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Democracy for
President:
A Guide to How
Americans can
Strengthen
Democracy During
a Divisive Election



More in
Common

DEMOCRACY
FOR
PRESIDENT

Democracy for President:
A Guide to How Americans
can Strengthen Democracy
During a Divisive Election

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About More in Common

This report is published by More in Common US, a nonpartisan nonprofit that seeks to strengthen democratic culture by bringing Americans together around shared values, beliefs, and identities. More in Common US works as part of an international initiative to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media and government to connect people across the lines of division.

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www.democracyforpresident.com

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Foreword

Americans are voting this year amidst challenging circumstances. They are concerned about the safety of their loved ones from the coronavirus, about their ability to pay bills and keep or secure a good job amid an economic downturn, and about racial inequality in their communities. Against the backdrop of a global pandemic and the ongoing health and economic threats, Americans would understandably feel exhausted even if this year's election were "normal".

But this is not a normal election. The intensity of this year's presidential race is unlike any in recent memory—four out of five Americans say this is one of the most important elections of their lifetime. Partisan conflict saturates the newsfeeds of the most politically engaged and looms in the background for all Americans.

In this tense climate, More in Common set out to understand where there might be opportunities to bolster the resiliency of our democracy. Building off our **2018 Hidden Tribes project**, the goal of which is to counteract the forces pulling Americans apart, we fielded new research to understand Americans' views on democracy, community, and the 2020 election.

Many of our findings confirm that Americans are deeply concerned about the risks this election poses to our democracy. Sixty-one percent of Americans feel there will not be a peaceful continuation of power if President Trump is re-elected. Nearly half - 48 percent - of Americans feel there will not be a peaceful transfer of power if Joe Biden is elected. Overall, seven in ten Americans are concerned about widespread election-related violence.

Americans are also concerned about the extent to which the country seems divided and how that will impact the election. Eighty-one percent say the country feels more divided than unified. Eighty-three percent say Americans being pitted against each other is a threat to our democracy. Fewer than half of Americans - 41 percent - feel the US government is prepared to keep this year's election secure.

At the same time, we find Americans across the ideological spectrum express a resilient faith in democracy and in the sacred nature of voting. Eighty-one percent of Americans agree that democracy is still preferable compared to other types of government. The overwhelming majority—87 percent—see voting as a way they can take action to improve our country. These findings speak to unifying themes of civic rights and responsibilities which cut across political differences.

We also see a strong contrast between Americans' perceptions of our national divisions and their experiences at the local level. When asked about the community they live in, 57 percent of Americans say that people with different views treat each other with respect. Eighty percent say people can express their views through rallies and other peaceful demonstrations in the community where they live. And, while only 39 percent of Americans express confidence in the federal government to do what is right for America, 68 percent have confidence in their local officials.

This is not to ignore the fact that there are real and pressing challenges evident at the local level. Recent civil unrest sparked by the killing of Black Americans by police underscore the long-standing need to address racial inequality and significant differences in Americans' feelings of safety in their neighborhoods.

When asked whether people in their local communities have an equal opportunity to succeed regardless of who they are or where they come from, we find significant variation by race, with 55 percent of Black Americans saying no, compared to 64 percent of white Americans who say yes.

Overall, our findings present a sobering, but far from despondent, reality of a country steeling itself for a volatile, if critical, election, while yearning to move forward. We find a clear need and opportunity for conversations – which would be most impactful if held at the local level – about shared values and concerns about the integrity of the election. Americans across the political spectrum want a peaceful and secure election conducted within our democratic system, and to find ways to come together after the results are final.

To truly move forward, these difficult conversations must first take place. Our report aims to equip any American who wants to strengthen the health of our democracy with the insights, tools, and guidance needed to make these discussions easier and more impactful. In the end, Americans are in this together and each of us is responsible for the health of this shared experiment in self-government.

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Key Findings

Americans are concerned about the integrity of the 2020 election.

- 80 percent of Americans are concerned about election officials and politicians deliberately discouraging Americans from voting.
- 75 percent of Americans think we will not know the results on Election Day, and 73 percent feel that the longer we have to wait for results, the more likely it is that fraud will occur.
- 51 percent of Americans think it is very likely that misleading information about voting day will be spread.

Americans are also concerned about what will happen after the election results are announced.

- 71 percent of Americans are concerned about widespread violence after the election results are announced.
- 52 percent of Americans think it is likely that if Joe Biden wins, President Trump will refuse to concede.
- 31 percent of Americans think it is likely that if President Trump wins, Joe Biden will refuse to concede.

These concerns are exacerbated by the fraught relationship Americans have with the media and information environment.

- 56 percent of Americans feel that top media sources have a bias against people like them.
- 69 percent of Americans think that media/social media make America seem more divided than it really is.
- 71 percent of Americans say that an unreliable and one-sided media is a threat to democracy.

Yet Americans still place great value in democracy and share a sense that our elections are safe, secure, and legitimate.

- 81 percent of Americans say democracy, while imperfect, is preferable to other forms of government, and 92 percent say it is important to live in a country that is governed democratically.
- 69 percent of Americans believe elections in the United States are generally safe, secure, and trustworthy.
- 81 percent of Americans say when they vote they feel a sense of pride in being American, 80 percent say they vote in part to honor people who fought for their right to vote, and 88 percent feel voting is a way they can improve the country.

And, Americans are finding strength, solidarity, and confidence in their local communities.

- 68 percent have confidence in their local officials to do what is right for America.
- 82 percent of Americans say people in their local community have more in common than what divides them.
- 57 percent of Americans say that in their community, people with different views treat each other with respect.

I Introduction

As the nation moves closer to Election Day, there is widespread concern about what will happen with the voting process and the election results. A substantial majority of the country is worried about election-related violence. Americans feel that the country is intensely divided, with partisan voices dominating what they see and hear.

Elections are divisive by design. They force us to pick winners and losers. This is essential to the health of our democracy—we want and need a competition of ideas and candidates. But when there is so much animosity in politics, as there is today, new risks emerge which can be exploited by actors interested in weakening and dividing America.

This report aims to describe how Americans are experiencing this election season. It examines Americans' attitudes, beliefs, and feelings toward the state of democracy, and covers core concerns related to the integrity of the election. The study explores issues of trust and belonging, to provide greater context for why Americans may be expressing particular views towards the integrity of the election.

This report also seeks to provide nonpartisan guidance for what Americans can do to strengthen our democracy in the coming weeks and months. A critical aspect of this guidance is on how to talk with friends, family, neighbors, and other Americans – especially those with different political views – about issues we all care about regarding the integrity of the election. Americans are not as divided as we think we are, especially at the local level, and this provides opportunities to talk with each other about how we bolster confidence in and commitment to our democracy.

To contribute to such conversations, More in Common tested nonpartisan messages that aimed to increase faith in our democracy and confidence in the resilience of our electoral system. These messages draw from insights from our previous work and employ themes that resonate with Americans across political leanings.

The goal of the messaging is to build a strong, shared willingness to work within the democratic process this election. America's democracy depends on Americans' collective faith that the systems, institutions, and people can deliver a legitimate result. This year, it is important for Americans to talk with each other – across partisan differences – about how our communities can:

- Ensure a peaceful election;
- Address concerns and questions voters may have about why they should vote;
- Enable eligible voters to cast ballots through methods that are safe and secure, including addressing concerns and questions related to mail-in ballots;
- Guard against election misinformation and keep it from pulling communities apart;
- Speak to the process and timeline for verifying and counting ballots, and for announcing results; and
- Respond to any election scenarios that may emerge in ways that strengthen our democracy.

In this report, we also include an overview of messaging guidance and a framework for any individual or organization to use to speak to the actions above. On the companion website – www.democracyforpresident.com – we provide a comprehensive suite of discussion guides, infographics, guides for writing community letters and op-eds, and additional resources that individuals and groups can employ to reach out and talk with members of their community.

Although our research reveals some concerning findings about the state of the country, the picture is ultimately one of pragmatic optimism. Americans share deeply held emotional connections to our elections and our democracy. They are acutely aware of polarization and hear the loud message that the country is divided, yet they perceive and experience their local communities as more united. This creates opportunities to engage other Americans in strengthening our democracy during a divisive election.

II Methodology

The results presented here are from **three national polling surveys** conducted from June-September 2020 in partnership with YouGov. As part of More in Common's research process, we also engaged a diverse online research community of approximately 100 Americans over the course of April through August 2020. Quotes from these Americans are included throughout the report.

Survey 1 (Democracy and the Election). We conducted online survey interviews with 8,000 Americans in July-August of 2020. The data was weighted to be representative of American citizens to a sampling frame built from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). The data was weighted using propensity scores, with score functions including gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (6-category), race (5-category), and education (4-category). The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 1.33.

This survey asked questions on attitudes toward democracy as a system of government, local community and democratic culture, perceptions on the US political landscape including possible election scenarios, and political and media consumption behaviors.

Survey 2 (National identity and Meta-Perceptions). More in Common surveyed 4,000 Americans in July of 2020. The data was weighted using propensity scores and post-stratification, with a sampling frame built from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). The propensity score function included gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-category), race (4-category), and education (4-category). The weights were then trimmed at a maximum value of 7, and then re-centered to have a mean of 1. The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 1.74.

This survey included questions that explored major phenomena related to American identity and pride, including American beliefs about the country's history, Americans' shared experiences, and Americans' vision for the future.

Message testing. In September of 2020, we conducted message testing with 2,000 Americans (drawn from the Survey 1 sample). The messages emphasized various themes that emerged as points of cohesion in the 8,000-person (Democracy and the Election) survey. These themes included: resilience of America's electoral process, trust in local election officials, duty to country, and others. After reading the messages, respondents indicated their agreement with the messages.

III Americans' Views of Democracy

Blanket statements about the state of democracy in the US and Americans' feelings about it fail to capture the complexity of the issue. There is still widespread faith in democracy as the best mode of governance, a commitment that cuts across party lines. There are shared concerns and fears about threats to democracy, which include pitting Americans against each other, the role of money in politics, and gerrymandering. Yet there are also differences among some Americans, especially partisans, when looking at how people characterize the values, freedoms, and cultural variables that make up American

This section examines Americans' attitudes, beliefs, and aspirations about democracy and democratic practices. If Americans are to strengthen democracy, there needs to be an understanding of where there are differences and where there is common ground among Americans across the ideological spectrum.

“The citizen is vital to any democracy. Free, fair and secure elections are the keys to ensuring that citizens have a voice in government and what is done to ensure the country's safety, economy, and role in the world. Government power must be checked; otherwise it is a dictatorship. Freedom of speech, journalistic freedom are also critical if we are to have an informed citizenry.”

— Dorothy, 65+ Black woman, Independent

Americans' commitment to democracy remains strong, but this commitment should not be taken for granted. Eighty-one percent of Americans across all political leanings state that democracy is preferable to other forms of government. Most Americans also express commitment to key democratic principles. For example, 79 percent of Americans dislike the idea of the President having power to limit the voice and vote of his/her opponents.

81% Believe **democracy** is imperfect but is **preferable** to other forms of government

Source: More in Common (2020)

Yet, almost 4 out of 10 Americans believe that, at least to some degree, “to fix America, we need a leader who is willing to break the rules.” The rule of law – the principle that all members in society, including our leaders and institutions, are accountable to a system of justice – is a fundamental aspect of democratic societies. However, almost half of Republicans and 28 percent of Democrats state that America needs a leader willing to circumvent the legal system.

Almost half of Americans – 45 percent – are not satisfied with the way democracy is currently working in America, but the numbers diverge across party lines. Seventy-five percent of Republicans say they are satisfied with democracy currently, while only 46 percent of Democrats are satisfied.

45% Dissatisfied with the way
democracy works in the US

Source: More in Common (2020)

Satisfaction with democracy does not vary much by race. Similar to the US average, 44 percent of white Americans, 45 percent of Black Americans, and 43 percent of Hispanic Americans state they are not satisfied with how democracy is working; with Asian Americans (54 percent) being slightly more dissatisfied.

Members of both political parties share concern around a common set of threats to democracy. Eighty-three percent of Americans – 81 percent of Democrats and 85 percent of Republicans – view Americans being pitted against each other as a threat to our democracy. Similarly, 82 percent of Americans believe the role of money in politics threatens American democracy. Finally, majorities of Democrats and Republicans see gerrymandering – political parties drawing voting districts to their advantage – as undermining democracy.

“In general, society needs to stop being “If you're not agreeing with me, you are my enemy.”

— Ronald, 65+ white man, Democrat

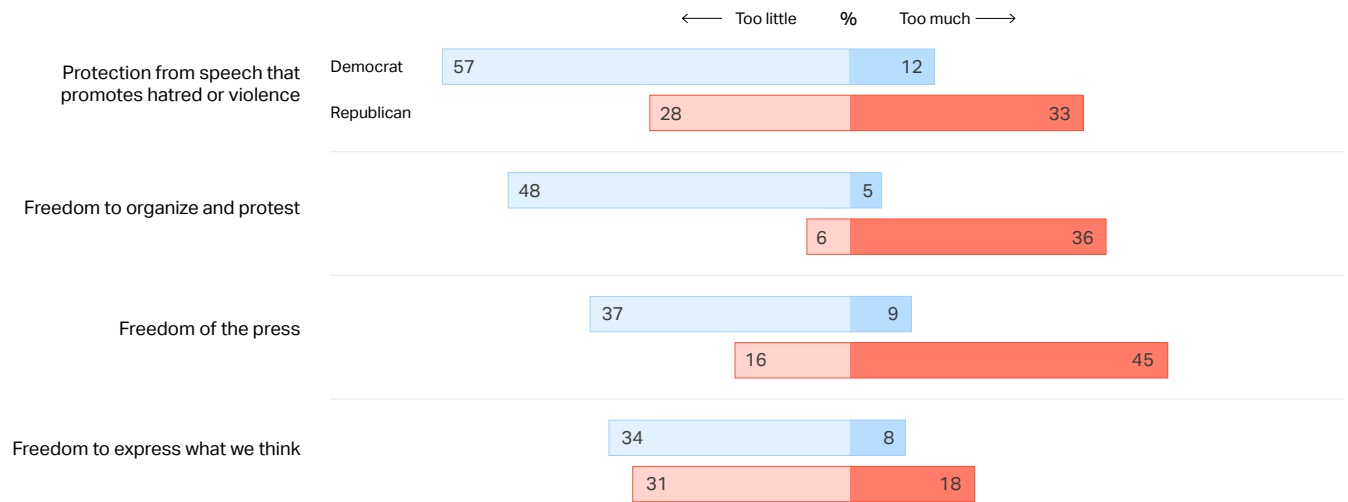
Partisan differences emerge when asked about other potential threats to democracy. Republicans are deeply concerned about the decline of traditional American values, for example, with 84 percent seeing this as a threat to democracy, while only 40 percent of Democrats share this view. In contrast, Democrats are almost twice as likely as Republicans to believe that foreign interference in our elections is a threat to democracy (82 percent vs. 44 percent).

Americans differ by party in their attitudes on whether the country needs to impose or remove constraints on the media, speech and protests. Republicans are concerned about media excesses and the policing of speech while Democrats are worried about hate speech and limits on protests. Forty-five percent of Republicans say that America has too much freedom of the press, a sentiment shared by only nine percent of Democrats. Similarly, 1 out of 3 Republicans believe that there is too much protection from hate speech, a view held by only 1 out of 10 Democrats. Almost half of Democrats (48 percent) say there is too little freedom to protest – a stark contrast with the six percent of Republicans who hold this view. Interestingly, we see convergence when asked about freedom of expression: more than half of Democrats and Republicans (58 percent and 52 percent, respectively) agree that Americans have the right amount of freedom to express what they think.

Figure 1

Freedom in America

Democrats and Republicans diverge in their perceptions of democratic freedoms.



Do you believe that nowadays in America we have too little, the right amount, or too much...
Complete data available in the appendix.
Source: More in Common (2020)

“I think it is important for America to feel like they have as many rights as possible and to feel like we are the ones who made the choices we did together. We should always feel free especially if we live in a place where it is the land of the free.”

— Sara, 25-34 Hispanic woman, Democrat

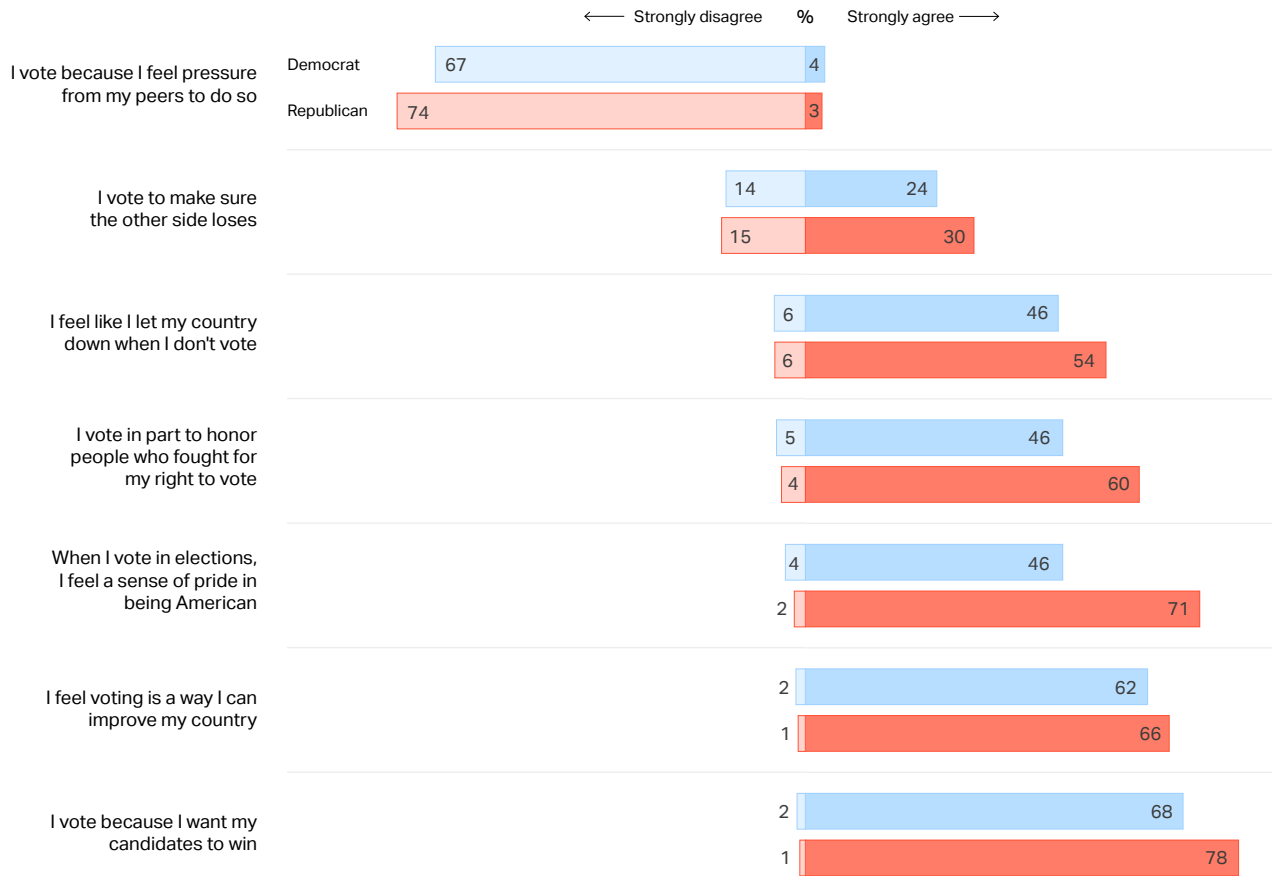
Americans share deep and positive emotional connections with voting.

Eighty-one percent of Americans say they feel a sense of pride in being American when they vote; 79 percent say they vote in part to honor people who fought for their right to vote; and 73 percent say they feel they let the country down when they don't vote. Partisan differences emerge with the intensity felt with some of these views. For example, 60 percent of Republicans “strongly agree” that they vote in part to honor people who fought for their right to vote whereas only 46 percent of Democrats hold such an intense view.

Figure 2

Reasons for Voting

Voting gives Americans a sense of pride and a sense of agency that they can improve the country.



How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding voting?
 Complete data available in the appendix.
 Source: More in Common (2020)

“Elections/voting is the most fundamental aspect of democracies and having elected officials is one way individuals’ voices may be greater heard in a healthy democracy.”

— Alex, 18-24 Black man, Republican

Negative partisanship, or the dislike of the other side, is also evident in how Americans describe their motivations for voting. More than half of Americans say they vote to make sure the “other side” loses (56 percent). This finding is consistent with other research demonstrating that animosity towards your political opponents rather than support for your own side often drives political behavior.¹ Yet at the same time, 87 percent of Americans still believe that voting is a way to improve the country—a finding which holds across party lines and racial background.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that Americans’ feelings and attitudes toward the current state of democracy are complex, but they are cautiously hopeful about the system and the future. Most Americans do not experience democracy merely as a system of government but also as a culture and set of values. Understanding these linkages provides insight into how Americans can communicate with and engage one another – across partisan lines – on issues related to the integrity of the election and the health of democracy.

¹ Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018.

IV Americans' Expectations for the 2020 Election

While Americans of different political persuasions find themselves on opposite sides of most policy issues this cycle, one thing they agree on is the consequence of this election: four out of five Americans say that this election is one of the most important in their lifetimes.

81% Believe the 2020 election is one of the **most important in my lifetime**

Source: More in Common (2020)

In this section, we examine some of the hopes and fears that Americans have regarding the 2020 Presidential election. Understanding how Americans are currently thinking and feeling about this election can inform strategies for combatting misinformation aimed at undermining its integrity.

Americans feel positively about US elections in general but are polarized on the federal government's ability to conduct a safe and secure election in 2020.

Sixty-nine percent of Americans say that elections in the US are generally safe and trustworthy, and this number differs little between Democrats and Republicans. However, political differences emerge when asked how prepared Americans feel the US government is for this election, with 57 percent of Republicans and 33 percent of Democrats saying the US government is prepared.

More Americans have confidence in their state government's ability to conduct the election. Majorities of both Democrats (61 percent) and Republicans (54 percent) feel their state governments are prepared for the 2020 election, underscoring the difference in confidence between federal versus state officials.

When asked about specific election scenarios, views fall along political lines; Republicans emphasize voter fraud and Democrats elevate foreign interference and voter suppression. Sixty percent of Republicans say it is very likely that mail-in ballots will be tampered with, and 51 percent believe it very likely that people who are not eligible to vote will vote. A majority of Democrats (57 percent) say that a foreign country might use social media to turn Americans against each other, and 56 percent say it is very likely that politicians will deliberately discourage some people from voting.

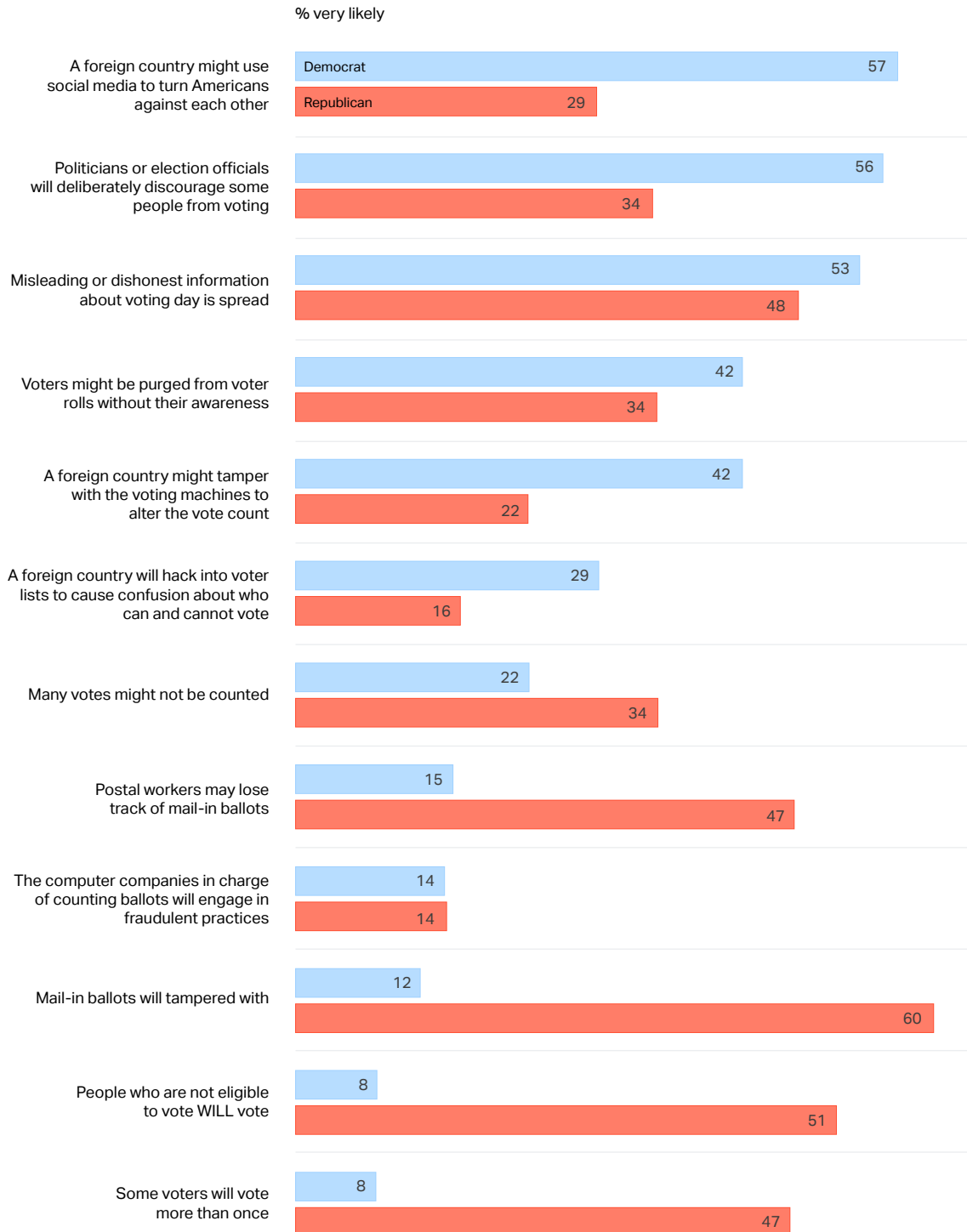
"I am more concerned with voter fraud than I am about the public safety when it comes to coronavirus. I am more concerned about voter fraud because it's already happening in states with our current securities in place. If you then allow everyone to mail in vote, ballots could be "lost" or manipulated given and even less accurate number for each candidate."

— Nicole, 25-34 white woman, Republican

Figure 3

Likelihood of Election Scenarios

Democrats' concerns center on foreign interference and voter suppression. Republicans are concerned about voter fraud.



The following describe possible scenarios for this year's elections. How likely do you think each of the following will occur in this year's federal elections?
 Complete data available in the appendix.
 Source: More in Common (2020)

Each party also thinks that the other party is more likely to engage in these actions. Sixty-five percent of Republicans believe Democratic voters are more likely than Republican voters to engage in voter fraud. Sixty-six percent of Democrats feel that Republican officials are more likely than Democratic officials to engage in voter suppression.

Breaking out the responses to specific election concerns by race, Black Americans (12 percent) are less likely than White Americans (35 percent) to believe Democratic voters are more likely to engage in voter fraud, and are slightly more likely (46 percent and 38 percent, respectively) to believe that Republican officials are more likely to engage in voter suppression.

Democrats and Republicans agree that the spreading of misinformation about Election Day is a plausible scenario, with 53 percent and 48 percent, respectively, saying this scenario is very likely to happen.

Americans also recognize that the current pandemic will bring about changes to their usual voting experience. Eighty-four percent—majorities across Democrats (93 percent) and Republicans (75 percent) agree that it is reasonable for the government to require that people wear face masks in polling stations to vote. Views on the alternative to voting in person, voting by mail, are split: 85 percent of Democrats but only 28 percent of Republicans approve of mail-in ballots as a secure and valid voting method.

“I am extremely concerned that people will be fooled by misinformation campaigns to believing vote by mail is not secure. I am also extremely concerned, pandemic or not, that Russia or China or other adversaries to the US will be able to tamper with our election process, both prior to elections through misinformation and during elections by conducting voter fraud.”

— Rita, 18-24 white woman, Republican

About 7 in 10 Americans are worried about the risk of widespread violence breaking out across the country after election results are announced.

This worry is more pronounced among Republicans (85 percent) than among Democrats (70 percent). When asked if they expect a peaceful continuation of power if President Trump is re-elected, more than 60 percent of Americans said it would not be a peaceful continuation. Similarly, in a scenario where Joe Biden is elected, Americans are split on the transition with 48 percent saying it will not be a peaceful transition of power.

71% Worry about the risk of **widespread violence** across America after the results of the 2020 election are announced

Source: More in Common (2020)

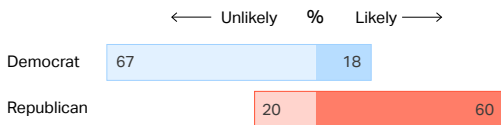
Democrats and Republicans are skeptical about the candidates accepting the election result if they lose. If Biden is elected president, most Democrats (83 percent) think it is likely that President Trump will delay or stall on his decision to accept the result, and 74 percent of Democrats think he will reject the results and refuse to concede. If President Trump is re-elected, 67 percent of Republicans say it is likely that Biden will stall on accepting the results, and half think that he will refuse to concede.

Figure 4

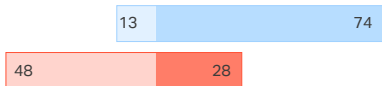
If Joe Biden wins

The majority of Democrats expect Trump to reject the results if he loses.

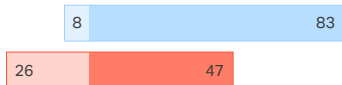
President Trump will **accept** the results of the election and concede to Joe Biden



President Trump will **reject** the results of the election and refuse to concede



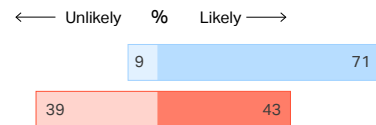
President Trump will **delay or stall** on his decision to accept the result and will call for a recount



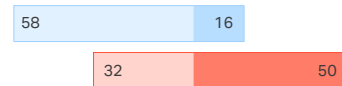
If Donald Trump wins

Half of Republicans expect Joe Biden to reject the results if he loses.

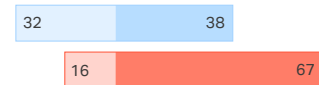
Joe Biden will **accept** the results of the election and concede to President Trump



Joe Biden will **reject** the results of the election and refuse to concede



Joe Biden will **delay or stall** on his decision to accept the result and will call for a recount



Imagine that Joe Biden wins the presidential election in November, what do you think is the likelihood of the following scenarios occurring?

Unlikely includes moderately and very unlikely;
Likely includes moderately and very likely.
Complete data available in the appendix.
Source: More in Common (2020)

Imagine that President Trump wins the election in November. What do you think is the likelihood of the following scenarios occurring?

Alongside of these stark findings, however, we see evidence of Americans' willingness to prioritize the health of the country over their partisan concerns.

Eighty-one percent of Americans believe that "no matter who wins the Presidential election, it is essential that all Americans accept valid results." And 71 percent agree it is more important to come together as a country after the election than to challenge the result if their candidate loses the presidency.

81%

Believe no matter who wins the Presidential election, it is **essential** that **all Americans accept valid results**

71%

Believe it's more important that we **come together as a country** after the election than to challenge the result if their candidate loses the presidency

Source: More in Common (2020)

"I do believe that, at the very least one should care about the country, viewing it as their home and wanting the best for it (even if people disagree about what's "best"). And for that reason, I do feel like the ideal American should want to help the country any way they can."

— Edward, 25-34, white man, Democrat

The majority of Americans expect election results within days of Election Day but recognize delays that may be caused by the current pandemic. Fifty-six percent of Americans expect results for the presidential race to be finalized within 48 hours of election night (25 percent expect results on election night). When asked what the maximum acceptable length of time is for results, 47 percent say 48 hours after election night, with another 28 percent willing to wait 3-7 days after Election Day.

When the coronavirus and the changes to voting made necessary by the pandemic are explicitly mentioned, Americans show a greater willingness to wait longer for results. Eighty-one percent of Americans said that they would be willing to wait a few days for results to be announced in this scenario. Fifty-five percent of Americans said they would be willing to wait a few weeks, although Democrats are more willing to do so than Republicans.

Americans believe that longer election result wait times for the election result imply a higher likelihood of fraud. Seventy-three percent of Americans believe that the longer they wait for election results, the higher the chances are that there will be election fraud. There is some partisan variation in this belief with Republicans (89 percent) more likely to agree than Democrats (63 percent).

Overall, these findings paint a complex portrait of Americans who, though they believe in the importance and power of the democratic process, are apprehensive about the negative events that could occur during and after this year's Presidential election. There is also uncertainty around when Americans will find out results. Yet, Americans are also willing to do what is necessary to ultimately move forward as a country, even if their candidate for president loses the election.

V Americans' Media Behavior and Perceptions

Americans' views towards democracy and the upcoming election cannot be explained without a discussion on the role of media—the sector with arguably the most power to frame the narrative of the state of the country. Nearly half of Americans – 49 percent – report following news about politics every day, with an additional 23 percent saying they follow news about politics several times a week. In this section, we contextualize the American public's perceptions of the media industry as it relates to their views on democracy and civic action.

Most Americans do not believe that media sources of either ideological leaning tell the full story. Only 39 percent of Americans feel that media sources such as MSNBC and CNN tell the full story, and only 30 percent feel that media sources such as Fox News, Wall Street Journal, and the Daily Wire tell the full story.

Overall levels of confidence in the media are low and polarized. Fifty-six percent of Americans say they lack confidence in the media to do what is right for America. This lack of confidence differs widely by party, with 86 percent of Republicans and 29 percent of Democrats responding this way.

Feelings of being portrayed harshly by the media vary significantly by ideology. Seventy-three percent of Republicans feel that perceived left-leaning sources, such as MSNBC, CNN, and the New York Times depict them harshly. Democrats think similarly about media sources perceived as right-leaning, though only 53 percent say that sources such as Fox News, Wall Street Journal, and The Daily Wire portray them harshly. This aligns with the finding that Republicans compared to Democrats have higher distrust for the media.

“There needs to be an honest, unbiased source for information in this country because it is certainly not the media, social or otherwise. We all need to form honest opinions based on real facts, not just on what we see and hear on TV and other media. One subject cannot be overly saturated everywhere we look. It causes mental overload, and that does no one any good, except to increase frustration and anxiety levels in this country to a boiling point, which we have seen many times.”

— Vanessa, 55-64 white woman, Republican

Social media behaviors reinforce an information landscape that is increasingly fractured along political lines. The majority (59 percent) of Americans who use social media say that more than half of their social media network is composed of others who have the same political views. Increasingly tailored messages, curated consciously by the person or unconsciously by a computer algorithm, and often told by the loudest rather than the most representative messenger¹, can further contribute to promoting a divisive national rhetoric, and undermine Americans' capacities to welcome opinions even remotely discordant with their beliefs².

¹ Cohn & Quealy, 2019.

² Sunstein, 2018.

Americans' media consumption correlates with their feelings towards democracy and society. Americans who report more hours spent on social media are also more likely to have low satisfaction with the current state of US democracy. Americans who spend more time following news about politics are more likely to say they are frustrated, exhausted, and less hopeful.

Americans believe that what they see in social media and on the news may not match what they experience in their day-to-day life. Sixty-nine percent of Americans say that traditional and social media make America seem more divided than it really is.

69% Believe media/social media make America **seem more divided** than it really is

Source: More in Common (2020)

“When I see the news, it looks like our country is greatly divided with all the problems with racism and other issues. But when I go out in my local community, I’m not seeing these types of problems that I’m seeing on the news.”

— Warren, 25-34 white man, Republican

VI Local Communities: Where Americans Experience Trust and Democracy in a Polarized America

“Our local community doesn't talk about their personal politics too much and prefers to talk to each other as neighbors. The political climate nationwide, however, feels very polarized due to the worst elements being highlighted and emphasized by the media.”

— Joey, 18-24 white man, Independent

Local communities have long been a source of strength for American democracy. Many of the greatest democratic movements in American history – from the Revolutionary War to the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s – started with groups of people assembling at the local level. When we consider issues related to the integrity of the 2020 election, the local community is especially relevant given how much of the election system is run at the local level.

Americans feel there is less political division at the local level. While 58 percent of Americans feel the country is “very divided” politically, only 10 percent feel that way about their local community.

68%

Have confidence in **local officials** to do what's right for America

59%

Have confidence in **state government** to do what's right for America

39%

Have confidence in **federal officials** to do what's right for America

Source: More in Common (2020)

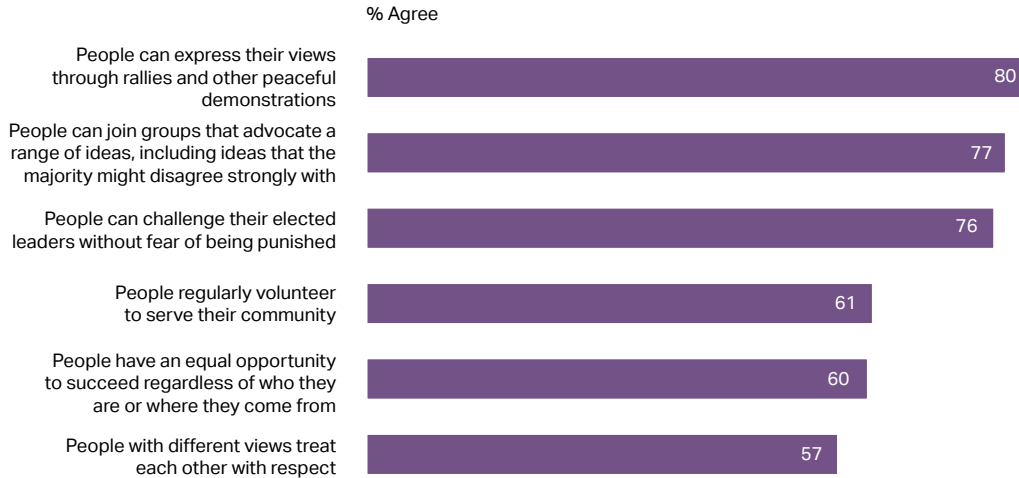
Local government officials are more trusted than national leaders. While only 39 percent of Americans have confidence in the federal government to do what is right for America, 59 percent have confidence in their state government and 68 percent have confidence in their local officials to do so.

Americans report a vibrant democratic culture at the local level. When asked about the community they live in, 57 percent of Americans say people with different views treat each other with respect; 80 percent say people can express their views through rallies and other peaceful demonstrations; and 77 percent say people can join groups that advocate a range of ideas, including ideas with which the majority might strongly disagree. Seventy-two percent of Americans say that in their local community, they are friends with people who have different political views.

Figure 5

Democratic Culture in Local Communities

Americans report a relatively vibrant democratic culture in their community.



In your opinion, how much do the following statements accurately reflect your experience in the community you live in?
'Agree' means at least '4' on a 6 point scale
Complete data available in the appendix.
Source: More in Common (2020)

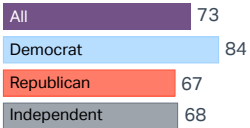
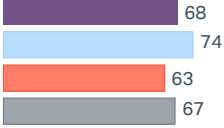
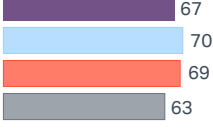
Local communities still face tension and challenges. There is a more complex discussion and need to address divisions in American communities, especially with respect to racial inequality. For instance, when asked about the community they live in, 60 percent of Americans agree people have an equal opportunity to succeed regardless of who they are or where they come from; however, only 45 percent of Black Americans agree with that sentiment compared with 64 percent of white Americans.

The shared democratic culture and the strength of relationships at the local level is an encouraging and critical sign, especially at a time when trust is more fractured towards many national institutions. The findings at the local level suggest there is ample opportunity for talking and engaging across political differences, to support nonpartisan, community-oriented actions to strengthen democracy.

VII Ways to Communicate About Strengthening Our Democracy During a Divisive Election

Democracy is strengthened when Americans engage with the democratic system and when eligible voters have their voices heard through election processes that are secure, safe, and fair. If issues around election processes or outcomes arise, communities can strengthen democracy by resolving any challenges through the appropriate democratic legal system, and by organizing and engaging in peaceful ways that do not attack other Americans or further drive the country apart. A critical element in empowering our communities to best navigate the election period is communications—the ability to reach people, connect with them, and build a shared commitment to act in ways that keep democracy strong.

To help with such communications, More in Common used research insights described in the previous sections to develop and test messages about democracy and the integrity of the election system. The goal was to identify approaches for communicating with Americans that resonated with people of all political backgrounds. More in Common tested these messages with a sample of 2,000 Americans. Effectiveness was evaluated based on respondents' general agreement. A sample of high-performing messages is shown below. Additional communications guidance is found at www.democracyforpresident.com.

Theme	Message	% Agreement								
<p>Duty to democracy. Messages that appeal to civic duty and personal responsibility.</p>	<p><i>“Duty means doing the right thing even when it’s hard. This year, Americans have a duty to wait for every valid ballot to be counted even if it takes a while – because a slower process is just as valid as a fast one. Every generation before us has done their duty to keep our democracy strong, it’s up to us now.”</i></p>	 <table border="1"> <tr><td>All</td><td>73</td></tr> <tr><td>Democrat</td><td>84</td></tr> <tr><td>Republican</td><td>67</td></tr> <tr><td>Independent</td><td>68</td></tr> </table>	All	73	Democrat	84	Republican	67	Independent	68
All	73									
Democrat	84									
Republican	67									
Independent	68									
<p>Appeal to trust at the local level. Messages that highlight the integrity of local election officials who are also our neighbors and friends.</p>	<p><i>“America’s election workers are our neighbors and friends who work side by side to make sure every ballot is counted, fairly and properly. Our election systems are not perfect, but we can trust our local election workers to ensure the accuracy of this year’s election.”</i></p>	 <table border="1"> <tr><td>All</td><td>68</td></tr> <tr><td>Democrat</td><td>74</td></tr> <tr><td>Republican</td><td>63</td></tr> <tr><td>Independent</td><td>67</td></tr> </table>	All	68	Democrat	74	Republican	63	Independent	67
All	68									
Democrat	74									
Republican	63									
Independent	67									
<p>Enduring tradition of America’s successful elections. Messages that emphasize the robustness of America’s electoral process and appeal to national pride and American exceptionalism.</p>	<p><i>“No election system is perfect, but America’s elections are some of the very best in the world. Americans have been holding elections for almost two-hundred and fifty years. We have successfully voted during the Civil War, two World Wars, and other crises. Americans can be confident that we will overcome this year’s challenges to hold a fair election.”</i></p>	 <table border="1"> <tr><td>All</td><td>67</td></tr> <tr><td>Democrat</td><td>70</td></tr> <tr><td>Republican</td><td>69</td></tr> <tr><td>Independent</td><td>63</td></tr> </table>	All	67	Democrat	70	Republican	69	Independent	63
All	67									
Democrat	70									
Republican	69									
Independent	63									

General Messaging Guidance. In addition to using language and framing that resonates with your audience, a crucial part in engaging other Americans – especially those with different political views – is how you approach the conversation. This can be difficult and so to help facilitate these conversations, More in Common recommends the following framework.

- **Appeal to a shared identity and a shared goal.** People respond more positively when they are included in the message— “we have more that unites us this election than divides us”. Similarly, instead of setting out to persuade someone to adopt your point of view, try to frame the conversation about a set of shared actions everyone can take towards a common goal. Frame differences in opinions, even political opinions, as different routes to the same goal of strengthening and improving the country. Remember that even your concerns about the election can connect you—caring about the health of your community and about American democracy are things you have in common.
- **Speak to concerns, but through a local lens.** As the research demonstrates, local communities are where people feel belonging and hope. It can be productive to speak to these sentiments by focusing on everyday often-overlooked democratic actions, such as acts of kindness in people’s local community, especially during the pandemic. It is also important to address concerns people raise about the integrity of the election. If they are concerned about the security of mail-in ballots, for example, talk about the steps your local election officials take to ensure the validity of the process. We know that democracy is more strongly felt in neighborhoods, and that regardless of the divisiveness in the national rhetoric, most Americans think their local community has more in common than what divides them.
- **Be slow to judge. Recognize that people came to their opinions and conclusions in a thoughtful manner.** Hear the reasons and emotional motivations behind their opinions. You can acknowledge the authenticity of a person’s belief without affirming the validity of a claim with which you disagree. This can create opportunities to frame the conversation about shared goals, values, and hopes for your community, the election, and democracy.

Additional communications guidance can be found at www.democracyforpresident.com.

VIII Conclusion

A successful democracy requires confidence in the institutions that are put in place to serve the people. As this report makes clear, many Americans feel our collective faith in democracy is under pressure this election. Yet it remains in Americans' power to either meet this pressure in ways that undermine democracy—by disengaging or turning on each other—or in ways that bolster the resilience of our system.

This report aims to support efforts to strengthen our democracy by providing insights and guidance for how to communicate to people across America's polarized politics. It is intended to serve individuals and organizations who recognize the stress this election season is putting on our democracy and who want to build faith in the capacity of our election systems to deliver a legitimate result.

There is significant opportunity and need for communications efforts that start at the individual level – friend to friend, neighbor to neighbor – and scaffold up to the community level. Such efforts can mitigate election misinformation, foster greater will to ensure safe, fair, and peaceful elections, and set the conditions to successfully navigate the challenges to our democracy that lie ahead.

More in Common looks forward to working with partner groups on such efforts. The resources available at www.democracyforpresident.com build on the findings laid out in this report. We hope that individual Americans, nonprofits, civil society groups, government agencies, businesses, faith leaders, and others will use these insights and resources to take needed action and to drive critical conversations.

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Full Appendix Available Here

<https://www.moreincommon.com/our-work/publications/>

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