

The Atlantic

One Nation, Divisible

Our annual American Values Survey finds that the country is badly polarized -- and the blame falls squarely on our political leaders.

DON BAER AND MARK PENN

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TEXT SIZE



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The second annual Atlantic/Aspen Institute American Values Survey of more than 2,000 Americans, commissioned for the Aspen Ideas Festival and conducted by Penn Schoen Berland with sister firm Burson-Marsteller between May 29 and June 8, 2013, shows that as America approaches its 237th birthday, it's feeling a great deal more

"pluribus" than "unum." More than 60 percent of Americans say we are more divided as a country now than we were 10 years ago, with even higher percentages saying America is at least as fragmented now as it was during the Great Depression, Vietnam, and Watergate. (Those old enough to remember those eras say so with even greater certainty.) Nearly six in ten Americans rate the health of our democracy as weak, and only one in three thinks this feeling of disunity is going to get better anytime soon.



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Perhaps most strikingly, one in five Americans doubts that America can remain united as one country. The poll asked which phrases of the Pledge of Allegiance ("one nation," "under God," "indivisible," etc.) apply to our nation today, and people gave their lowest vote, with only 45 percent, to "indivisible."

However, this pervasive sense that America is growing apart doesn't seem to come from the usual places. The economic news, while not great, is better than last year: While 59 percent of Americans think the economy is on the wrong track, that's down from 66 percent in 2012. And while a plurality of Americans (33 percent) says the economy and jobs are the most important issues facing the country, that's down from 52 percent in last year's poll, with more Americans now caring about other issues such as government spending, education, immigration, and the decline of the middle class.

Nor does our nagging sense of discord reflect any actually dramatic differences in our personal priorities. Americans of every age, gender, political party, and region overwhelmingly say that "family" is most important to them, far more so than religion, work, community, or

politics. Interestingly, such devotion to family is actually 13 points higher in the "liberal" northeast than in the "heartland" Midwest.

Religion isn't the source of our division, either: 80 percent of Americans say religion is fairly or very important in their own lives, and almost 90 percent say they believe in God. In any case, a sizeable majority says it's "okay to be divided on religion" and still feel like a united country.

And it's not traditional social issues that are driving us apart, either. In many of the earlier eras we remember as more united, Americans fought pitched battles over so-called "alternative" lifestyles. Today, such lifestyles are anything but. According to the poll, large majorities of Americans now say that contraception, interracial marriage, sex education in schools, unmarried cohabitation, stem cell research, gambling, and divorce are morally acceptable. Even pre-marital sex and having children out of wedlock are morally acceptable to the majority of Americans under 65, and homosexuality is morally acceptable to the majority under 45. While marijuana is still about a draw (47 percent morally acceptable to 51 percent morally objectionable), for the most part what used to be "counterculture" is now, simply, culture.

For sure, we are still quite divided on abortion and guns, with 60 percent of us finding abortion morally objectionable versus 37 percent of us finding it morally acceptable, and 51 percent of Americans saying it is more important to protect gun owners' rights versus 47 percent who say it's more important to control gun ownership.

But most of the historically divisive social issues just don't rile us up like they used to. We've even reached a kind of unprecedented truce on the origin of life, with almost half of Americans -- including 58 percent of young people and majorities of people in the Northeast and Midwest -- saying they believe in a "combination" of creationism and evolution.

Perhaps just as strikingly, only nine percent of Americans say they don't believe in climate change.

The source of our sense of disunity, it seems, is not so much the way *we* live, but the way our leaders do. When asked which figures in America do the most to divide our nation, every group in America, across age, gender, political party, and region said "politicians," choosing them at a rate of more than five to one over media figures, corporations, religious leaders, and others. Americans particularly blame "money in politics" and "Congressional gridlock" for driving us apart.

Americans think politicians are responsible for the other top driver of disunity, too: "wealth inequality." A remarkable 62 percent of Americans, including a plurality of Republicans, say elected officials "mainly reflect the values of the wealthy." Sixty-three percent of Americans -- including nearly half of Republicans -- say big corporations have too much power. In perhaps the most damning appraisal of America's current playing field, barely four in ten Americans say today's wealthy people got there by actually working harder than everyone else. Indeed, over 80 percent of Americans say that if we want to regain our unity, we need to shrink the gap between rich and poor.

No, Americans aren't feeling divided by a failure to agree on a set of common values; they feel divided by the failure of our civic and corporate leaders to represent those values themselves. In perhaps the clearest indication of our ambivalence toward our public leaders, President Barack Obama is called out in this poll as both the most divisive and the most unifying force in the country.

What propels unity, Americans declare, is "equal opportunity" and "freedom of speech" -- not

trendier, more modern community-builders such as "social media" or "sports teams."

Americans want very much to reweave our fraying fabric. Nearly three-fourths of the nation say it is "very important" to remain united, and 95 percent say we should strive for greater unity. Indeed, every age cohort in America thinks it considers unity more important than either their parents did or their children will.

And they have solutions. Given their sense that it's not America that went off track, but its leaders, those solutions -- perhaps fittingly on the eve of July 4 -- reaffirm, rather than overturn, bedrock national principles. Radical measures like eliminating Congress, replacing representative democracy with referenda, or even imposing Congressional term limits received less than 15 percent support in this poll. Rather, Americans want to regain unity through measures the Founding Fathers would have recognized quite well: "hold politicians more accountable" (27 percent), secure "greater cooperation by Republicans and Democrats in Congress" (22 percent), and "limit the power of the federal government" (22 percent). Americans say regaining unity will require "encouraging meetings between parties" and "reducing bureaucracy," far more than they favor structural changes like "reforming the redistricting process." What propels unity, Americans declare, is "equal opportunity" and "freedom of speech" (at 59 percent each) -- not trendier, more modern community-builders such as "social media" or "sports teams" (which received 20 percent support or less).

Nor is there much appetite to overhaul our economic system: 68 percent of Americans, including 64 percent of Democrats, say free enterprise unites us; and 56 percent of Americans, including 52 percent of Democrats, say America's free market economy is "very important" to helping individuals reach the American dream. Looking

to the future, over one in four Americans says technological growth is the biggest strength of our economy.

And so -- the state of our discord is deep, but it need not be permanent. Americans, profoundly, want to be united. They are simply uncertain about how to get there. And they're despairing that their leaders will help them find a new unity.

Can America really recapture the unity it felt in earlier decades? For a nation in which 59 percent think the country is heading in the wrong direction, there is a good bit of urgency and optimism on this question. Sixty-three percent say it's very important for politicians to get unified. *Seventy* percent say it is possible for politicians to come together on the issues that truly matter to America.

Now wouldn't that be a nice 237th birthday present?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Baer is Worldwide Chair and Chief Executive Officer of the strategic communications firm Burson-Marsteller and Chairman of the research firm Penn Schoen Berland. Mark Penn is Corporate Vice President for Strategic and Special Projects at Microsoft.