all. The new civic infrastructure summarized above enables practical steps toward greater understanding and cooperation. These steps might begin to actualize the rebalancing and pendulum upswing between individualism and community.

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<sup>55</sup> Fisher, R., Ury, W. L., & Patton, B. (2011). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. Penguin; Also see Susskind, Lawrence, & Field, P. (1996). *Dealing with an angry public: The mutual gains approach to resolving disputes*. Simon and Schuster.

<sup>56</sup> Masters, Suzette Brooks (2020) "Change is Hard: Managing Fear and Anxiety about Demographic Change and Immigration in Polarized Times," Research Insights, Welcoming America. <https://welcomingamerica.org/resource/change-hard-managing-fear-and-anxiety-about-demographic-change-and-immigration-polarized/>