

# [***Americans Hate Divisiveness. We Need to Demand More From Our Leaders | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:69VM-PS71-JBR6-90XX-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** f we want something different in the political dialogue, we the people need to demand it by rejecting divisive rhetoric and rewarding substance and solutions.

**Body**

The potential shutdown of the federal government in January illustrates the risks of America's deep political divide. Although history will judge the effect of this political moment on our economy and society, we must recognize the potential for long-term damage to our communities today.

The distressingly low level of trust Americans have in their government—and in each other—is well documented in a new study by the Pew Research Center. The troubling results are captured in one sentence from [*the study*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/): "Americans' views of ***politics*** and elected officials are unrelentingly negative, with little hope of improvement on the horizon."

The proof for this harsh assessment is in the numbers. Today, 65 percent of Americans say they always or often feel exhausted thinking about ***politics***, and 55 percent feel angry. Only 10 percent always or often feel hopeful about ***politics***. So it is not surprising that 63 percent of Americans express little or no confidence in the future of the U.S. political system.

[*The survey*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/) uncovered more discouraging data:

* 79 percent of Americans use negative words to describe their feelings about ***politics***; the two most common are "divisive" and "corrupt."Just 16 percent say they trust the federal government always or most of the time.61 percent of the public say that talking about ***politics*** with people they disagree with is stressful and frustrating.And 28 percent of Americans have an unfavorable view of *both* parties, compared with just 6 percent who said the same thing in 1994.

As the leaders of The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Center (a subsidiary of the Trusts), we worry about the erosion of trust and America's move toward a distinctly unhealthy cynicism. But does the survey mean that American ***politics*** has run into a cul-de-sac with no way out? Surprisingly, no.

This negativity about ***politics*** does not mean that the public lacks opinions about how our system can be improved. An overwhelming majority—87 percent—favor term limits for members of [*Congress*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/congress?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). And nearly two-thirds would do away with the Electoral College and have the winner of the popular vote become president.

People can agree or disagree about how well government performs and how to address any perceived problems. But to say that government gets nothing done is simply wrong. Despite the frustration of political gridlock, our experience—as well as the experience of other nonprofits, community organizations, and individuals—shows that partisanship can give way to compromise and solutions.

For example, millions of Americans are getting connected to high-speed broadband and will be able to access essential services including education and health care, thanks to a provision in the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021.

Policymakers also came together in 2020—while the [*Senate*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/senate?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) was controlled by [*Republicans*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/republicans?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and the House of Representatives was controlled by Democrats—to pass the Great American Outdoors Act, facilitating greater public access to open spaces and recreation, along with providing funding to help fix our aging and beloved national parks.

And in Louisiana, South Carolina, and a number of other states, legislators from both parties are finding better alternatives to prison for nonviolent offenders, reducing burdensome costs to taxpayers while protecting public safety.

Although these examples and others give the two of us hope, the findings from our survey are clear: Democracy is under stress, which is a message we Americans must not ignore.

So how do we as a country move forward to strengthen our democracy?

By remembering, primarily, that compromise is not capitulation. After all, compromise is essential in a democracy as large and as diverse as ours. We Americans can resist the temptation to fall into the pattern of polarization, in which a win for your side must by definition be a loss for mine, and instead choose to discuss and debate the issues themselves. And we need to elect leaders who can see past their ideologies to focus on solutions, and who demonstrate that dialogue can bridge division.

To underscore this point, another finding from the study stands out: 57 percent of Americans believe that partisan conflicts receive too much attention these days. And 78 percent say there is too little focus on important issues facing the country. But if we want something different in the political dialogue, we the people need to demand it by rejecting divisive rhetoric and rewarding substance and solutions.

As we approach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, it's a good time to remember that America has experienced eras of extreme divisiveness in the past. At each of those times, our nation ultimately progressed by choosing to work across partisan and ideological divides for the common good.

The political will to do so—as it should in a democracy—originates in the people demanding more of their leaders, and their leaders responding.

*Susan K. Urahn is president and chief executive officer of The Pew Charitable Trusts and Michael Dimock is president of Pew Research Center, a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writers' own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2255730/us-congress.jpg)

**Graphic**

US Congress

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A file photo of the United States Capitol

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