

Our Common Ground

Dedication...

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Our Common Ground:

Insights from Four Years of Listening to American Voters

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DIANE HESSAN

The State of Our Disunion

"Give me a call if you can," the email read. It was from Gary, a Republican from Pennsylvania and one of 500 American voters who were participating in my research project. He continued, "I had a terrible day yesterday, and I think I have lost a lot of friends."

I called Gary right away. He was a pretty even-keeled man, 52 years old, a store manager, married with three children—and it was unlike him to exaggerate.

"Hi, Gary. So tell me."

"Well, I went to Capitol Hill to protest yesterday, and now everyone is calling me a terrorist."

I was flabbergasted. It was January 7, 2021, and I couldn't imagine that Gary, a cheerful family man, was one of the people I saw storming the Capitol the previous day.

As he spoke, I learned that Gary and his friends had just driven to Washington, DC, to march. They planned to walk peacefully down Pennsylvania Avenue to express their chagrin about the election of

Joe Biden and what they saw as the radical policies that Democrats were promoting. His sign read, “Honk if you think Socialism Sucks.”

“I mean, my wife went to the Women’s March in DC back in January of 2017, and everyone thought she was a hero. She had a blast. I just figured I could do the same kind of thing, and I wasn’t near that group at the Capitol. Meanwhile, my neighbor called me un-American, and my children are refusing to talk to me.”

I asked Gary about the friends who had accompanied him. They were all bowling buddies who didn’t like President Trump’s values, but who believed that he would do the best job on the economy, their number one issue. “We had nothing to do with those crazy people at the Capitol, but if you watch the news, I was there with my automatic rifle, invading Nancy Pelosi’s office. What a mess—and no one wants to hear my truth.”

It was not the time for me to tell Gary that Joe Biden was not a socialist. But as we talked, I realized that inaccurate perceptions were behind most of what he was experiencing. He perceived that President Biden would take his hard-earned income, raise his taxes, and use his money to give Americans everything they wanted for free. And his neighbor and his children assumed he was an anarchist just for having been in DC on that day.

I have had thousands of these conversations since 2016 as part of a massive longitudinal study of 500 American voters—conversations about everything from immigration to climate change to mask-wearing to Trump’s rallies. Each week, voters from all states, all ages, all ethnicities, and all ends of the political spectrum have shared with me their lives, their dreams, their fears, and their politics. I wrote more than fifty opinion pieces for the *Boston Globe* about what I learned from them, many of which are in this book. And, I have seen over and over again that the assumptions we make about each other—our attitudes, our values, and our rigidity—are horribly inaccurate.

And here’s the thing: our inability to hear each other, our speculation, and our impatience are tearing us apart. This has now caused a crisis in Gary’s close circle, and, repeated everywhere in America, it is dividing us as a country. It’s a sickness that permeates the American culture, erodes our collective mental health, paralyzes our ability to move forward, and makes us hate each other. Substance abuse is up, mental illness is on the rise, and sales of guns and ammunition are exploding.

Addressing this problem doesn’t require us to agree on everything. But to turn down the heat, we need to stop presuming, to listen, to try to understand, to treat each other with dignity, and to know that most Americans are not crazy radicals. If we can find our common ground, we can have a much better world.

Common Ground

There is actually much more common ground than you would think in our country, especially when it comes to policy. Common ground means just that: the path forward might not be ideal, but it’s a good compromise, a positive step. Let’s take immigration as an example.

Most Democrats tell me that Trump supporters want to halt all immigration into the United States—that they want to build a big and expensive wall across the entire southern border of the country, that they want to evict Dreamers, and that they believe that Trump’s separation of children from their parents at the border was a sad but necessary step.

Most Republicans tell me that Democrats want open borders where illegal immigrants can pour into our country at their convenience. Once in, they should be able to get a driver’s license and free health care, independent of whether they plan to work or pay taxes.

To be sure, there are Democrats and Republicans who are proponents of those views, but my research says they are on the fringes.

Only 2 percent of the voters in my sample thought it was okay to separate children and parents, and only a few Democrats were for open borders.

The reality is that most Americans would be fine with an immigration bill that was a compromise: funding a wall in select parts of the border with Mexico, creating a path to citizenship for Dreamers, accelerating citizenship for university students in STEM fields, and stiffening security at the border to discourage further illegal immigration. More specifically, when I laid out the main elements of the proposed Immigration Reform Bill of 2013, more than 80 percent of my voters said they would support the bill. That bill actually passed the Senate and was championed by everyone from Republican Senator Lindsey Graham to Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer. The House never acted on it.

In the meantime, we assume we are far apart on the issue, but it is not the case.

As with immigration, there is also common ground in our country on gun control, health care, infrastructure, climate change, and many other issues. We think we agree on nothing, but it's all perception.

With so much common ground, you would think we'd have significant legislative progress in Washington. The system, however, works against that: if representatives want to get reelected, they are actually better off with popular issues unresolved. It's easier and more powerful to be a Republican candidate and yell to your constituents that immigrants are dangerous people and that, as your voters' ambassador, you will never let those open-border Democrats get their way. It's more compelling to be a Democratic candidate and holler about children at the border and the outrageous cost of a wall, reassuring citizens in your district that you will work every day to make sure the other side doesn't get its way. Resolving the issue takes away valuable talking points. As Kathy, an independent from Ohio, told me, "I used to listen to my congressman for information and for com-

fort, but now, every time I hear him, he makes me more anxious." Immigrants are worse than you think, liberal teachers brainwash our children, gun owners want to shoot you, minorities are replacing you at work, and you are getting the short end of the stick. Vote for me and I will fix it all.

Our media also plays a role in our divisiveness by amplifying the extreme messages. Cable TV channels get more eyeballs showing white nationalists than they do showing normal people trying to live their everyday lives. So we see the stories of people who believe in extreme policies and we project those stories onto our views of others. "I used to think Republicans were reasonable Americans who just wanted less government interference in our lives," said Matthew, a Democrat from Florida. "But I have been watching MSNBC and it has convinced me not to spend a lot of time with my Republican friends anymore." Turn on the news and it is all discord all the time: we hear regularly about our divided America, that constant case of us versus them, the Never-Trumpers versus the Lock-Her-Uppers, the Elites versus the Deplorables. The fringes are clearly getting the airtime. Those media clips get shared on Facebook and Twitter, which keeps conservatives in their own information bubble and liberals in a separate bubble.

The more we watch, the more we read, the more apprehensive we become. It feels better to blame the other guys and to parrot back a story you heard—even if it's extreme. At this point, if you ask most Republicans about the Democratic Party, they will say Democrats are a bunch of elitist socialists who want to take my hard-earned tax dollars and give them away to illegal immigrants, criminals, and people who are too lazy to work. And who want to take away guns, allow women to use abortions as birth control, and, more recently, to completely dismantle policing. Or, if you ask most Democrats about Trump supporters, they will say that they are a bunch of hypocritical, uneducated deplorables, who sleep with their guns, refuse to wear masks, deny

that climate change is happening, and never met a Black person they liked. Both of these views are inaccurate, but these are the stereotypes that were on the ballot in 2020, and they dominate our perspectives.

Voting Against Versus Voting For

“I always thought of myself as a Democrat,” said Joseph, a Republican from Texas. “I thought that the Dems were cool and young and always trying something new, breaking the mold, putting money in your pocket, looking out for the people, and slamming the rich corporations.” Then, he told me, things changed. “Our senators explained that the Dems were actually taking my tax money and funding people who are not out there earning their living. I heard a news story about someone on welfare who didn’t want to work because it was easier to get a government handout. And I also noticed that Fox News was talking nonstop about the economy, and CNN was talking nonstop about sexual orientation. I am all for letting transgender people pick whatever bathroom they want, but I don’t want to hear about it as the main issue for our country. So I guess I am voting against the Dems these days rather than for the Republicans.”

This theme dominates the discussions I have with voters. They voted against someone rather than supporting their candidate because of horror stories about the other side. “I don’t like Trump, but the alternative is much worse” was a frequent cry from those who supported him.

In 2016, one of the primary reasons that people voted for Donald Trump was not that they thought he was a really great guy. They just hated Hillary Clinton. Trump supporters reported to me that she was totally corrupt and listed an entire lifetime of questionable activities: Whitewater, Vince Foster, the Clinton Foundation, Benghazi, and “stealing furniture from the White House on their way out.” Although each of these issues was resolved in Hillary Clinton’s

favor, voters were not appeased. “Normal law-abiding, ethical people just don’t have all of those shady, questionable things in their lives,” said Susan, a Republican from North Carolina. Women told me that Clinton was a hypocrite to say that she was a supporter of women, when she had once defended her husband against women who accused him of sexual harassment. And the famous emails, rather than being a pivotal factor in their decision to vote for Trump, were just one more thing to pile onto their list.

Of course, that same year, many voters chose Hillary Clinton because they hated Donald Trump, calling out his criticism of Gold Star families, his conversation with Billy Bush about his sexual escapades, his narcissism, his name-calling, his track record of business failures, his mocking of a disabled reporter, and more.

This “dislike of the alternative” also happened in 2020. Over half of my voters who chose Biden told me they were just voting against Trump. And over half of those who voted for Trump told me they were just voting against Biden.

Trump supporters saw a strong man who tells it like it is, works hard, loves his family, and made huge progress despite unprecedented lawsuits, hearings, and general obstruction from the other party—the likes of which had never been seen before. They think Biden has dementia, will be hijacked by the “radical liberals” in the party and mess up any chance of an economic recovery, and is just too quiet and weak for our times.

Biden supporters saw an experienced, empathetic man who will unite our country, bring sanity back to the White House, build a great and expert team, and watch out for the little guy—especially because of his background. They saw Trump as a lying, cheating buffoon who panders to Putin and cares only about himself.