



Light Many Fires

This book is part of a civic renewal project called **Light Many Fires**. It is devoted to helping Americans move from political exhaustion toward shared responsibility and constructive engagement.

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WHEN WE THE PEOPLE LEAD

THE LEADERS WILL FOLLOW

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**THE LEADERS
WILL FOLLOW**

Richard McKnight, PhD



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*To my beloved daughters, whose lives inspire this book:
May your generation lead us toward a freer,
kinder, more resilient America*

*And to the people of MLUC,
a continual inspiration*

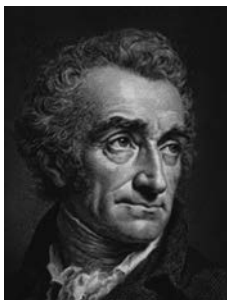
A NOTE ON SOURCES

My goal is to give you insights without a lot of academic machinery, while being transparent about my sources, giving credit where it's due. I strive to give credit in the body of the text. Where that is not possible, I've included a section at the back of the book called "Chapter Notes." For readers who simply want to follow the argument, feel free to ignore the Chapter Notes entirely.

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FOREWORD



If Thomas Paine were to speak from the beyond, he might say what follows.

My Fellow Americans,

I write to you from beyond the grave with fire in my spectral heart and alarm bells ringing in my soul. The democracy I helped midwife into existence—your democracy—stands threatened. I fear that many of you, distracted by your screens and your algorithms, will fail to stand up as tyrants threaten your country.

I wrote *Common Sense* because the colonists needed to wake up to their power. This book is written for the same reason: because many of you have forgotten that **you are the government**. You are *not* Subjects waiting for salvation from politicians, you are *not* passive Consumers of it—or shouldn't be. You *are* Citizens with power if you act like it.

The very threats I warned about in 1776 have returned in new dress: tyranny masquerading as patriotism, hypocrites

posing as moralists, extremists claiming *they* are the only true patriots, and good people retreating into inaction while demagogues seize control.

You say you love America? You pledge allegiance to America? Then fight for it. Not with muskets but with something far more powerful: civic engagement, acting in numbers with your fellow citizens. The author of this book is correct—**when *We the People* lead, the leaders will follow.** This was true in my day when we thwarted King George, and it remains true now as you face would-be kings and the bootlickers who aid them.

You are the heirs of a revolution that cast off a crown, that defied the mightiest empire on earth rather than live as subjects. The blood, sacrifice, and courage that won your independence are not relics to be admired from a safe distance, they are a summons to vigilance for all generations. **Stand up!**

In the midst of your troubles, some of you fantasize about fleeing to other countries or you tune out or become cynical, thinking someone else will fix things. **Stop!** I didn't risk the hangman's noose so you could abandon the republic when it needed you most. The "Exhausted Majority" described in this book—the nearly 70 percent of you who crave compromise, comity, and common sense—you are the inheritors of everything we fought for. **Act like it!**

The threats facing you are real: voter suppression, gerrymandering, dark money, the rise of Christian nationalism, nightmare technology that manipulates you, and politicians who prefer ruling to governing. But, from the other side of eternity, here is what should give you hope: Americans have faced worse. Your forebears defeated a powerful King, survived civil war, overcame depression, and vanquished fascism. You

can handle some would-be authoritarians if you stop acting like Subjects or Consumers and start acting like Citizens!

This book is not merely an analysis of our troubles; it is a manual for democratic resistance and community involvement. Stand up for democracy. Join something. Volunteer somewhere. Strengthen your communities. Vote in every election. Demand better from your representatives. Refuse to let cynicism become your master.

Each citizen must decide: Will I abandon the very idea of America? Will I bow before cynicism and gloom? Or will I fight like hell, waging the struggle that our very freedom requires? Do not allow despair to have the last word!

With undying faith in you, the people,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "T Paine".

Thomas Paine

Eternal Agitator for Liberty

*Thomas Paine was not an original signer of the Declaration of Independence but through his book **Common Sense**, inspired widespread support for the American Revolution throughout the colonies. Published in January 1776, it was America's first bestseller: It sold an estimated 500,000 copies by the end of the Revolution. Adjusted for population, that's the equivalent of tens of millions of copies today.*

PREFACE

The TV droned in the background on January 6, 2021, when I heard the words, “They’re breaking into the capitol.” I turned to watch, my anxiety turning to concern, then worry, then to outrage as I saw American flags being used as weapons against the police. The desecration of the Capitol and the use of the flag as a bludgeon, to me, revealed a crisis not just of politics but of spirit. I found myself fiercely protective of a symbol I didn’t realize I had come so much to cherish.

Afterward, and as a consequence, I told a friend that I was going to buy and display an American flag for the first time in my life. He gave me a friendly warning: “Be prepared for some reactions you may not like.”

With my wife’s blessing, I went to a website to buy the flag, and I read this in the product description:

**PROUDLY DISPLAY
YOUR PATRIOTIC
FEELINGS:**

**Express your love and
your admiration for
this great country!**



Though committed to the purchase, I was taken aback by the word “patriotic.” I stopped and asked myself: *Am I patriotic?* I do love the convictions on which this country was founded, but do I truly love my discord-riven, deeply flawed country?

After putting out the flag, I got one of those reactions my friend warned me about shortly after, not from the guy whose faded Trump/Pence sign from 2016 had finally fallen from the tree in his yard, but from my neighbor, an outspoken Democrat. Approaching me on the sidewalk one day, he asked reproachfully, “Are you a Trump supporter?” When I said no, he said, “Your flag tells me your home is a MAGA enclave.”

My reply was quick and clear: I see Donald Trump’s influence as deeply damaging to our democratic norms, but I hardly believe that all Republicans share his values. I said that many Republicans still hold fast to principles on which our country was founded, have integrity, and offer service to their communities. With those people, I am proud to be associated.

Sometime later, I wrote an editorial about the flag and why Democrats (like me) should fly it just as many Republicans do. Based on this, I was asked to give a talk to a group of liberals. In my remarks, I urged my audience to reclaim our symbol, asserting that doing so would potentially rekindle a spirit of enthusiasm for our country—at least in them. Afterward, most people thanked me, and some later sent photos of their own flags. But a small number objected. One said their anger at the country’s failings ran so deep that they would never consider flying the flag. Another was openly seething: “I hate this country. If I had the means, I’d move to another country tomorrow.”

This broke my heart. When people of conscience retreat from our nation’s symbol—not to mention moving away from

the country itself—we allow others who don't have our interests at heart to define and determine it.

As I've been writing this book, I've spoken to many people about my growing faith in America. One friend who has known me since my hippie days could hardly believe his ears. "Aren't you the guy that marched against the Vietnam War?" Another said, "How did you become such a Pollyanna?" Another hastened to point out our country's flaws. I am very happy to say, though, that 95 percent of the people who heard about this book still believe in our country's potential and not only wished me well but offered to help by telling me stories and in other ways, too. You will meet some of them in these pages.

To the naysayers, I get it. Ours is the story of an imperfect people trying to live up to some lofty ideals. We're blemished and defective. We do terrible things at times. And now, it seems we've completely lost our way. But as I have come to understand our history, I see us as a people who make mistakes but who also learn from them, who prevail, who strive and get better. And who are deeply good.

If you're young, you're probably cynical about America right now. I was once deeply cynical myself, especially during the Vietnam War, when it seemed like the country had abandoned its own principles, and again later during the Iraq War. Both periods left a mark on me. But they also taught me something important: Cynicism is a natural response to betrayal, but it's not a sustainable way to live. Eventually, you either give up or start looking for places where ordinary people are doing the slow work of repairing what's broken. I chose the latter. I hope you will, too.

In contemplating the events of January 6, I have come to recognize that when people lose faith in the transcendent

purpose that democracy had once provided and when religion falters or becomes divisive, something else must fill the void. If that “something” is fear, resentment, or, in the case of Christian nationalism, the hunger for domination, democracy cannot survive—unless the rest of us maintain the faith.

If each of us carries the faith that our neighbors are capable of goodness, that our shared life has meaning, that justice is real, then democracy can heal itself from within.

Looked at in this light, January 6 was not just a political riot—it revealed a profound collapse of faith in one another. It was a moment when part of the nation, untethered from truth and trust, attempted to seize by force what can only be sustained by mutual faith. I do not mean this in a religious sense. I mean that the only antidote to despair in a people like ours is not cynicism or counter-rage but the recovery of belief in one another’s basic goodness and a belief that the ideals symbolized by the flag are still worth nurturing—and can again light our darkness.

With this book I aim to play Cupid and attract you, perhaps for the first time, to your country and its potential. Another is to convince you there are meaningful answers to the question, “What can I do that could possibly make any kind of a difference?” Further, I am going to claim that as you join with others to restore our country, you will be happier and more likely to flourish.

I had my 78th birthday while writing this book. I’ve lived through enough American seasons to recognize when we’re at an inflection point. This book is my attempt to offer you a perspective that might help you build an America you can be

proud of. You certainly don't need an old man to tell you what to think, but what I can offer is a long view as to how change happens, how faith ebbs and returns, and how much power ordinary people have when they act together.

People, let's do this.

INTRODUCTION

A Time That Tries Our Souls

Americans are told, over and over again, that we are a people at war with one another. The fancy word is polarization. We are repeatedly told we're divided, hostile, that are differences are irreconcilable. But I will prove that this story is a big fat lie. Someone profits from telling us this lie. I will tell you who that is. All of us must push back on the lie. Our mental health depends on it, and our liberty does, too.

Though we may not be at war with one another, most of us are not happy with how conflict is handled and the way our politics go. Some of us are so disgusted with our country we're leaving or considering leaving. Most of us, even if we have no thought of leaving our country, feel a deep unease about it and look away. It's a relationship that, for many of us, is breaking down.

I spent over forty years as a social psychologist, helping people and organizations mend fractured relationships. Again and again, I saw this: When a relationship reaches a breaking point, we face three possible paths. Today, with respect to the relationship we have with our troubled nation, each of us must choose which one to take.

Leave it. This choice seems to have special appeal for liberals, the fallen idealists of our time. This choice also appeals to

the roughly 26 percent of Americans who have opted out of political life entirely, the group researchers call “the Disengaged.” Most concerning, this option tempts many young people, the very generation that will inherit the future.

Break it. This is the path of political warfare, of treating opponents as enemies to be eliminated. A very powerful minority on the right is doing this, including Donald Trump and his ilk. Steve Bannon uses this very language: Burn the whole system down, he says.

Stand up for it. This is the hardest path. It’s the choice to work with others to repair what’s broken. It asks us to face some uncomfortable truths: America is far from perfect, no one is coming to save us, and none of us alone can bring it closer to its promise. Yet each of us, in concert with others, can restore the integrity of our system and make our community lives better and richer.

This book is filled with stories of people, heroic and everyday, who are doing exactly that. These are ordinary Americans who have decided not to walk away, not to give in, but to stand up for the country they still believe can be better, by *making* it better.

If standing up for America is the choice you’re making, even if this is something you’re considering, this book is for you. Speaking personally, I am not going to leave or break something. No one takes my country and my liberty from me. I am in this for the long haul. And I am going to try to convince you to be, too.

Even if you are ambivalent about our country, I want to entice you to become intimate with our country, to understand its founding aspirations more deeply as well as the problems it faces, and then to join with others to improve it. I am hopeful

that what you read here will help you find a way to take your fear, or anger, or whatever you're feeling about our country, and find a way to help America get back on track. We've done it before and we can do it again.

An American tradition and the actual defining characteristic of democracy is that *We the People* can effect change when it's necessary. In fact, no one else can. Yes, the people who make laws and oversee the function of our government have power. In our system, *We the People* give it to them. And our history tells us that when sweeping change occurs, it's because *We the People* made our lawmakers do the legal work required.

Time and again, when Americans have organized, persisted, and made their voices heard loudly enough, politicians have responded. *We the People* have forced politicians to pass laws protecting workers and giving them the right to organize. *We the People* caused an end to the Vietnam war, the elimination of laws preventing interracial marriage, and the legalization of same-sex marriage, and on, and on, and on. Women's rights. Jim Crow laws. On and on.

Of course, this is easy to say. When things aren't working, and when we're socially isolated from one another, it can be hard to know what to do or how to begin advocating for the things that matter to us. Following the talks I've given on the themes in this book, the most common question I hear is, "What could *I* possibly do? I'm just little ol' me." One of my aims in writing this book is to help you answer that question.

To this point, at the end of every chapter you will find a short section called "Stepping Into Your Power." These sections contain thoughts about influence, politics, and how one person,

by shifting the way they think about their own daily conduct, can acquire greater agency.

You may not feel powerful right now. That's understandable; many of us don't. The problems around us are big, and there are few inspiring leaders showing us how to be effective together. But you *do* have power. You use it every day in how you speak up, what you support, what you avoid, and whom you stand with, and you can add your power to the many existing initiatives to improve our country. As you do this, you will feel more confident of the future because you're helping to build it.



In a sea of social media that foments despair, three dark forces threaten democracy.

xxiv *When We the People Lead*

This isn't about doing something dramatic. It's about learning to see yourself differently: not as a spectator of our government, or as a consumer of it, but as a citizen with a place in making our government and way of life work. One small step, taken with intention, is all you need to begin.

Now, let me introduce the hard part of this book, the powerful forces that swirl together and create our present troubles. This whirlwind is depicted in the graphic (previous page). Political extremism, civic decline, and oligarchic wealth are what ail us. Together, these forces create what I think of as a spiritual crisis, in the middle of the graphic. Surrounding, suffusing, and accelerating all three of those forces is social media.

If you have a pulse and don't live under a rock, you're probably troubled by what's happening in our country. Very large numbers of Americans are. Anxiety is common among us; so is fear. Many of us fear financial ruin, others political violence, still others a dystopian future or civil war. This is the center of the whirlwind, the despair we feel. Many of us—older, better resourced, supported by family—can withstand the current storm. But countless others cannot and are being battered cruelly.

I use the term *spiritual crisis* for this constellation of troubles because it captures not just the symptoms but the deeper ache beneath them. Maybe the term spiritual crisis makes you uncomfortable. If so, substitute the term “mental health crisis” or “existential crisis” instead, but even these terms tell of the depth of the problem we face. I'll explore this crisis more fully in Chapter Two.

When I use the term political extremism in the preceding graphic, I am referring to a menacing minority on the extreme

right that pretends to be about preserving what's essential about our nation but that is actually intent on degrading our liberty and recasting our country as a theocracy, a government grounded in a state religion. This movement goes by several names—Christian nationalism, MAGA, national conservatism. It is the focus of Chapter Four.

The extremism I'm describing thrives in the vacuum left by civic decline, the collapse of everyday participation in community life. Fewer of us now vote, volunteer, or spend time in the places that once connected neighbors and built trust: churches, service clubs, union halls, and local meetings. Without that trust, more people become vulnerable to the appeals of extremism. As I'll show in Chapter Two, civic engagement has been falling for decades. But the good news is, it can be rebuilt; we've done this before.

The third force, oligarchy, is the subject of Chapter Three. This is an economic system in which a very small number of extremely wealthy people control the politics, economics, and media of a nation. Such a system concentrates wealth in the hands of a few. In such a system, *We the People* have less and less power. Because we value our liberty, we must curb this system.

All of these problems, while dire, can be addressed if we work smart and work together. Through this book, I hope to enlist you in the emerging movement that seeks to refresh our democracy and ensure the conditions in which it thrives.

Here's the good news: What this requires from each of us has very positive *personal* payoffs; it's a win-win. When we take

action on behalf of the greater good, it's good for democracy, and it's good for our own health and happiness. The truth is when we do *anything* to build community—reaching out to a neighbor who needs help, volunteering for an hour at the library, or even starting a club—personal stress goes down. We lower our stress when we add something to our community by creating or joining a block association, shoveling the sidewalk of a neighbor, coaching a little league team, or volunteering for something. Even joining a book club lowers stress. And importantly, we lower our stress when we refuse to believe our fellow citizens are our enemies.

In this book, while I encourage you to devote time to the betterment of your neighborhood, your community, and your country, I urge you to do so through actions that respect your time, your energy, and commitments. You don't have to become a political activist or devote your life to a cause to play a meaningful role in helping our country get back on track. Standing up for your country should start with standing up for your neighborhood and your community.

Join With Others

That phrase is the key to the political and social turnaround we need. Even more important than our relationship with our country is our relationship, as citizens, with one another. We need one another and our country needs us: to work together, to join together. As *We the People* work together, we become powerful. As *We the People* stand up, the elected leaders notice and respond. They always have.

WHEN WE THE PEOPLE LEAD, THE LEADERS WILL FOLLOW

This is not just a clever phrase; it's a fact supported by history and by research, as we'll discover. When even a sliver of the population shows up steadily and refuses to relent, political leaders will take the steps necessary to defend democratic life. Americans in every era must preserve and renew democracy. Ours is no different.

This book follows the arc of a journey we must take in our time.

Part I puts us on a hard road. In it, we examine how we've been shaped into spectators and subjects and moved away from the citizen role. Part I asks us to face the forces that have drained our confidence, frayed our trust, and left so many feeling dispirited. James Baldwin once said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Naming these realities is the first act of liberation. My hope is that by confronting the spell we're under, we begin to understand why we feel so overwhelmed.

In Part II, we learn to travel not as individuals but as fellow citizens, building strength in company with others. This enables us to understand the core task of every American today: To say no to being a subject and to reclaim our power, to move away from the stupefying consumer mentality. This is the work of rediscovering the habits, mindsets, and alliances that make citizenship revitalizing and uplifting. Along this road, we remember that democracy isn't a machine that runs by itself; it's a *practice* that depends on citizens regularly exhibiting the routines of care for one another.

Having faced what is broken and with our tools of courage and cooperation in hand, we now act, repairing institutions and rebuilding community. In Part III, we make the choices that enable us to continue the journey and to do the work that renewal requires. The journey does not end at the crossroads; it begins there.

PART I

How We Lost Our Power

Every democracy in history has had moments when its people grew tired of shouting, of losing faith, of wondering if anything they can do will improve things. *We the People* are living through one of those moments. The headlines scream polarization, but beneath the noise lies something quieter and even more dangerous for democracy: exhaustion.

This section begins by naming that exhaustion. The intent is not to wallow but to see it so we can put something more wholesome in its place. Only by facing the truth of our weariness can we recover the will to act. We will meet the “Exhausted Majority,” the bulk of Americans who want decency and compromise but feel—and are—sidelined and worn out.

We will confront the sad state of civic engagement in our country today and how democracy suffers for it. We will look inward at the heartbreak beneath our politics: the loss of community, purpose, and friendship; the erosion of trust that has left so many feeling alone and discouraged about our country.

We will learn about how a determined minority of political extremists has brought about a “tyranny of the minority” and how this group is trying to weaponize citizen apathy and anger to redefine what America is.

We will also learn how a very small number of extremely wealthy Americans are increasingly controlling the tax laws, government regulation of industry, and the flow of information that shapes what citizens believe, discuss, see on their screens, vote for, and even think.

Part I is the act in which the hero faces the dragon and admits fear. Naming what's broken is the first act of repair. When we look unflinchingly at what's wrong, we become clearer about what we need to put back in place.

1

We are in a fight not against each other, but against the forces that thrive on chaos and division and are willing to destroy our institutions for the sake of power.

—ADAM KINZINGER, FORMER
CONGRESSMAN

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

—JUNE JORDAN, AFRICAN
AMERICAN POET AND ACTIVIST

We the Exhausted Majority

*Who We Are, What We Want,
Why We've Been Sidelined*

Maybe you know someone like Ashley, a 43 year-old woman I spoke to while writing this book. Maybe you *are* someone like Ashley. This is pretty likely since Ashley's views and behaviors are typical of a very large percentage of Americans.

Ashley works in a marketing role at a healthcare system in a suburb of a midwestern city. She was raised a Methodist but

stopped going to church during college. She is worried about our country as many of us are. “I wonder if we’re going to have another Civil War,” she said.

To Ashley, politics feels like a toxic game, one she never wanted to play. She told me she cares about fairness and decency, but politics to her feels like a shouting match between people who don’t know how to listen. She told me she thinks she “should probably care more about politics” but is largely disengaged. She votes some years, skips others, and feels vaguely guilty that she’s not doing what a citizen should, although when I asked her what they would look like, she wasn’t sure.

When I spoke with Ashley, a working mother, she said, “It feels like everything’s broken and I’m not sure anyone’s even trying to fix it. All politicians do is shout.”

Does she pay attention to current events, I asked? “I scroll through the headlines but not every day. It mostly makes me feel tired,” she told me. To assess how well informed she is, I asked if she could name three Supreme Court Justices. She could not. Does she know the names of the Senators from her state? She could name one but not the other.

Ashley could not speak about politics without revealing strong feelings, but those emotions pointed nowhere in particular. “Why do politicians fight with one another all the time?” she asked, offering the view that “They are all corrupt, both Republicans and Democrats. They only care about themselves.” That brought up the question: Is she a Democrat or a Republican? “I’m registered as a Democrat, but I’m really an independent,” she said. Both parties feel disappointing to her, more interested in bickering than solving problems.

Ashley worries about the high cost of living, climate change and healthcare costs but thinks her voice and views mean nothing to those in power. By turns, she was annoyed, anxious, and disillusioned with anything relating to government. She came off as a victim of politics and government, utterly without agency.

I asked about her involvement in her community. “I don’t go to church, but I give to the Salvation Army at Christmas,” she said. Is she a member of a club or service organization? “Not currently.” Why not? “Work and family keep me very busy.”

Ashley wants harmony in America, but her confusion keeps her on the sidelines. She doesn’t see an “enemy” or “opponent” so much as a fog of dysfunction. This leaves her without urgency, and thus, she takes no action. I told her about this book. Does she think she would read something that might help her find ways to work with others to reclaim our politics and create more community feeling?

“Honestly?” she said. “Probably not. Just thinking about things like that makes me really nervous.”

Maybe you aren’t like Ashley. Maybe you’re more like Tony, a 52-year-old manager at an electrical contracting business who lives in a suburb north of Philadelphia. He is a born-again Christian. He watches Fox News almost exclusively. I asked him about his religious beliefs and how they show up in his life, how they shape his perspective on America. He was remarkably open and very articulate.

How knowledgeable is Tony about our government? Where Ashley could name only one Supreme Court Justice, Tony named all nine. He called the so-called liberal judges “the communist left-wing of the court.” He named both of Pennsylvania’s senators.

Tony believes that both America and his religious faith are under siege. From his vantage point, his faith is mocked in schools and families are undermined by atheists in Hollywood and other cultural institutions. He thinks America is in a state of moral collapse. All of this leaves him feeling alarmed, on guard, and convinced that if people like him don't "return our country to its Christian roots," it will be no more.

Throughout our conversation, Tony used the language of war. He used the term "fight" and "fighting" repeatedly. He spoke of "enemies" without hesitation, referring to other Americans. He said people like him are trying to "kill" dangerous beliefs and corrupting lifestyles. For him, the enemies are secular progressives, globalists, transvestites, and those who, in his view, reject God's plan for humanity and the United States.

When Tony sits in his church for up to three services and prayer meetings each week, he feels part of an army. When he goes to the polls, he knows he's part of a powerful, coordinated movement. His pastor tells him that every election is a battlefield, every vote a weapon. The Voter Guides provided by the Faith & Freedom Coalition through his church confirm his choice of whom to vote for. For Tony, the stakes of politics are eternal. His clarity and affiliation give him energy and purpose.

If you value living in a country in which no single faith or faction dominates, where all people have equal rights and a fair say in public life, the contrast between Tony and Ashley, stand-ins for sizable groups of Americans, should make you worry.

Between Ashley and Tony lies the fault line that defines this era of our democracy: an exhausted majority on one side that is turning away from involvement in our politics and community

life and a fervent minority on the other. Ashley's quiet weariness is far more representative of the country than Tony's certainty. And that lethargy, if we can learn from it, may yet become the beginning of renewal.

Researchers have a name for the population that Ashley belongs to: *the Exhausted Majority*. The phrase comes from the Hidden Tribes study, which found that nearly two-thirds of Americans share her outlook: frustrated by the noise, yearning for compromise, and unwilling to see neighbors as enemies.¹

Make no mistake: There *is* polarization in America, especially in the run-up to elections and when research subjects are asked for their party affiliation before they give their opinions. Yet research shows the majority of us do not think principally of ourselves in political terms and are *not* polarized. Ashley isn't, but Tony is. Ashley is at war with no one. Tony is at war with anyone who is "woke."

Even though we're constantly told we despise one another, the research tells a different story. Many studies show that most Americans simply want things to get better. They're weary of the shouting, the outrage, and the performative politics that make our public life feel more like a wrestling match than a republic. They want change, but many don't know where to begin or how to make their efforts matter.

If most Americans aren't polarized, what terms describe us more accurately? How about this: Most Americans make up the broad, steady majority that keeps this country running in the everyday ways that matter most. They are the quiet strength of our communities. These are the people who, despite all the noise, still believe that decency, dialogue, and compromise can solve problems.

If you're like these Americans—and you probably are—you have friends and relatives across the political spectrum, and your conversations with them are mostly civil, respectful, even caring. You believe in the possibility of America's renewal, yet you worry that the nation is coming apart. You may be weary of politics, but deep down you still trust that this country can do better, even if the path forward is not yet clear.

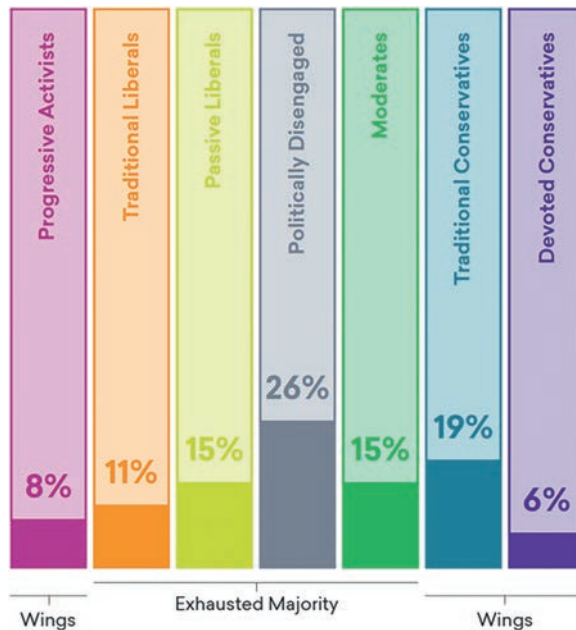
That's why the constant conflict and outrage in the news feels so alien and so exhausting. Research confirms what you already sense in your bones: Americans share far more in common than what divides us.

SEVEN TRIBES

The Hidden Tribes research found that, based on values and perspectives on issues of the day, Americans fall into seven groups or “tribes.” As we go along, you might want to find your “tribe.”

The Exhausted Majority includes people slightly left of center, those in the middle, and those slightly right of center. This is not where the polarization lies; it exists between the smaller tribes on the left and right, the so-called “wings.”

Those in the Exhausted Majority are far less likely than those on the ideological wings to define themselves in political terms. They worry more about the country's deepening divisions than about advancing any particular ideology. Survey after survey shows that large majorities within this group—often 70 percent or more—believe the media exaggerates our conflicts and that Americans share far more common ground than we're led to think.



Source: *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape* (More in Common, 2018). Used with permission.

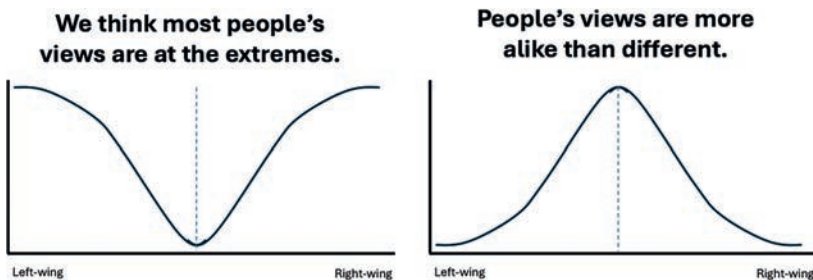
In short, they are not disengaged because they don't care. They are disengaged because they are disheartened. They are worn down by the tone, the rancor, and the performative politics that now pass for public life.

These findings have been independently verified by other researchers including Kristen Soltis Anderson, a Republican pollster. In summarizing a year's worth of focus groups, she wrote:

It turns out we don't want a tyranny of one side over the other, but the decency of compromise. We don't want purity tests or

culture war crusades, but practical steps that improve daily life. We want representatives and a President who remember that their job is to serve the citizens, not the political class or their cronies and not the top one percent of earners. We want a country where neighbors can differ without hatred, and where the republic is renewed, not consumed, by debate.²

Further, these findings echo the work of political scientists at Stanford. Their research presents two curves: one showing who Americans actually are on a range of issues and another showing who we *think* Americans are. If we were truly a highly polarized nation, the distribution of political views would resemble the curve on the left—heavy at the extremes, with very few people in the middle. But that’s not what the data show.³



On a host of issues, Americans, even across so-called “red” states and “blue” states, agree on many issues. The actual distribution looks more like the curve on the right.

The authors of the Stanford study state:

There is little evidence that Americans’ ideological or policy positions are more polarized today than they were two or

three decades ago, although their choices [in elections] often seem to be. The explanation is that the political figures Americans evaluate [when they vote] are more polarized. A polarized political class makes the citizenry appear polarized, but it is only that—an appearance.

The Stanford researchers also answer the question: *If we aren't polarized, why do we seem to be?* One answer is “because political party activists themselves convince us that we are.” As they put it, the politicians at the extremes—far-right and far-left—“hate each other and regard themselves as combatants in a war.”

Unlike those on the far-right and -left, the Hidden Tribes researchers found that those in the Exhausted Majority support finding political compromise (65 percent) and believe that the nation needs to heal (64 percent). People in this group consistently identify America's political divisions as a primary concern.

If you are in the Exhausted Majority, you feel forgotten in the political debate—and you are!

THE SEVEN HIDDEN TRIBES OF AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Progressive Activists (8%)

Highly engaged, left-leaning, deeply concerned about inequality, discrimination, and climate change. See activism and protest as key tools for change and often distrust traditional institutions.

Traditional Liberals (11%)

Classic, open-minded liberals. Value tolerance, diversity, and reasoned debate. Less confrontational than Progressive Activists and more willing to work across political lines.

Passive Liberals (15%)

Lean liberal but less politically active. Dislike conflict and polarization, feel politically homeless, and often withdraw from public debate even though they care about fairness and compassion.

The Politically Disengaged (26%)

The largest group, often young or economically strained. They rarely vote or follow politics and feel powerless to influence events. Tend to see the system as rigged or irrelevant to their lives.

Moderates (15%)

Pragmatic, middle-of-the-road. Value compromise and civility. Dislike extremes on both sides and are motivated more by common-sense solutions than ideology.

Traditional Conservatives (19%)

Patriotic, religious, and institution-respecting Americans who emphasize personal responsibility, family, faith, and community. Value stability and civility over disruption.

Devoted Conservatives (6%)

Ideologically very consistent and politically active. See moral decay everywhere and threats to traditional values. Believe their way of life must be defended vigorously, sometimes viewing compromise as weakness.

BROAD IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT

Not only are those of us in the Exhausted Majority not deeply divided, but it also turns out that we substantially agree on a long list of issues, including abortion, gun control, and money in politics.

Across a wide range of issues, Americans in the Exhausted Majority share strikingly similar views. This group overwhelmingly supports universal background checks on guns, raising the purchase age to 21, investing in infrastructure, job retraining, affordable childcare, and a higher minimum wage. Most also favor curbing the influence of money in politics and other electoral reforms, and oppose the *Citizens United* ruling.

On social issues, around two-thirds of those in the Exhausted Majority support legal abortion in most or all cases. Further, large majorities (83 percent–96 percent) say racism is a serious problem, 82 percent believe it is common, and 68 percent see white supremacy as a growing threat.

Agreement areas extend also to same-sex marriage (64 percent), acceptance of transgender people as morally right (66 percent), and though many fault Biden for mismanagement

of immigration, most say immigration benefits the nation (60 percent). (For a more complete list, see Appendix: *What the Exhausted Majority Really Believes*.)

The Hidden Tribes study did find that while we all may not be at one another's throats, some Americans do have "absurdly inaccurate perceptions of each other." For example, when Republicans in this study were asked what Democrats believe, they were way off, but Democrats are even worse in understanding what Republicans believe on key issues.

Other research confirms this pattern. The *Perception Gap* study (conducted by Hidden Tribes, the same research group) found that when Democrats were asked what percentage of Republicans believe that "properly controlled immigration can be good for America," they were off by over 50 percent: Respondents guessed only 48 percent would agree; in reality, nearly 80 percent of Republicans agreed.

Intriguingly, greater education and deeper political engagement do not necessarily foster empathy for those on the other side; in many cases, this appears to do the opposite: Highly educated progressives who closely follow the news are often among the least accurate in understanding what their political opponents actually believe. The pattern is not limited to the left. Those on the far right—the Traditional and Devoted Conservatives—tend to misperceive others just as badly. In short, the more politically immersed people are at the extremes, the more distorted their perceptions of fellow Americans can become. (If you'd like to assess how well you know people who vote under different banners than you, take the five-minute quiz at perceptiongap.us.)

THE EXHAUSTED MAJORITY HAS BEEN SIDELINED

The Hidden Tribes research found that most of us in the Exhausted Majority feel disempowered by and unrepresented in our political system. A large majority of the Exhausted Majority agreed that “politicians don’t care about people like them.” They also expressed feeling “forgotten in the political debate.” This disempowerment is rooted in the feeling that they “do not feel their voice can make a difference.”

Many of us feel completely invisible in *local* politics, let alone at the *federal* level. That sense of alienation turns into passivity and disengagement, both dangerous in a system of self-government. According to the Hidden Tribes report, members of the Exhausted Majority are far less politically active than the “wing” tribes. This disengagement isn’t simply nonparticipation; it reflects a deeper withdrawal from the kind of public conversation that shapes our country. The report says, “almost half the members of the Exhausted Majority select ‘none’ when asked to select ways they have been active politically in the past year.” The list included sharing content, donating, attending meetings, and other activities.

The Exhausted Majority is also sidelined because various structural mechanisms built into the voting and election process promote disengagement and reward extremism. I’m referring here to partisan gerrymandering, closed party primaries that empower the most ideologically motivated voters, the flood of money from interest groups and super Political Action Committees (PACs), and the winner-take-all system that discourages independent or centrist voices. To address

this, some states are moving to ranked choice voting; if your first choice can't win, your vote goes to your next choice until someone has a majority. This weeds out extreme candidates, but some, especially on the far-right, resist this.

Many of us feel that our needs and interests are of no consequence to most politicians, and quite often, we're correct: A major study into the impact of ordinary voters in determining public policy recently concluded that "the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, *near-zero*, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy [my italics]." This research also found that public opinion from the bottom 90 percent of income earners has essentially *no* impact on policy outcomes, while economic elites and organized interest groups hold substantial influence.⁴

We may feel overlooked and lack clout overall, but, as we'll see, voters in the Exhausted Majority have already shaped key elections and can be a powerful force going forward, if we act together.

MEDIA SEPARATES US

Another reason we're sidelined lies in the negative impact of social media that separates us into echo chambers and keeps us off balance and misinformed. Increasingly, media creates outrage. As pundit Scott Galloway said, "We used to think sex sells. What we found is something better, and that is rage."

This brings up the question: *Who profits from outrage, whether real or perceived?* The Hidden Tribes researchers noted that there is big money in polarization; it's the fuel that keeps social media, cable news, and talk radio running. As political

maps have been redrawn (gerrymandering), the real fight has moved away from the middle and into the extremes. This is where each side tries to fire up its base during primaries instead of appealing to the center in general elections. Now, that same kind of tribal anger is spreading beyond politics and the internet and into college campuses, workplaces, and even family dinners at Thanksgiving.

Social-media platforms are not simply channels for communication; they actively amplify political anger and cause civic disengagement. For instance, one study found that exposure to political attacks on social media correlates with higher levels of cynicism and detachment from democratic institutions.⁵ Meanwhile, research into the emotional effects of online networks shows that anger spreads more rapidly than positive emotion, making outrage both pervasive and contagious.⁶

Together, these dynamics contribute to a civic “doom loop.” Stirred into frustration by what we see online, we conclude that our involvement won’t matter. We pull back, and in turn are overlooked by politics and policymakers. We are not wrong in feeling insignificant; we are the effect of powerful algorithmic and emotional forces that shape online and political civic life.

Social media especially, but nearly all media, create echo chambers that are designed to expose us to fewer alternative ideas the more we spend time on these channels and platforms; what we’re fed reinforces our preconceptions and biases. As one study into polarization concluded:

The media exacerbates pessimism...Producers of local television’s nightly news continue to follow the old media dictum that ‘If it bleeds, it leads’ by showing stories about

crimes and disasters first in their lineup every night. Cable news networks spend their entire day belittling the beliefs and behaviors of political candidates from across the political chasm they and their talk radio allies have helped to create.⁷

One intent of this book is to reverse this loop, to increase the visibility of ordinary people in politics, to get the negativity to stop, and to help those of us in the Exhausted Majority to get politicians to care more, listen more, and disconnect from big money more.

WE CAN STILL BE POWERFUL

Despite the powerful forces that would lull us into cynicism, rage, and disengagement, there is reason for hope. Across the country, when issues are put directly to the people, Americans rise above the noise. Time and again in recent elections, voters have broken through partisan gridlock and reminded us who we really are: a nation guided not by extremes but by the steady, common-sense convictions of a vast, moderate majority.

In several cases in state elections in 2018, 2020, 2024, and 2025, voters bypassed polarized legislatures to enact reforms with broad, bipartisan support, even in conservative states. For example, voters in Idaho, Nebraska, and Utah approved Medicaid expansion, in Michigan legalized recreational marijuana, and in Missouri approved medical marijuana. These ballot wins demonstrated a clear, cross-partisan readiness to solve problems that elected officials had been unwilling or unable to address.

In 2018, Florida voters passed Amendment 4 to restore voting rights to people with felony convictions, and states like Colorado, Michigan, and Utah approved redistricting reforms to curb gerrymandering.⁸ Maine went further by adopting ranked choice voting for some offices, signaling a widespread appetite for this proven means of choosing fewer extreme candidates. When given the chance to vote directly on policy rather than through partisan representatives, voters—often including those in “Red” states—support pragmatic solutions that transcend party lines.⁹

Then, in 2020, the results in some states were striking because they happened during a presidential election year when polarizing rhetoric was at its peak. In this election, voters consistently chose pragmatic, cross-partisan solutions over ideological positions. This validates the Exhausted Majority research. In deep-red states like Missouri and Oklahoma, voters approved Medicaid expansion, ensuring health coverage for low-income residents, and in Florida, nearly 65 percent supported a higher minimum wage.

In 2024, voters in Washington, DC passed Initiative 83 which introduced ranked choice voting and opened primaries to independent (unaffiliated) voters. Initiatives in South Dakota and Ohio that would have made gerrymandering unlikely failed, however, revealing the difficulty reform efforts face, especially where the proposal is opposed by entrenched powers.

Abortion is a hotly contested issue but one where a large majority of the Exhausted Majority agrees. Since 2020, abortion ballot initiatives have shown how direct democracy can bypass deadlocked legislatures and give voice to the political middle.

By 2024, after the *Dobbs* decision, a surge of ballot measures let citizens decide directly. In seven states—Arizona, Colorado,

Maryland, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, and New York—voters approved constitutional amendments protecting abortion rights. (Nebraska was the one state where restrictions advanced: While a pro-rights measure failed, a rival amendment to limit abortion after the first trimester passed.)

Now, 2025. Maine voters approved Question 2, a statewide initiative establishing “extreme risk protection orders” (often referred to as “red-flag” laws) allowing courts to temporarily restrict firearms access for persons deemed dangerous. This passed by 63 percent to 37 percent, again showing the preference of most Americans for moderation.¹⁰

Also in 2025, Californians voted on Proposition 50, which passed with about 64 percent in favor to 36 percent opposed. Under this measure, the legislature would temporarily take over congressional redistricting (for the 2026–2030 election cycles), replacing the independent citizen’s commission. The maps produced under this change are projected to enable the gain of up to five U.S. House seats for the Democratic Party.

These results reveal how moderate majorities can move beyond legislative stalemates when given the chance and often show a decided preference for initiatives that are fair and balanced and that protect democracy.

STEPPING INTO YOUR POWER

One way, perhaps the easiest, to move into your power, is to counter the perception that “We’re all polarized.” When we let this claim slide without comment, it reinforces our disconnection from one another and empowers those who profit from

this perception: news organizations, social media, and many politicians.

What might you say if you hear someone lament, “There’s so much polarization in our country”?

How about this: “We feel polarized because the loudest voices in politics tell us we are. But I’m aware of research that says otherwise.” Or you might simply say, “This is a myth. Most of us are not extreme.”

If you are a peace-loving individual who generally sees the best in others and wants a world in which we live and let live, you are in the *majority* in America. Your job—our job—as members of this group, is to find one another, stop listening to newscasters, politicians, and pundits who tell us we hate one another, and work together to start demanding that our politicians get this country back on track. The Exhausted Majority has the numbers and clout required to force change. If enough of us step into our collective power and remember that democracy bends toward justice when ordinary people exert their power, we can put our country on a better path.

In this chapter, we have named the Exhausted Majority and reclaimed the truth: We are not powerless extremists but a quiet super-majority yearning for common purpose. In the next chapter, we look at what broke our politics and how, in turn, it’s breaking our sense of belonging, connection, and trust.

KEY IDEAS IN THIS CHAPTER:

- ★ America feels polarized because our *political class and media ecosystem* are polarized; the public, largely, is not polarized.

- ★ The Exhausted Majority wants problem-solving and compromise, not culture-wars or purity tests.
- ★ Structural features such as gerrymandering, closed primaries, big money, and outrage media mute moderate voters and reward extremes.
- ★ Direct democracy in the form of ballot initiatives often reveals the center's will: When voters decide policy directly, pragmatic solutions usually win.
- ★ Power returns to the people when moderates re-engage together: voting, organizing locally, and insisting on structures (e.g., ranked choice voting, fair districting maps) that reward coalition building.