CNN **November 2019**

By Yaffa Fredrick, CNN

Christine M. says that her stepfather canceled his plane ticket to her wedding in Utah because of their political differences (she's anti-President Donald Trump, he's pro). Justin M. won't wear his MAGA hat in his hometown of Boston for fear he'll be humiliated. Richard G., an independent who lives in the Tampa area, put a "No Politics Zone" sign on his door after several Trump-supporting coworkers challenged him over the latest political headlines.

Mario Benavente, a North Carolina Republican, puts it simply: "Political debate right now is a blood sport."

These folks are only a snapshot of the reality facing Americans today. Many parents no longer want their children marrying people from a different political party — 35% of Republicans and 45% of Democrats, to be precise. Workers, like Richard, feel politics simply has no place in the office. And Americans at large dread the idea of Thanksgiving dinners with family members who might bring up President Donald Trump. Some on the right are even concerned we are on the verge of a new Civil War.

"Political debate right now is a blood sport."

– MARIO BENAVENTE, A NORTH CAROLINA REPUBLICAN

In 2019, there's only one thing that unites us: just how divided we think we are. In fact, according to the Public Religion Research Institute, 91% of Americans feel we are polarized — and 74% feel we are extremely polarized.

Welcome to the Fractured States of America. In this series, over the next three weeks, we'll explore the new landscape of a polarized America and examine ways to get beyond it, with the help of frequent CNN Opinion contributors and many new voices, including those of our readers.

The harm it's causing

Politics is now a major source of stress for Americans. According to Pew Research Center, almost 50% of Republicans and nearly 60% of Democrats say discussing partisan issues — be they abortion, immigration or gun control — can be "stressful and frustrating." And increased levels of stress are often linked to increased risks of chest pain, headache and sleeping problems. Not surprisingly, then, many Americans have also reported losing sleep and experiencing bouts of depression because of political tensions.

But it gets worse. Political division increases the risk of violence. As people begin to identify with one party or another, they isolate themselves and can become more extreme in their views. According to data from two national surveys, 15% of self-identifying Republicans and 20% of self-identifying Democrats think the country would be better if members of the opposing party "just died." And almost 10% of people who identify as members of both major parties think violence would be acceptable if the opposing party's candidate won the next presidential election. While these individuals represent a minority of surveyed participants, the fact that any voters are thinking in these terms is cause for alarm.

We've been here before

Of course, this is not the first time this country has experienced political division. At the founding of the United States, America's first president, George Washington, warned of the dangers of partisanship — stating in his Farewell Address, "It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and … foments occasionally riot and insurrection."

And his fears came to a frightening reality less than 100 years later when the issue of slavery led to the outbreak of the Civil War. The US lost 750,000 lives in that war, or approximately 2% of its population. But the end of the war in 1865 did not spell a unified vision for the future.

From the Great Depression to the Vietnam War, the 20th century was marked by periods of division over economic inequality, political ideology and the use of military force. However, as documentary filmmaker Ken Burns explains to CNN, "the essential thing about history, though it catalogs so many injustices and indignities, is that it always shows us that particularly the American example moves back to the center."

For now, though, the pendulum appears to have swung toward the extremes.

How we got here

Just pause for a moment and think about the town or city you call home. How many of your neighbors voted the same way you did in the last presidential election cycle? Probably most of them. And if they didn't, research indicates you may be considering relocating sometime soon.

Just 40 years ago, most districts in the US were swing districts. Today, less than half of them are. And this is unlikely to change anytime soon, as more and more people move to neighborhoods where they likely won't encounter anyone who holds an opposing political view.

So, what happened over the last four decades? Journalist Bill Bishop explains we've been self-sorting ourselves since the 1970s, when geographic inequality in education grew. That meant Americans with college degrees began clustering in big cities, while less-educated people remained in more rural areas. And jobs migrated accordingly, with technology and production following the new city dwellers.

This clustering was followed by the rise of partisan media, social media networks and a market that was built quite literally on catering to those divisions. In other words, entire identities — defined by diet, media patterns and size of home — have been created around party affiliation. And, as sociological research explains, place, and even consumption habits, have become a way of creating identity and broadcasting it to the world — or, at least, our closest neighbor.

The dangers of self-sorting

There is an inherent danger in this form of identity politicking — it's isolating and pushes people into their respective political tribes. In these tribes, they are not forced to rigorously interrogate their belief systems.

Identifying with our tribes isn't inherently bad, notes SE Cupp. "Tribalism, after all, is part of our evolutionary DNA. The need to identify with a group, to belong and commune with like-minded people is not only biological, it's what has helped motivate our desire for and devotion to all kinds of important cultural institutions, from organized religion to sports fandom."

What isn't natural, she says, is the increased importance we attach to politics, or the rigid allegiance to a specific political tribe — and the misperceptions of the other side that accompany it.

> "Tribalism, after all, is part of our evolutionary DNA."
>
> – SE CUPP, HOST OF "SE CUPP UNFILTERED"

So much of our division, or our perceived level of discomfort with the opposing party, is imagined. For many liberals, listening to a Ted Cruz speech is seen as nails on a chalkboard, or slightly less painful than a root canal. And for conservatives, the same might be said about Bernie Sanders. Yet Harvard researchers found that the negative anticipation both sides had about these experiences far exceeded the result. When forced to listen to Cruz and Sanders, both groups said it was much more tolerable than they expected.

But it's hard for liberals, conservatives and even independents — who research suggests usually have partisan leanings — to realize this because they live in their echo chambers, which often reinforce their existing beliefs and make them even more polarized. All of this comes at a cost — creating a massive perception gap between what Americans suspect their political opponents think and what the reality is.

The other cost? Awkward family gatherings — be it for the holidays, weddings or funerals. People feel increasingly uncomfortable around their Fox News-loving grandfather or their New York Times-subscribing granddaughter. And research indicates the solution to this is simply to not engage in political debate. Stick to sports or the weather. But do not mention the White House or its current inhabitant.

But there is some good news

Most Americans are not hyper-partisans. They comprise the "exhausted majority," writes scholar Daniel Yudkin. They are flexible in their politics and open to compromise — especially if that means advancing legislation on issues like gun reform.

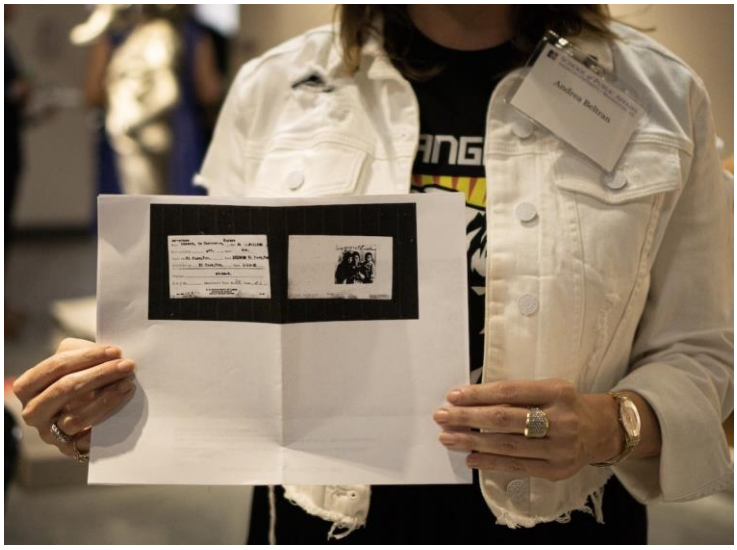
And there may be a way to re-engage them in the political process. Deborah Fallows recommends starting on the local level. While our national government may seem paralyzed most days, towns — big and small — "are often and strongly acting in a united way, facing their problems, negotiating their solutions and taking action for the greater good of their communities," she says.

The reason is pretty simple. At the local level, people recognize the bucks stop with them — and they cannot wait for someone else to "save" them. If a school is failing, if a bridge is breaking, they are the ones who can move quickest to address the situation.

Ken Burns has another idea — share stories. "We all have stories. And sometimes they lead us back to emotions and feelings we have in common," he explains. That may require breaking out of our red and blue silos and actually grabbing beers (Coors is the preferred drink of both parties!) with someone of a different political persuasion.

But it also involves having a frank discussion of what our core American values are.

Andrea Beltran, a liberal leaning writer and poet, shared her great-grandmother's 1920 nonresident alien border crossing card, containing the only photo Beltran has of the family matriarch. She explained that the card represents the idea of identity "being something hard to locate and even harder to define." In this climate of what she calls "heavy patriotism and nationalism," her great-grandmother reminds her just how complicated, and perhaps even dangerous, it can be to define who is and who is not American simply on the basis of birth.



Andrea Beltran holds a copy of her great-grandmother's 1920 nonresident alien border crossing card. Photo by Patrick Craig.

John Moye, a moderate Republican and development manager for the Housing Authority, brought a 1944 El Paso Times newspaper article, which recounted his father's experience as a prisoner of war in then-Nazi Germany. His father, who enlisted in the military the day after Pearl Harbor, survived 10 months as a POW before eventually returning to Texas. Moye emphasized that the article shows how much people at the height of World War II "truly gave of themselves and asked for little in return," a kind of patriotism he worries Americans are now losing.

John Moye holds 1944 El Paso Times newspaper clipping, telling the story of his father, who was taken as a prisoner of war during World War II. Photo by Patrick Craig.

Though Beltran and Moye are lifelong El Pasoans with strong connections to the city they call home, their items of choice reflect their different perspectives on this country's fundamental values. Beltran chose the nonresident card to emphasize the complexity, but also beauty of American identity. It's not singular — it's messy, multilingual and built on the backs of immigrants. And trying to narrowly define it hurts us as a nation.

“We all have stories. And sometimes they lead us back to emotions and feelings we have in common.”

– KEN BURNS, AMERICAN FILMMAKER

What are our core values

At the “Looking For America” dinner organized by New American Economy, American University School of Public Affairs and Curiosity Connects at the El Paso Museum of History, guests were asked to bring an item that illustrates their connection to their community.

Moye used the newspaper clipping to showcase the importance of having a clear national identity and parlaying that into sacrifice for one’s country. His choice reflects a nostalgia for a different time, and perhaps even generation, when duty to country came first. Back then, Americans were united around a common cause — and had a strong senseof community. These days, for so many, both cause and community hang in the balance, he says.

Beltran and Moye’s differences on what American national identity should or could be is just one example of the fractured state of America. But their ability to break bread together also offers a ray of hope — one that is premised on the notion that the US is stronger because of its diversity of views, rather than its uniform acceptance of any one ideology.

As Beltran phrased it, “the best thing about this dinner was it reminded me of the human connection.” Moye seconded her, noting that though he disagreed with some of Beltran’s views, he was so grateful “that a space was finally created for these kinds of tough conversations. This country needs more of them.”

Source: https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/11/opinions/fractured-states-of-america/part-one-fredrick/

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How America fractured

By Yaffa Fredrick, CNN

Christine Barabasz, a Texas resident, has been happily married for 50 years — and for most of that time, she and her husband have been politically in sync.

But then 2016 happened. She supported Hillary Clinton; her husband voted for Donald Trump.

One of the reasons she thinks she and her husband have diverged politically: their different media consumption habits. She prefers watching NBC, while he now listens to Rush Limbaugh and reads The Drudge Report. The consequence, she writes, is that they "are completely unable to discuss anything political together."

Christine is one of our many readers who told us that the rise of right-wing media was to blame for the state of political division today. But many conservatives believe the mainstream media has left them out — or left them behind — creating a void for partisan outlets to fill.

> "The consequence, she writes, is that they 'are completely unable to discuss anything political together.'"

That's a key part of the road to today's "Fractured States of America." But it's more complicated than that. Americans have sorted themselves into predominantly liberal and conservative enclaves. Social media has accentuated partisan division and enabled extremists to get their views out. And the political system has abetted the fracture by drawing voting district lines in ways that encourage members of Congress to resist compromise.

We see the results in today's impeachment debates, but as CNN senior political analyst John Avlon points out, division existed before Donald Trump's presidency — and, according to Pew Research Center, almost two-thirds of Americans think it will continue long after.

Blame it on our psychology

While there are many factors playing into today's division, the simplest one may be human psychology. Research suggests that often we do not draw conclusions based on a thorough examination of the facts. Rather, we reach a conclusion based on our prior beliefs — and then selectively bring evidence to support it.

As scholar Martin Bisgaard explains, "In terms of politics, this means that partisans want to confirm their existing beliefs on political issues and favor politicians who represent those beliefs." And what better example than the impeachment inquiry into Trump.

For most Democrats, the log of Trump's phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, text messages between senior US diplomats and public depositions before the House Intelligence Committee confirm what they already believe to be true — that Trump poses a threat to the American people and puts his own interests before everyone and everything else.

For many Republicans, the phone log, text messages and public depositions prove just the opposite — that the President was simply asking a foreign ally to assist in an investigation into potential corruption by a leading Democratic presidential candidate.

And while impeachment polls have varied in the last few weeks, one thing remains clear: large majorities of Democrats continue to support impeachment (and removal), and large majorities of Republicans continue to oppose it. Both groups likely made up their minds long before the inquiry began — and are using the evidence they have collected to confirm their preexisting partisan views.

Won't you be my neighbor

But it's not just about psychology; it's also about choice. When journalist Bill Bishop left his ultra-blue hippie enclave of Austin, Texas, he did it because he wanted to live where the polka action was — La Grange, Texas.

Bill Bishop and his wife Julie Ardery at a polka dance. Courtesy Bill Bishop.

It came at a personal price. Sixty-five miles southeast, he crossed into another political world, one in which Trump was beloved and Clinton scorned.

He and his wife had been taking polka classes long enough to know the move was out of the ordinary. And he'd even written a book about geographic self-sorting, noting the growth of the urban-rural divides over the last four decades. But in making the move himself, he was forced to contend with a hard reality: His Austin neighborhood was incredibly monolithic, and rather than inspiring him to rigorously question his worldview, it had been reinforcing it, over and over again.

But in taking the leap from one Texas county to the next, Bishop found inspiration again. Sure, he says, "There's no Ethiopian restaurant and no movie theater." But he and his wife have found a new church, joined a choir and are happily enjoying their easy access to polka.

Most of us are not Bishop, though. We are comfortably nestled in our largely blue or red districts, increasingly surrounded by like-minded individuals.

The partisan media arms race

Of course, it's not all our fault — partisan media and the federal government bear some of the responsibility for division today. Prior to 1987, broadcast news was governed by the fairness doctrine. That doctrine "aimed to ensure balance by requiring time for opposing political views," explains Avlon. And while it was in place, the three main television news networks — ABC, CBS and NBC — were bound to devote time to differing views on issues of public significance.

But the FCC rolled back the doctrine during President Ronald Reagan's second term, arguing that many networks, rather than presenting all sides of provocative political issues, were simply not discussing those issues at all. That controversial decision helped pave the way for partisan media to thrive.

And thrive it did. Radio waves, which had been dominated by music, suddenly made room for conservative talk radio — with Rush Limbaugh entering the national mix in 1988. Several years later, in 1996, both Fox News and MSNBC premiered. Fox's founding CEO, Roger Ailes, a former Richard Nixon media adviser, helped shaped the network into a bastion of conservative ideology. And MSNBC, over time, evolved into a leading platform for liberal commentary.

Then, in the early to mid- 2000s, liberal news sites like Daily Kos and Raw Story and conservative news sites like Breitbart and Gateway Pundit entered the political fray. As Avlon writes, "The partisan media arms race was on. But what is good for ratings can be bad for the country."

Outing ourselves on social media

This partisan media race became more complex with the rise of new media in the mid- to late- 2000s. While television news remains the leading source of news for most Americans — 49% of Americans report getting their news from television — digital news consumption (33%) and social media consumption (20%) have experienced growth in recent years, according to Pew Research Center.

"The partisan media arms race was on. But what is good for ratings can be bad for the country."

– JOHN AVLON, CNN SENIOR POLITICAL ANALYST

Phil L., a Democrat in Pennsylvania, tells CNN that social media, in particular, has complicated the political discourse. “In the past, our political leanings were held relatively close to the chest. At least in the sense that we didn't profess our allegiance to party in a large group setting.” But now, so many people have “outed” themselves on social media, creating and reinforcing an us-vs.-them mentality.

And Phil’s read of the social media sphere is supported by new research. According to Christopher Bail, director of the Polarization Lab at Duke University, and other researchers, people have become so entrenched in their political views, particularly on Twitter, that little can shake them of their partisanship.

Even when they are exposed to contrary political opinions, they tend to cling to the ones they already have. This, Bail notes, is more pronounced among conservatives, who he posits “hold values that prioritize certainty and tradition, whereas liberals value change and diversity.”

But we can’t blame cable news and Twitter for everything

It’s worth asking here: Do you watch cable television news each night? Do you tweet your political views each day? The short answer to both is: probably not. While viewership varies, prime time cable news shows averaged an audience of just under 2 million in October, according to Nielsen data. And the average age of their prime time audiences was over 60.

And what about a medium like Twitter? According to a 2019 Pew survey, only 22% of Americans report using Twitter’s platform. And of the ones who do use Twitter, only 42% report checking the platform once or more per day.

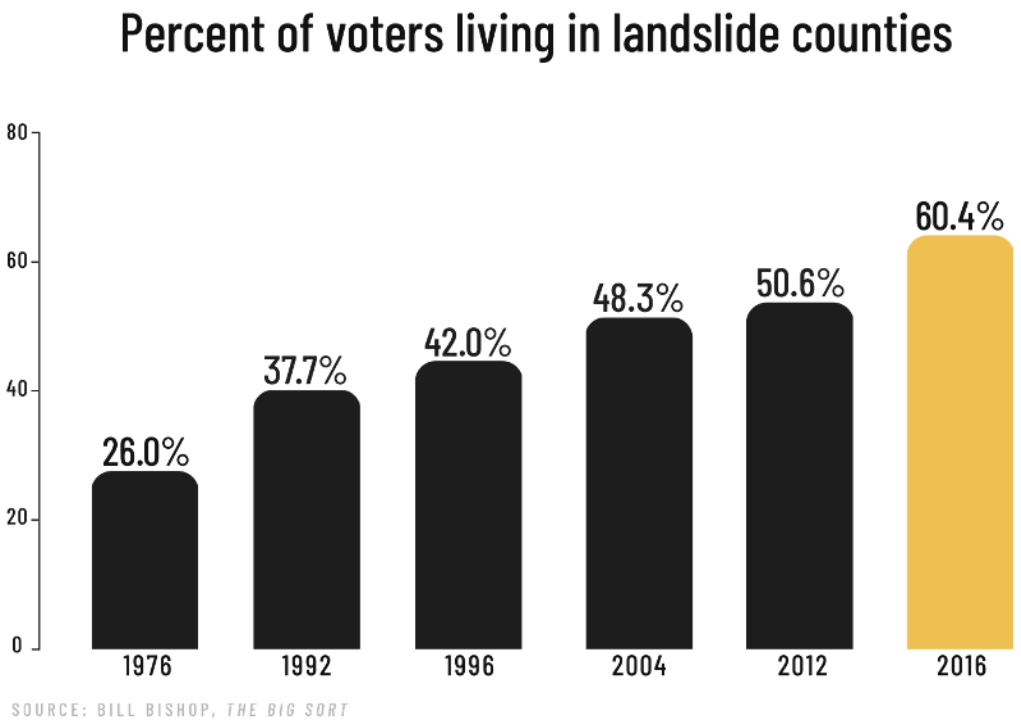
> “If you want to heal the divide, give the people you love precedence over politics.”
>
> – MICHAEL L., OF MAINE

In other words, much of broadcast and social media is consumed by a small segment of the population, who research indicates may already be more partisan in their leanings. So, the growth of these networks may only be activating the most polarized among us, while the rest of the population just flips the channel or scrolls to the next tweet.

The dark art of drawing political maps

To make matters worse, many politicians have figured out how to capitalize on these divisions. Author David Daley explains that gerrymandering, “the dark art of drawing political maps to favor one party,” has contributed to “an epidemic of minority rule nationwide.” And while gerrymandering has been a part of US politics for a while, Daley argues that Republicans outplayed their Democratic counterparts in the lead-up to the 2010 election, winning back state legislatures from Ohio to North Carolina.

This enabled them to redraw districts the following year and contributed to their gain of 33 House seats in the 2012 election cycle. (Democrats, in the intervening years, have caught on and deployed a similar redistricting plan in Maryland.)



Today, according to Bishop's analysis, a majority of Americans vote in noncompetitive counties, where the outcome is predetermined by the polarized extremes. And the winners in these counties are motivated to continue to exploit the issues that most divide us.

Why? As Elizabeth Spiers, who runs a progressive digital strategy firm, told The New York Times, messages of unity simply don't motivate voters on Election Day. "[N]obody takes time off work, gets in their car and drives to the polls to vote specifically for that," she adds.

The America we want

While our nation's leaders may have little incentive to promote unity and harmony, they are not the only ones with power. We have it, too, and as one of our readers — Michael L. of Maine — told CNN, "If you want to heal the divide, give the people you love precedence over politics. Love and respect will go a long way to heading off the rancor and personal attacks endemic in today's political environment."

But love alone may not be able to overcome the institutionalized forms of division plaguing America today, and in Part III, we will explore several concrete solutions to this pervasive problem.

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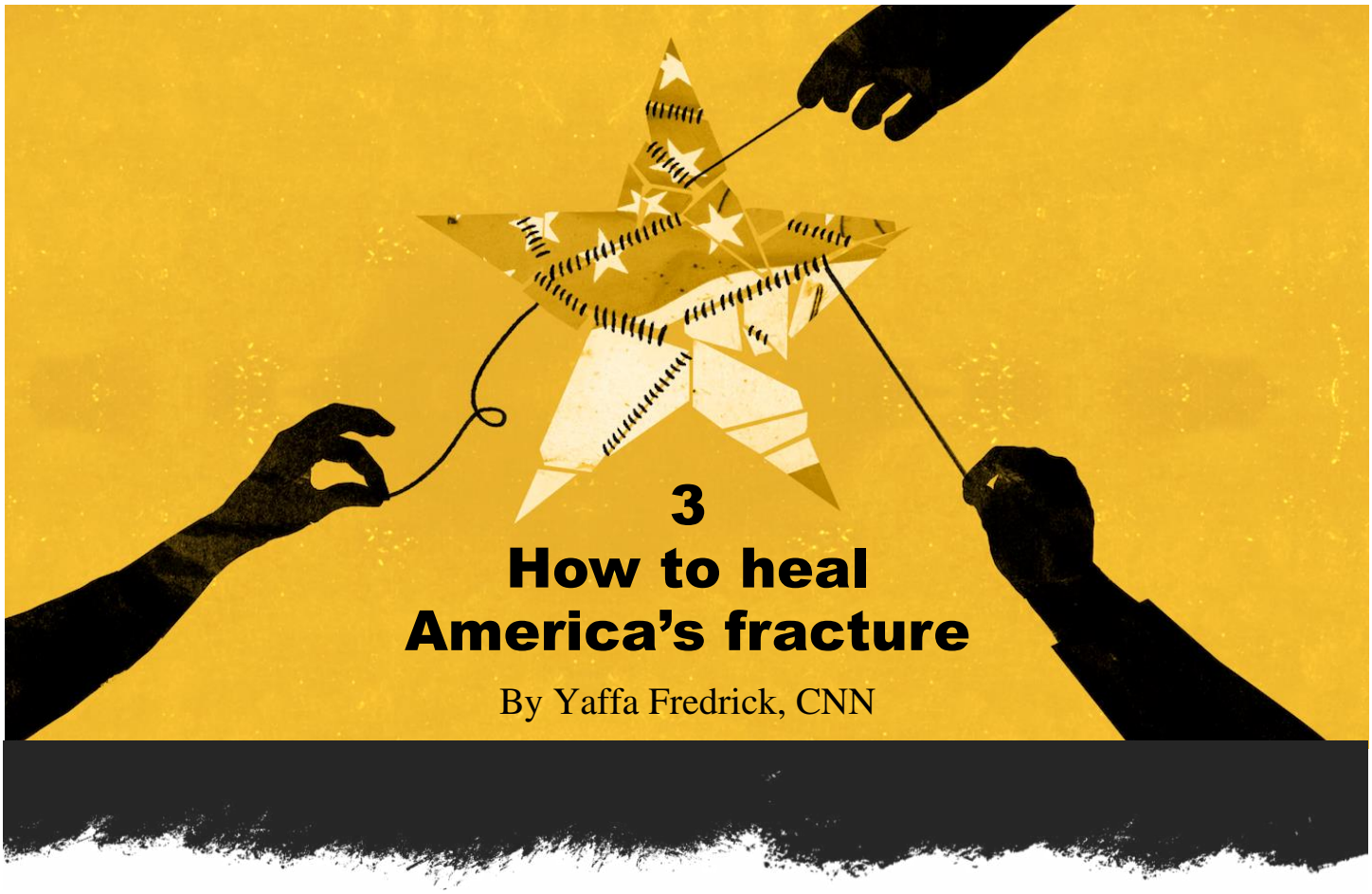

3
How to heal America's fracture

By Yaffa Fredrick, CNN

Rremida Shkoza, a progressive Democrat, did not understand how another immigrant could be a Republican. An Albanian refugee, she fled communist rule in the early 1990s. As Shkoza ran for a boat to Italy — the first stop in her long journey to the United States — she fell and almost drowned.

SHKOZA
If not for the kindness of one stranger, she may not have made it to Italy at all. And though Shkoza survived, sought asylum in America and now calls North Carolina home, she frequently thinks back on that terrifying moment.

After President Donald Trump's administration began enforcing a "zero-tolerance" immigration policy last year, resulting in the forced separation of several thousand parents and children at the southern border, Shkoza says she felt "incredibly triggered."

She knew these children would be traumatized for life. Shkoza was living proof of that. And she could not understand how any immigrant who had struggled to start over in the United States could not see the cruelty of this policy. (Trump has since rescinded it.)

SONG
Then she met Julia Song, a Brazilian immigrant to the United States, at a Living Room Conversation, an intimate event designed to bring people of opposing political backgrounds together to discuss some of the most controversial issues of the day.

Song was a proud Trump supporter, who believed that several of the President's immigration policies were necessary first steps in reforming a broken and backlogged immigration system. While she acknowledged the

humanitarian issues at the heart of many immigrants' stories — and lamented that leading Republicans failed to do so — she said she had experienced first-hand the cost of illegal immigration on the system.

Though Song was able to come to the United States on a family visa and work toward her citizenship, her brother and mother had not been so fortunate. And if they wanted to abide by federally mandated guidelines, she said they would have to remain in Brazil for the near future.

Shkoza was quite moved by Song's experience — and while neither she nor Song switched political sides of the debate, they acknowledged the many layers of complexity to it. Shkoza also believed she had found a pathway forward. And it began in a living room in a Raleigh suburb, where she, Song and four others agreed to be open, honest and, above all, vulnerable.

Shkoza's epiphany touches on one of the critical first steps Americans seeking to heal the political divide must take — daring to engage with those they disagree. This requires stepping outside the largely blue and red bubbles we currently reside in and acknowledging that the individual experiences we have play a significant role in shaping our political views.

But creating the space for uncomfortable dialogue at the local level is not enough. Our legislators must engage in a similar process at the highest echelons of government — identifying the issues that large majorities of American support and enacting laws around them. And if they are unwilling to do so, those same majorities must hold elected leaders accountable at the ballot box.

Finding the purple in politics

Of course, enlisting the help of politicians poses a challenge, given so many of them profit from drawing divisions between liberals and conservatives. And since they have to answer to their increasingly polarized constituencies, many elected officials now take on hyperpartisan positions.

In fact, according to VoteView, Republicans and Democrats in the Senate have trended farther to the right and left, respectively, for the last 10 sessions of Congress. Rather than working together to find bipartisan solutions, many politicians appear to be actively working against each other — seemingly in the interests of their emboldened partisan bases.

However, there is a sliver of hope, says Van Jones, and it's called criminal justice reform.

> "We still have a chance to build a country with 'liberty' and 'justice' for all."
>
> – VAN JONES, CNN HOST

For decades, Democrats and Republicans tried to one up each other with their "tough-on-crime" rhetoric. And the reason was simple — doing anything else seemed like a political death sentence. Just ask former Democratic Gov. Michael Dukakis. Many believe his dreams of the presidency were crushed, in part, after television ads ran in 1988, pinning Willie Horton's heinous crimes on the Dukakis prison furlough program.

But some 30 years later, there has been a shift in the political plates. And last fall, Jones, who worked with a broad coalition of conservatives, liberals and everyone in between, helped in the passage of the First Step Act, the first significant piece of federal legislation on criminal justice reform in a generation.

While Democrats and Republicans had different motivations in pursuing reform, the outcome, is quite significant in the age of political polarization. As Jones writes, "[c]riminal justice reform is renewing the right's dedication to individual 'liberty' and deepening the left's commitment to social 'justice.' As a result, we still have a chance to build a country with 'liberty' and 'justice' for all."

Building the world we want to live in

Criminal justice reform isn't the only issue with bipartisan support, though. Take the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which the Trump administration announced it would phase out in 2017. At the time, the President argued that his predecessor, Barack Obama, had overstepped by using executive authority to protect nearly 800,000 DACA recipients. "It is now time for Congress to act!" Trump said.

2019 is coming to an end. Congress has yet to act, and its fate is now in the hands of nine unelected members of the Supreme Court. This, despite the fact that, according to a CNN poll, 83% of Americans support keeping DACA in place — including 94% of Democrats and 67% of Republicans.

SE Cupp argues this is yet another example of the exhausted majority being ignored. And the reality is the two-party system, with all the politicking that comes with it, may no longer be able to serve the needs of millions of moderate Americans.

> "It is the diversity of our experiences that creates something new and better, something even more American."
>
> – KEN BURNS, DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER

But don't take her word for it. In a NBC/Wall Street Journal poll from earlier this year, only one in 10 Americans said they thought the two-party system was working fairly well. Almost 40% of them thought the solution was the creation of a third party. And Cupp thinks that vocal minority is on the right track.

Though creating a third party may seem an impossibility, just imagining a party "that isn't swayed by cable news hosts, preening politicians, special interests, that isn't designed solely to enrich coffers and play to an ever-shrinking base, but exists simply to reflect the moderate majority, lowers one's blood pressure almost instantly," Cupp writes.

It also serves a much greater long-term goal, Cupp says — ensuring that Americans who feel disenfranchised by the current system are not "politically homeless."

Embracing a state of discomfort

But as Shkoza and Song demonstrate, everyday Americans must also put in the work. The challenge? Many of us actively try to avoid discussing politics with our own family members — let alone complete strangers. As scholars Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan explain, "For many people, politics and partisanship bring up thoughts of conflict and hostile debate." And why would any of us voluntarily seek out conflict?

Perhaps because not having political arguments poses a bigger threat than simply keeping the peace at Thanksgiving. As Caroline Hopper of The Aspen Institute writes, "[A]rgument is fundamental to any democracy, and limiting arguments can suppress needed deliberation."

But doing so requires fundamentally rethinking the way we have arguments. If the purpose is to win, Hopper says, then it will be unsuccessful. Better arguments employ many of the same principles seen in the Living Room Conversation — paying attention to context and experience, embracing a state of discomfort and creating the space for transformation or change.

Filmmaker Ken Burns believes that conversation, even argument, is critical to overcoming the fractured state we find ourselves in today. It may be tempting to presume the other side lives in an alternate universe that bears little resemblance to ours, but we must resist that temptation. After traveling across the country, Burns says he has learned, "it is the diversity of our experiences that creates something new and better, something even more American."

However, even with that knowledge, many Americans may still feel unprepared to take that step. As the Pew Research Center indicates, in the last 25 years, Democrats and Republicans have grown increasingly hostile toward one another. In fact, Pew researchers note that members of each party feel their opponents "are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being." In other words, they feel giving the opposition oxygen is a greater threat than actively engaging with them in conversation.

Art as a means to build empathy

In light of these existing hostilities, it may be necessary to break down some of the barriers that divide the two parties. And what better way to do that than with art.

According to Dacher Keltner, who runs the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, works of art — be they musical compositions, dance recitals or photography exhibitions — have the ability to bring on "awe and wonder." That state of awe allows us to begin to understand how other people feel. Put simply, art can make us more curious and empathetic individuals, who seek to find the nuance in the human experience.

Philippa Hughes, a creative strategist who herself has grappled with a major political divide — her Vietnamese immigrant mother supports Trump, while she does not — decided to put this sociological research into practice. In the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, she began hosting dinners for Democrats and Republicans in her art-stuffed Washington, DC apartment.

> "I might not have as much hope for the future of this country as I do now."
>
> – RREMIDA SHKOZA, LIVING ROOM CONVERSATION PARTICIPANT

What she found, even before the dinners began, was that attendees explored, studied and commented on the artwork adorning her walls. And the political conversation that followed, though heated at times, reflected a group of people whose minds had been expanded by their initial experience of Hughes' vast collection of paintings and other works.

She has since replicated these dinners in her home — and far beyond — bringing together Americans across the political divide to, as Hughes puts it, "experience art, share personal stories and break bread together." And the

greatest lesson she has taken from hosting nearly two dozen dinners? There's no right way to be an American, and our democracy will be stronger if we are willing to embrace our differences.

The America we deserve

After spending one afternoon debating the nuance of immigration reform, Shkoza and Song made an unusual, but wonderful, discovery. They were both proud dog moms. While Shkoza owns a boisterous Wheaten Terrier, Song has a small but mighty mutt, who most closely resembles a beagle.

That connection — that only dog owners can truly make — bonded them in a new and surprising way. And it reinforced just how much the two women actually had in common.

Had she not attended this gathering and met a fellow puppy mama, Shkoza writes, "I might not have as much hope for the future of this country as I do now."

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