



*A HOUSE DIVIDED?
REFLECTIONS ON THE PUBLIC'S MOOD*

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October 2017

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The Research Design

Background. Shortly after the 2016 election, we were asked to explore public thinking and to try to understand what’s going on in the United States beyond the conventional wisdom. Working with Paloma Dallas, we investigated how Americans feel about the country, its problems, the government and their relationship to it, and how they feel about their own future. The research design began with an interview with Senator John Unger, the Minority Leader of the West Virginia State Senate and a scholar-in-residence at the Kettering Foundation, followed by four focus groups: one with union electricians, white men between 25 and 40 with a high school education, in Middletown, Delaware,¹ and three with cross-sections of the public with at least some post-high school education, including trade school, in Cincinnati, Dallas, and Los Angeles.² We also conducted additional interviews with Alberto Olivas, executive director of the Pastor Center for Politics and Public Service at the University of Arizona, and Reverend Robert Turner, a program officer with the Black Belt Community Foundation in Selma, Alabama, both of whom are familiar with the Kettering Foundation’s work and have demonstrated a keen insight into the public’s mood.

A Note about Methodology. “A House Divided” used qualitative research—focus groups and interviews—to help explain and interpret quantitative research, i.e., current public opinion polling. Both methods have advantages and disadvantages.

Polls, if done well, have a particular strength: they yield an astonishingly accurate picture of public opinion at a point in time. Interviewing no more than a few hundred people can reveal what 300 million think.

But we at Kettering rarely rely on polls for a variety of reasons. For one thing, people can tell you what they think only about the specific question asked. It’s a

¹ We felt that the foundation may not always hear the voice of skilled labor, especially young white men with no more than a high school education, a key group in the 2016 election. The Delaware group was conducted on June 8, 2017. Major stories that week included a terrorist attack in London (6/3/17), US air strikes against Syria (6/7/17), and congressional testimony by former FBI director James Comey (6/8/17). Interestingly, none of these issues were mentioned in the two-hour-long group discussion.

² These groups were conducted on August 15, 16, and 17, 2017, when the news was dominated by the protests and violence in Charlottesville, remarks by President Trump about those events, and reactions to his comments.

challenge to get people to elaborate on or clarify what they mean. Also, polls only measure ideas and concepts researchers have anticipated and prepared questions on. Polls often miss ideas and feelings that aren't already "in the air" in the public arena. Perhaps most important, as Dan Yankelovich taught us, public opinion is not static; it is fluid, constantly in motion, like a river meandering toward a public judgment. And so, polls are poorly suited for learning how people feel after they consider new information or arguments, or hear from others at some length and have time to deliberate about a complex public issue.

Americans' shifting views on the Affordable Care Act offer a current "real-life" example of how public thinking evolves as people consider additional information and perspectives. For many Americans, having the chance to juxtapose the pros and cons of "Obamacare" against the pros and cons of the various Republican alternatives caused their views to shift. That is, the ACA became more popular when people were forced to contemplate the alternatives.

Focus groups have strengths and weaknesses. People can talk at length, explain what they mean; they can describe problems in their own words and how issues affect their own lives. Focus groups enable people to take in information and consider other people's opinions; they give people the time and opportunity to deliberate about questions put to them. And focus groups enable researchers to ascertain how people "name" problems compared to how experts and leaders "name" them. Focus groups are often used to unearth insights or reveal additional information. In the language of research, they are especially good at generating hypotheses that can be tested in further work.

But focus groups, too, have a weakness. Compared to polls, they are more likely to be misleading. Or wrong. Far more likely. For starters, groups consist of small samples that are usually not random; a group may be dominated by one or two articulate people; people may not say all they want to, or be afraid to offend, or worried about how others may see them if they speak out honestly. Finally, interpreting focus group results varies depending on the skill and analytical ability of the researcher.

We say this as a caution. As you read this report, please keep in mind that at least some of the observations we present may be wrong. Dead wrong. And may not be borne out by subsequent research.

The Conventional Wisdom vs. What We Heard

#1. The Conventional Wisdom: Americans believe the country is on the wrong track because of economic stagnation and growing income disparity.

What We Heard: That's not what people said at all—in fact, their main concerns were in other areas.

To gauge the public's mood, pollsters have long asked this question: “Are things in the nation generally headed in the right direction or off on the wrong track?” Over the past 25 years or so, there have been only three periods when a majority said things were headed in the right direction: from 1998 until early 2001, when the economy was strong; in the aftermath of 9/11; and in 2003 when the Iraq War began.³ With those exceptions, most Americans, and often huge majorities, said we're on the wrong track. That is, optimism was due to either a strong economy or the nation drawing together because of patriotism.

Researchers know that it's problematic to do a head count in focus groups. Samples are small, in this case they were not random, and the conversations influence how people feel. But researchers also know that when a small group overwhelmingly agrees about something—as when a diverse jury quickly finds someone innocent or guilty—we can be confident that other groups will pretty much feel the same way. We also know that when several small groups express opinions that have an internal consistency, a logical coherence—in short, when people's views “fit” together—we can be reasonably confident we are gaining insight into what we call The Public Mind. In this work, both of those things applied.

We began each group by asking the right direction/wrong track question. In all four groups, overwhelming numbers—nearly four to one—said the country is on the wrong track. But people in these groups did *not* name the economy as their top priority. Instead, they saw a variety of other social and political issues as more troubling to themselves personally and more perilous to the nation as a whole.

³ See Figures 1 and 2, page 23.

In short, and as we'll explain, the polls may be missing something. Or underestimating its importance. And leaders who rely only on polls could be making erroneous, counter-productive assumptions.

#2. The Conventional Wisdom: People are voting their pocketbooks. Their dissatisfaction with their personal life prospects (or the prospects of their kids) led to their desire to upend the globalist economic agenda and put them at odds with Americans who benefit from it.

What We Heard: People were pretty happy with their personal economic prospects and security.

It's often said people are dissatisfied with the direction of the country because of economic stagnation, a lack of good-paying jobs, the impact of globalization, and growing income disparity. When we asked why things are on the wrong track, some people did name economic issues: not enough good-paying jobs; the wage gap and income disparity; the cost of housing; the federal deficit and national debt. But all those issues, taken together, were named much less frequently than other concerns we will discuss below.

In fact, in group after group, people said the economy is improving and they themselves are feeling the effects. A Delaware man said:

The economy's a lot better. From 2008 to now, it's really taken a turn. People aren't getting kicked out of their houses left and right because they can't afford their mortgages, things like that.

More important, when we asked people whether they themselves would be better or worse off five years from now, solid majorities in all four groups expected to be better off than they are today.

Another Delaware man said:

I've worked for five years, which puts food on the table, a roof overhead. [I've been] able to advance. . . . I don't think we're going to run into anything major in five years that will cause the economy to crash or anything to go south. So, I'm optimistic about my future.

This sentiment was echoed across the country. When we pointed out in the Cincinnati group that while people had overwhelmingly said the country is on the wrong track they

were also optimistic about their own future, a woman in that group laughed self-consciously and to a lot of nodding heads said, “That makes no sense, does it?”

#3. The Conventional Wisdom: The politicians and ideologues are divided but the American people aren't.

What We Heard: Yes, leadership divisions are a major cause of the public's frustration. But there's more to the story. Far more.

People did see the national leadership as nearly hopelessly divided. A man from Delaware said:

The Democratic Party is as far as they can go their direction . . . and the Republican Party as far as they can go in their direction. And nobody is fighting for 85 percent of the country that sits right in the middle.

People bemoaned leadership's unwillingness to seek common ground. Political bickering and gamesmanship, they said, blocks leaders from working together on national problems, which only fester and become more urgent. A Los Angeles man spoke for many:

When a Republican's in office, the Democrats vote against [everything the Republicans want], even if it's a good bill. . . . If a Democrat's in, Republicans do [the same thing]. . . . [That] really hurts the country.

In the three interviews we conducted, all unanimously agreed that the voice of most people is not being heard. One said that because of gerrymandering and primaries that favor candidates with more extreme views, most general elections “don't reflect what people really want,” adding, “Only a small minority is well represented.”

Health care was often cited as an example, with people complaining about politicians' unwillingness to work together to fix the Affordable Care Act. A Cincinnati woman said:

Our insurance premiums keep going up and up and up. Then I hear that, if the health-care system gets overhauled, they're going to skyrocket again.

This sentiment was voiced across the board, from those who opposed Obamacare, from those most worried about health-care costs, and from those who favored

universal coverage or a single-payer system. A Dallas woman summed it up this way:

Nobody cares about working for the better good. Instead of [leaders] coming together and saying, “Okay, I’m going to take [on] health care, we’ve got to fix this,” it’s like nobody even wanted to really sit down and compromise on anything. . . . It’s either my way or the highway.

But division and intransigence among political leaders were only part of the problem. People often saw the gap between the interests of those in power and the needs of the American people as equally, if not more, dangerous to the country. A Cincinnati man said, “We have a government ruling class that stays up there forever, be it Democrat or Republican.” Another man there said government is “like a big money grab and a lot of lies.” A Los Angeles woman said, “You have [leaders] that are only interested in themselves, and not the American people.” A Delaware man added:

The people . . . don’t have the power to really change much in this nation. Because all the power has been taken away [from us].

In the focus groups, people repeatedly said the government fails to do its job or take care of basic obligations; it is not responsive to *our* wishes; it does not represent *us*; it does not *belong* to the people; it is, in short, *the* government, not *our* government.

At this point, the question could fairly be asked: What *are* the public’s wishes? What do Americans *really* want? Aren’t their preferences all over the map? When any policy proposal surfaces, people instantly take sides, with large numbers objecting or in favor. People may *say* government is unresponsive, but because they do not understand the complexities of the issues, their views are often unrealistic and simplistic. Because people do not realize just how tough problems like health care are, isn’t it impossible for elected officials to be truly responsive?

Such questions are precisely why the Kettering Foundation and Dan Yankelovich put forth the idea of “choice work” to address the public’s lack of understanding and conflicting wishes. For example, people often complain that if members of Congress did not have such good insurance plans—better than everyone else’s—they would fix the health-care dilemma. While probably true to some extent, people do not realize the challenge of fixing the system so that everyone gets everything they want and need at an affordable price. In the end, the public’s belief that complex, “wicked” problems could be

solved quickly if leaders only tried harder or weren't mainly looking out for themselves only breeds cynicism and bitterness.

Over time, Americans have shown themselves to be pragmatic, not ideological. While surveys may show majorities or even strong majorities favor such-and-such position on various issues, public support is often thin; it is not worked through. As noted, public opinion is constantly in motion, moving toward a public judgment. And as it moves toward a judgment, the public will set what Yankelovich called the boundaries of political permission. Boundaries that can be likened to the banks of a river. Within them, the public expects leaders to develop practical, pragmatic solutions that are equitable and broadly acceptable.

The bottom line is that people want, and expect, leaders to lead. But lead within boundaries set by and with the guidance of—and with ongoing input from and in partnership with—the people they were elected to serve. Leadership compromise, with input from and working with the public, is one of the few—and perhaps the only—avenue for overcoming the public's cynicism and disaffection.

#4. The Conventional Wisdom: People are fed up with government and government employees, seeing them as incompetent and lackadaisical—or perhaps even pursuing an agenda that is at odds with what most Americans want.

What We Heard: People said most government employees work hard and care about the public interest. By far, the lion's share of their dissatisfaction was directed at elected officials, especially at Congress.

While there was a considerable sense that the federal government is too big, overreaching, and wasteful, people also said the vast majority of federal employees work hard, know what they're doing, and sincerely try to serve the public interest. People were mainly unhappy with elected leadership, not rank-and-file government employees.

In the four groups, we asked: "Let's talk about the people who work for the government. Do you think most of them work hard, pretty much know what they're doing, and care about serving the public interest, or not?"

In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan often quipped about the threat of government and government workers: "The most terrifying words in the English

language,” he said, “are: ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help.’”⁴ Yet, based on this research, those sentiments would seem to be far less widely shared than a few decades ago.

It is critical to note, however, that this finding is preliminary and comes with two caveats. First and most important, we did not ask follow-up questions or go into the implications of what people said at any length. Second, people may draw a sharp distinction between the bureaucracy and the people who work for government. And so, animus toward government may be aimed at the bureaucracy.

#5. The Conventional Wisdom: To the extent that Americans are divided, the divisions are between distinct groups: those benefitting from the new economy vs. those left behind; people in urban America vs. those in rural areas; those on the coasts vs. the rest of the country; those working in high tech vs. those in manufacturing, and so on.

What We Heard: Americans everywhere encounter the division in their own lives and in their personal interactions within their own circles and communities. We Americans are divided, people said, far more divided than we were a few years ago.

The observation that these political divisions have seeped into people’s personal lives in cities and towns across the country is perhaps the most important hypothesis emerging from this research. We heard this concern from people from all backgrounds and points of view, and in all parts of the country. People voiced this idea with a sense of unease and loss, perhaps fearing that some of our bonds of unity and shared purpose can no longer be assumed. Or reclaimed. Ever.

In the focus groups, we asked people, where are the divisions greater: among political leaders or among the American people? In each group, people said there are deeper divisions among the public than among leadership.

When asked why the country is on the wrong track, the issue named more often than any other was the discord and divisions among the American people. A woman from Los Angeles said, “It’s much more bitter now than it used to be.” A Los Angeles man offered this: “It’s either you’re on one side or the other. There’s not too many gray areas

⁴ http://www.searchquotes.com/Ronald_Reagan/Government/quotes/#ixzz4uGGEFZrn

anymore.” In Cincinnati, a man said, “There’s always constant arguing.” A woman there said, “We used to be America as a whole. Now we’re all like bits and pieces.”

Similar views were expressed in every group. In Delaware, a man said, “There’s much less sense of community . . . and sense of cohesion.” Another man there added:

Everyone should be coming together and working out their problems, trying to find a resolution instead of just fighting . . . against each other. We’re losing the sense of who we are as people. . . . The nation isn’t bound together anymore.

People in Dallas also voiced this sentiment, with a woman saying, “We’ve lost our sense of direction and our love for people; we’re [pulling] in all different directions.” A man there added:

We’ve lost our way. . . . We know who we *should be*. We know who we *were*. . . . [But] a lot of things are going to hell, to be honest.

Indeed, the degree of political polarization in the United States has increased sharply over the past 20 years, with the number of both Democrats and Republicans expressing a *very* unfavorable view of the other party rising from about 15 percent two decades ago to more than 55 percent today.⁵

People named six factors driving the polarization and divisiveness.

a. Some blamed the Trump Administration.

A Los Angeles woman said, “When the leader is mean spirited, and takes down and disparages women, blacks, Hispanics, [the] disabled, and Iranians, it [becomes] a free-for-all.” Another woman there added, “This administration has . . . given people who are not as accepting and open to having a diverse community . . . the confidence to be open about their beliefs.” A Cincinnati man said:

We [used to] stand for freedom. But now we will put up a big freaking wall and keep people out. . . . Our statue . . . says “Give us your tired, your poor. . . .” And now, all of a sudden, we’ve forgotten that.

⁵ Pew Research Center, April-May 2016.

A Dallas man said:

With the racial tensions going on right now, it's been very hit-or-miss with the presidency. I don't know where he's standing on what all is going on in Charlottesville or throughout the country.

A Los Angeles man said, "The man in the White House . . . has a narcissistic, belligerent personality." In Dallas, a man said, "We got a guy, bless his heart, I voted for the dumb jerk. But if he's anything, he's a lightning rod for lack of civility."

b. Others said Americans increasingly have divergent views and goals.

A woman from Dallas said, "People have different opinions about who we were, and . . . different opinions of who we want to be." A man from Cincinnati said, "Instead of 'we are all Americans' . . . we're losing that. . . . [But] if you read what's on the lady, that's what she says."

Some cited what they saw as perplexing inconsistencies. A Delaware man said his friend "was upset that they're not allowed to talk about Christianity at school, but his daughter had to write a paper on Islam." A minister's wife from Cincinnati said:

We [used to stand] for freedom. We stood for right of life. . . . We don't necessarily stand for those things anymore. [Some] stand for choice instead of being firm that life is life, no matter what. [Others] think everybody's life matters only when it's in the womb, but once they come out . . . they don't matter anymore. [Some] decide the [life of a] person on drugs doesn't matter, and that black people don't matter, and Hispanics don't matter. . . . But when I grew up, *everybody* mattered.

A man from Delaware said:

Black-on-black crime is the biggest killer of young black males. You want to say Black Lives Matter? [Okay. But] when was the last time Al Sharpton went to Detroit or Chicago?

Some felt that the country had become more liberal, including a Dallas man who said:

Before I had more pride about being an American. Now, I'm still proud of who I am as a person. But at the same time, I'm thinking where did we [as a nation] take this sharp left turn?

c. Many said talk radio and cable news deliberately provoke divisiveness.

A woman from Los Angeles singled out radio talk shows. "Rush Limbaugh, for example. The hateful things he says. That does not help this country." A man from Cincinnati voiced a similar view:

When public opinion is determined by shock radio and talk radio, where these guys go out of their way to cause controversy, the question [I have] is, "whatever happened to being nice to one another and not being rude?"

Most saw cable news as biased, presenting definite points of view instead of straight reporting. People agreed that FOX News is decidedly conservative while CNN and MSNBC are clearly liberal. A Dallas man said:

The news is biased based on what you're looking for. You have all these people that watch FOX News. People are obsessed with what they agree on. People watching CNN—that's what they agree on.

But while blaming cable news for exacerbating divisions, people confessed they themselves rely on only certain news sources while disregarding others. A woman from Dallas said, "CNN and MSNBC—I just hear their opinions and I go, 'You are out of your mind.'" An LA woman offered this:

I have a cousin who's very educated and a great guy. And since he's retired, he's listening to FOX News. Because of that, he is so poisonous. It's because he's listening to what they're saying.

Some said the media are interested only in ratings and gin up stories or make them more inflammatory merely to attract attention. A woman from Los Angeles said:

I think most news stations—the whole objective is to create fear in people. For instance, when you hear about Chicago and the South Side, it makes you not ever want to go there. . . . But you would have to be there or [be from there to] know [the city] is not like that.

Several called for a return to the days of people like Walter Cronkite: newscasters of great integrity, seriousness, and sensibility, and without an ideological ax to grind.

d. A lack of civility in social media fans the flames.

People said the impersonality of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media promotes a no-holds-barred style of communication, encouraging people to say things they would never say face to face. A man from Delaware said that “because of social media, [people] are able to insult somebody without any repercussions.” A man from Dallas added, “We’re getting to the breaking point in terms of lack of civility, which has been exacerbated by electronic communications and anonymity.”

e. “Political correctness”—which people talked about in personal and often deeply felt terms—makes matters worse.

People repeatedly used the phrase *politically correct*, saying it is a major cause of divisions in the country. Interestingly, hardly anyone based their comments on the widely reported controversies in politics, academia, or other sectors of public life. Instead, they described personal experiences that shaped their thinking on this hot-button issue. A Dallas woman said:

With conversations with family or whoever, I just don’t say anything. I don’t want to cause tension or disagreement. It’s like walking on eggshells.

A number of people said they’d criticized others for being politically incorrect. A woman from Cincinnati said, “We have children in our family . . . with mental disabilities. And [when] people say ‘retarded’ it sends me off the roof.”

Others said they had been chastised for being politically incorrect. A middle-aged white man from Cincinnati said:

I volunteer with inner-city Boy Scouts. And we take them out camping. . . . I yelled for a bunch of boys to come over. I said, “Boys, come over here.” And a woman who had never been there before, who was visiting and observing, told me I can’t use that term because of its racial context. They were 12-year-olds. The people who came to my defense . . . were all black gentlemen.

A young woman from Dallas said:

There was . . . an art exhibit [on campus] about victims of rape. And some of the pictures and some of the stories . . . were very

graphic. . . . I said to a friend, “Maybe they should have some sort of warning before you walk in because this is a student center. We have Girl Scout troops coming through here. This is a public space. Not everyone wants to walk right in and [see this].” And someone behind me turned and called me out very loudly in front of everyone for not being supportive of people who’ve been victims of rape or sexual abuse.

Some said they may inadvertently come across as politically incorrect. A Cincinnati woman said, “I’m a believer and sometimes my belief in the Lord . . . gets me to a place where I say something that is not necessarily [how] I mean it to be. But it comes across as being politically incorrect.”

A Cincinnati man tried to put it in perspective, saying:

I think parents and grandparents—you [might] say they’re losing their filter. But it dawned on me that the landscape continues to change, and terms like *retarded* that were used without malice 25 or 50 years ago are [now] . . . politically incorrect.

As part of the research, we also explored the theme of political correctness in our individual interviews. All agreed that being “politically correct” was a sore spot, a major cause for division. One admitted that he cannot take up certain issues even with his parents because his family’s divisions are so deep and distressing.

Another said this:

If you criticize somebody once, they’ll get upset with your criticism, but maybe they’ll evaluate [what they just said]. Criticize them twice and they’ll just get upset. [But if you] continue to criticize them, their reaction is either to get demoralized to the point where they don’t want to say anything and so conversation shuts down, or they’ll get angry and say, “I don’t give a crap what you say. I don’t care if you’re insulted. Go jump in a lake.” That’s what’s been happening. People feel criticized and so they’re reacting.

But while acknowledging that political correctness can be painfully divisive, yet another person interviewed pointed out that it is also a measure of progress and human decency:

It’s hard for me . . . to feel sorry for people who . . . are rude and insensitive to others. . . . Excuse me for living in a society that has improved from having black people sit at lunch counters and having milkshakes poured on them, and having coffee poured on

them. Cigarette butts put out on their backs and on their necks. People being called the *n*-word like it was their name. Excuse society for . . . acting civilized, at least in public.

These high levels of concern and anxiety about political correctness could have important implications for Kettering and the National Issues Forums—implications that may warrant further study. To the degree that political correctness promotes norms of respect for others and their life experiences, it is a plus. To the degree that it makes people feel like they are “walking on eggshells” when discussing difficult issues, it may be a drawback. It might be worth paying further attention to the role of political correctness in encouraging or discouraging deliberations among people in NIF forums.

f. What about *The Big Sort*?

There are undoubtedly other compelling explanations for the divisions in the country beyond what we heard in the groups. As a recent Kettering guest, Bill Bishop, reported, we Americans are separating ourselves in myriad ways. In his book *The Big Sort*, Bishop wrote that people increasingly decide where to live based on their lifestyle as well as their economic status, noting that in 1976, only about 25 percent lived in a county that went for one or another presidential candidate in a landslide. But by 2004, nearly 50 percent did.⁶

Bishop and others argue that Americans today don’t even agree on what is factual when it comes to basic scientific issues like climate change and vaccinations. To quote Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of New York’s Hayden Planetarium:

[People] have cultural, political, religious, economic philosophies that they then invoke when they want to cherry-pick one scientific result or another. . . . The day [when] two politicians are arguing about whether science is true, means nothing gets done. Nothing.

#6. *The Conventional Wisdom: People are enthusiastically dividing up into warring camps where their greatest desire is to impose their will on those with opposing views.*

⁶ *New York Times*, May 18, 2008.

What We Heard: People detest the divisiveness. They believe we've lost our way—in both our country and society. It's no exaggeration to say that Americans feel bereft about their relationships with their fellow citizens.

The conventional wisdom is that Americans are not only divided but at war with their fellow citizens and looking to vanquish them politically. But respondents in each group were distressed about what's happening. A Los Angeles woman said:

Especially with . . . everything going on with Charlottesville now, I see things are only escalating as days go by. And the more tensions grow [the more likely it is that] something's going to get out of hand.

Time and again, people bemoaned a lack of civility, the inability of citizens with opposing views to respectfully talk with each other. A man from Delaware said, "People have so many different viewpoints, they can't sit at a table like this without getting in a fight and [half] of us walking out the door." A woman from Dallas said:

There's a lack of people willing to listen to each other. . . . And when they can't listen to each other, you don't have to agree with the other person, just listen and hear them out. That's when the conflicts start arising.

People repeatedly agreed with this statement: "We used to stand for something but I'm not sure what we stand for anymore." A Cincinnati man offered this:

There's a whole lot of factions, left, right, and center . . . who don't have the country's best interest at heart. They only want their one little item that is all they vote or stand for. The country comes second to them.

In a recent study, University of Kansas political scientist Patrick Miller and his colleagues summarized a survey of college students' discussions about politics on Facebook and concluded that *only* (emphasis added) 14.7 percent, roughly 1 in 7, blocked or defriended a Facebook friend over politics.

But researchers know there is a vast difference between *statistical* and *analytic* significance. To illustrate, suppose *only* one in seven family members were an armed robber. Or a serial killer. Clearly then, a small raw number under most circumstances can have vast *analytic* significance, depending on the context.

In each group, people on both the left and the right said they had either been dropped or had themselves dropped a friend, sometimes a long-standing friend, because of a political difference. In Delaware, three men said they'd been dropped, with one saying:

I've had family members that don't talk to me anymore because I voted for somebody. I'm like, "Really? Come on. I would never do that to you."

Six people in Cincinnati said this was the case, with a man there saying:

I dropped a friend [who] did a big screed about how . . . anybody in the NRA is horrible. Yet he's inherited quite a bit of money and has actual armed guards in front of his house. And his wife has a driver who's armed. And yet he wants everyone else to go without guns.

A woman there said:

[I dropped a woman who] was my best friend from 7th grade through 12th grade. When they finally legalized gay marriage in Ohio, she was totally against it. She felt like I shouldn't be legally married ever . . . and I shouldn't be able to have kids.

In Dallas, a man offered this:

I was posting a lot about being anti-Trump. . . . [But] a lot of people . . . [wrote] "You shouldn't vote for [Hillary] because of this, this and this." . . . And I would fight back; we'd go back and forth to the point where we basically don't talk to each other anymore. . . . It got pretty nasty.

The depth of people's feelings about the damage these divisions are causing to the country, their communities, and in their own lives cannot be overstated. In some important respects, people's anxieties about sharp differences of opinion within their communities—and the prospect of being caught in a "gotcha" moment of being politically incorrect—could undercut their ability to talk about tough issues and find common ground, even where it exists.

Opinion polls and focus group research often show broad agreement on many key issues: expanding health coverage, improving education, getting money out of politics, to name a few. And leaders and analysts sometimes take comfort in these findings, reasoning that these shared concerns mean the problem of division is less serious than feared. But our research suggests that the idea of a new and malignant "division" in the

country may be taking on a life of its own. And constraining citizens' natural tendency to problem solve with those who have different political starting points.

Like public mistrust of institutions, the belief in division—and people's fears about it— seems to be overriding any “consensus platform” that exists beneath the surface. Our divisions, and our fears about these divisions, may become an enduring part of our public life.

#7. The Conventional Wisdom: Because the division in the country reflects economic, demographic, and geographic trends, there's no turning back. The divisions are permanent and getting worse.

What We Heard: People would make a remarkable trade—they would rather get along better with their fellow citizens than get exactly what they want.

While people may not know what to do about the divisions they see and feel, they repeatedly said it was refreshing and confidence-building to talk civilly with people they did not agree with. “We need more of this,” said a young electrician from Delaware, after the group discussion there. “A lot more.” A Dallas man said:

Look at this room. We're all sitting around, a very diverse group of people, being civil to each other and respecting each other's opinions and each other's time.

Taking a step back from the groups, consider Americans' reactions in the aftermath of the recent hurricanes. As people watched the Cajun Navy swing into action, TV newscasters pitching in to help stranded elderly, Americans from all backgrounds pulling together to aid their fellows, and record contributions pour in to relief agencies, we felt good about ourselves. One leader put it this way:

There's an old saying that there are no atheists in a foxhole. Well, during a time of natural disaster everybody is a socialist. They want the government to do everything for them, right then and there. [But we also see] everyday people helping each other [every way we can].

In a crisis, Americans do come together to help each other. And when that happens, we feel hopeful, optimistic, renewed. For a moment, we know who we are—we're Americans, damn it. And Americans stick together.

But these feelings are often transitory. They can be melted away by a tweet or an emerging issue or a dispute with a close friend or family member. People worried that the forces pulling us apart may be stronger than the bonds holding us together.

On the other hand, consider this: at the end of each group session, we asked people to imagine that using a magic wand, they could solve one—but only one—problem facing the country.

Their answers were all over the map:

- Eliminate the national debt.
- Improve education.
- Provide affordable health care for all.
- End racism and reduce racial tensions.
- Reduce illegal or undocumented immigration.
- Initiate term limits.
- Reduce tensions with North Korea.
- Lower taxes, especially for the middle class.
- Make sure every child has better parenting.
- Improve the economy, especially for middle and lower income people.
- Provide more good-paying job opportunities.
- Reduce the influence of big business and big money.
- Reduce crime and drug abuse.
- Get a new president.
- Provide more help for the poor.
- Make housing more affordable.

We then asked them to imagine that, using a magic wand, we could reduce—*reduce, not eliminate*—the divisions among the American people and simultaneously make sure that Americans talked with each the way they did tonight: with civility and mutual respect, listening to each other, considering what each other said.

We asked would they rather see that happen or would they rather solve their highest priority? Would they trade off solving the problem they just named as most important in exchange for less division and more civil discourse?

The results were remarkable. Not everyone, but a solid majority, said they'd make the trade. "Because if we did that," one woman said to a roomful of nodding heads, "we'd be able to unlock all these other problems. We'd be able to solve all of them."

In Sum: The key question coming out of this research is how deep and how permanent are these divisions?

Like people everywhere, we Americans are nationalistic. And, as naturalist E.O. Wilson has written, we are tribal too. Whether it's Alabama vs. Auburn, or NASCAR vs. the NFL, or Sibelius vs. Springsteen, we divide ourselves into groups. We are comfortable with those who share our interests, goals, and heritage; we are comfortable with people like ourselves.

But we Americans take pride in something else. We see ourselves as different. Unique. Unique because of our diversity. The country's motto is *E pluribus unum*. Out of many, one. And those words are alive for people; they are words people believe in, words Americans treasure. They are a touchstone of this country's heritage. They are a reason for hope.

Insights from the National Issues Forums, along with other KF research, suggest that it is possible to bridge the deepest divisions. In NIF forums, as in these focus groups, participants often say they feel better about those holding other points of view even though they continue to disagree with them.

Those we interviewed for this study were also hopeful. One said we are creating new definitions of community. Another said, "I'm an incurable optimist. . . . I believe if we're willing to stick together . . . our best days are ahead." A third said this:

We're at a crossroads of civilization. . . . [Yes,] all that's happening today . . . bothers me. But I have hope. . . . If we can get reconciliation and heal broken relationships, there's nothing we can't accomplish.

But our research also identifies some significant risks for elected officials, media, and other observers seeking to understand the deep sense of dissatisfaction among the

citizenry. Although our work is preliminary and not definitive, it casts doubt on three common assumptions about the public's current thinking:

- Questionable Assumption No. 1:

The public's concerns about political correctness and our fractious political culture are mere "noise" that will soon fade away. Our research suggests that this may vastly underrate the urgency of finding better ways for Americans to talk about the issues that divide them.

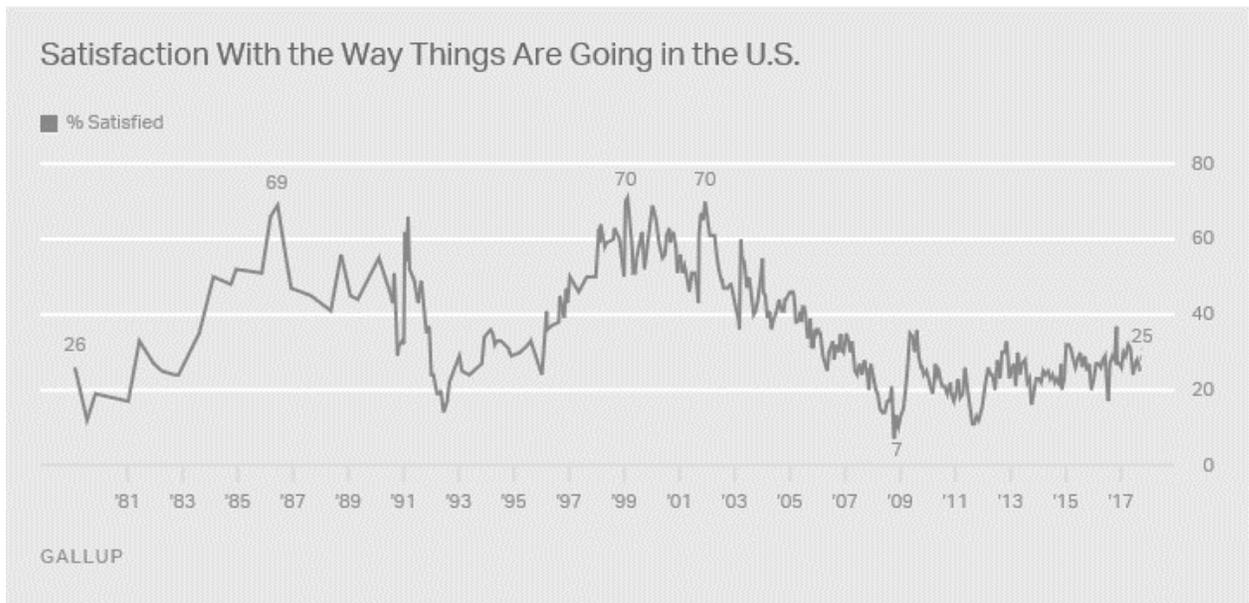
- Questionable Assumption No. 2:

Because polls often show broad agreement on issues "beneath the surface," division among the public is overstated. Our research suggests that the perception of a deep rupture and irreconcilable differences among different groups of Americans has become a problem in its own right. And that these divisions may take on a life of their own.

- Questionable Assumption No. 3:

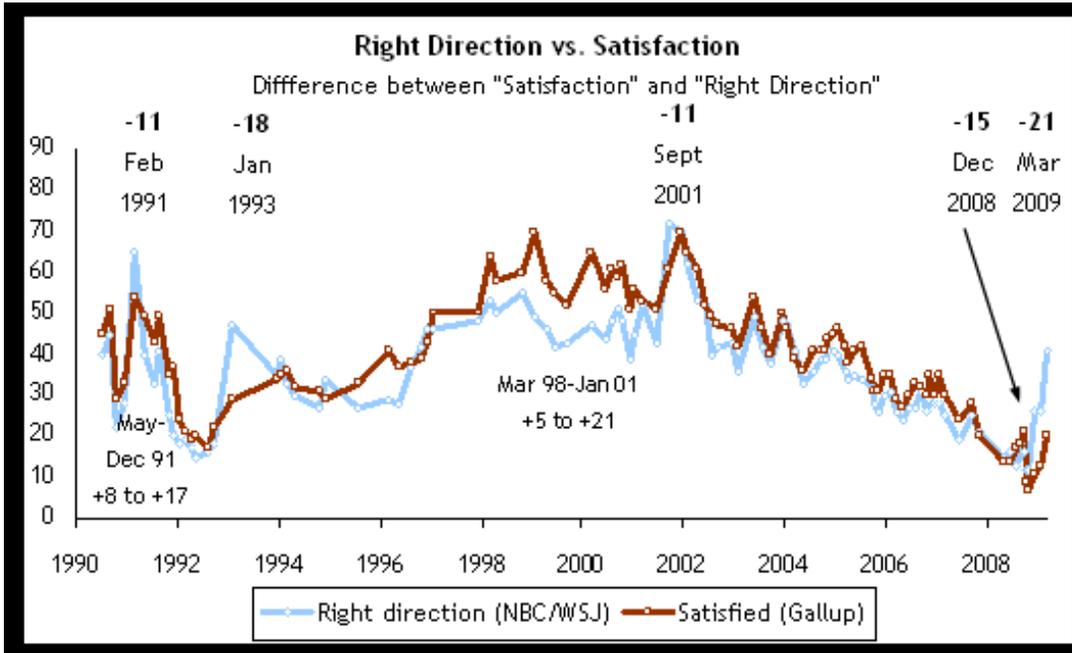
Economic factors and pessimism about the future are the principal drivers of the public's anxiety and dissatisfaction. This research suggests that Americans' longing for more cohesiveness and more constructive political discourse is more urgent. Even with a better and fairer economy, the divisions we are experiencing could be a wound left wide open to fester and worsen.

Figure 1
Satisfaction Levels in the United States



In general, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States at this time?

Figure 2



About the Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an independent, nonpartisan research organization rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Everything Kettering researches relates to one central question: what does it take for democracy to work as it should? Chartered as an operating corporation, Kettering does not make grants. The foundation's small staff and extensive network of associates collaborate with community organizations, government agencies, researchers, scholars, and citizens, all of whom share their experiences with us.

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