A Funder's Guide to Building

SOCIAL COHESION

Produced by Democracy Funders Network in collaboration with
Civic Health Project, New Pluralists, and Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that America is facing unprecedented levels of political and social division, undermining the social cohesion that binds the citizens of a healthy democracy together. Our division is fueled by an increasingly fractured media environment, widening economic inequality, growing demographic anxiety, and a broken incentive structure for those elected to represent us.[1] While America has experienced points of fracture and division throughout its history, rising polarization is threatening to undermine the ability of our political system and civil society to weather the kinds of challenges we have so far been able to overcome in our 246 years as a nation. Unlike issue polarization, which describes the kind of policy differences that are to be expected in a healthy republic, the affective polarization we currently face is characterized by hostility toward and hatred for partisan out-groups.[2] In recent decades, affective polarization has superseded—and even become somewhat detached from—our differences on substantive policy issues.

Increasingly, Americans who tend to identify as Republicans or Democrats view members of the opposing party as threats—to freedom, justice, peace, and, ultimately, to their way of life.[3] Americans are less and less likely to talk to or be in community with those who do not share our political identities.[4] In recent decades, political orientation has transformed into a "mega-identity" predictive of most other facets of a person's identity, including racial identity,

SOCIAL COHESION

A condition in which people in society have access to trusting social networks and a shared sense of solidarity, inclusion, and belonging.

Citation: Dragolov, G., Ignácz, Z., Lorenz, J., Delhey, J., and Boehnke, K. (2013). Social Cohesion Radar Measuring Common Ground: An International Comparison of Social Cohesion Methods Report. Bertelsmann Stiftung; More In Common (2022). More in Common 2025 Strategy.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

The tendency for partisans to vehemently dislike and distrust those from the opposing party, simply for being members of the opposing party and regardless of ideological or policy positions.

Citation: Druckman, J.N., Klar, S., Krupnikov, Y., Levendusky, M., and Ryan, J.B. (2021). Affective polarization, local contexts and public opinion in America. Nature Human Behavior. Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., and Westwood, S.J. (2019). The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States.Annual Review of Political Science.

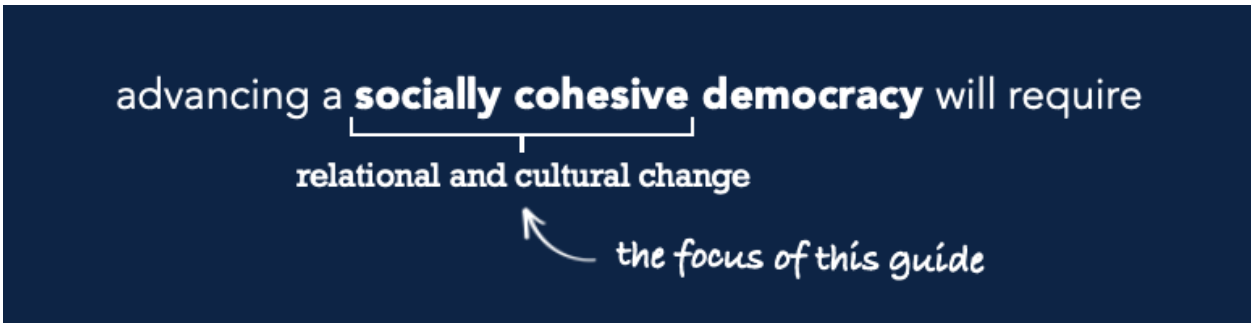
religious preference, the news we consume, and the communities in which we choose to live.[5] Wedged between two increasingly polarized extremes, the "exhausted majority"—the ideologically-flexible and compromise-seeking American middle that comprises two-thirds of the country—has grown increasingly fatigued by sectarian political conflict.[6]

Failure to reverse these trends will only deepen divisions within civil society along political and sectarian lines. If current levels of polarization persist, we should expect the continued degradation of our capacity to deliberate constructively and problem solve—disarming us in the face of mounting 21st century challenges. Without healthy, functioning governmental and electoral processes in place to address major societal challenges, the United States may find itself even more ripe for conflict, political violence, and exploitation by authoritarians who promise the kind of change that a dysfunctional representative democracy is unable to deliver.[7] As we have observed in numerous countries including, but not limited to, Hungary, India, Turkey, and Poland, perniciously high levels of polarization frequently predict democratic decline and autocratization.[8] And, as the wealthiest, most powerful, and longest-standing democracy in the history of the world, the consequences of our decline are sure to be felt globally, shaking the very foundations of democracy.

Like many entrenched social problems, affective polarization is in part driven by structural and institutional factors that shape the way people relate to each other in society.[9] Reform of democratic structures—like our election system—can affect the underlying incentives that drive politicians and funders toward short-term thinking and sectarianism.[10] Structural economic reform can address tensions created by unequal access to opportunity, such as the growing economic divide between urban and rural communities. Our information ecosystem also greatly influences how people relate across difference; strategies for stemming the proliferation of mis- and disinformation can reinforce our ability to connect around a shared set of facts (see The Democracy Funder Network's 2021 "A Funders Guide to Combatting Disinformation").

While necessary, structural change alone is not sufficient to mend the fabric that binds Americans together. The future of this republic depends on our ability to sufficiently repair the relationships and bonds of solidarity—or social cohesion—that exist between Americans within existing communities and, in particular, across lines of difference. There is no way to sustain American democracy if people of different ideological, racial, religious, geographic, or other backgrounds are unable to see themselves as part of a larger American community. The proactive relational and cultural change required to advance a socially cohesive democracy is the focus of this guide.

The intent of this guide is to orient funders to the different ways civil society actors are thinking about and addressing the problems of affective polarization and eroding social trust. Much of this work is deeply rooted in evidence from the social, neurocognitive, and psychological sciences; you can explore the citations at the end of this guide to learn more. We hope funders—whether brand new to this



set of strategies or already investing in them—will come away recognizing this work for what it is: a serious and vital project for sustaining and restoring the health of American democracy.

For the purposes of this guide, we exclude the related set of work that is responding to violence and extremism, and instead focus on proactive strategies for lowering the temperature and building relational bonds among Americans so that conditions are less conducive to those corrosive and destructive outcomes. Funders interested in learning about violence reduction efforts can read more here.

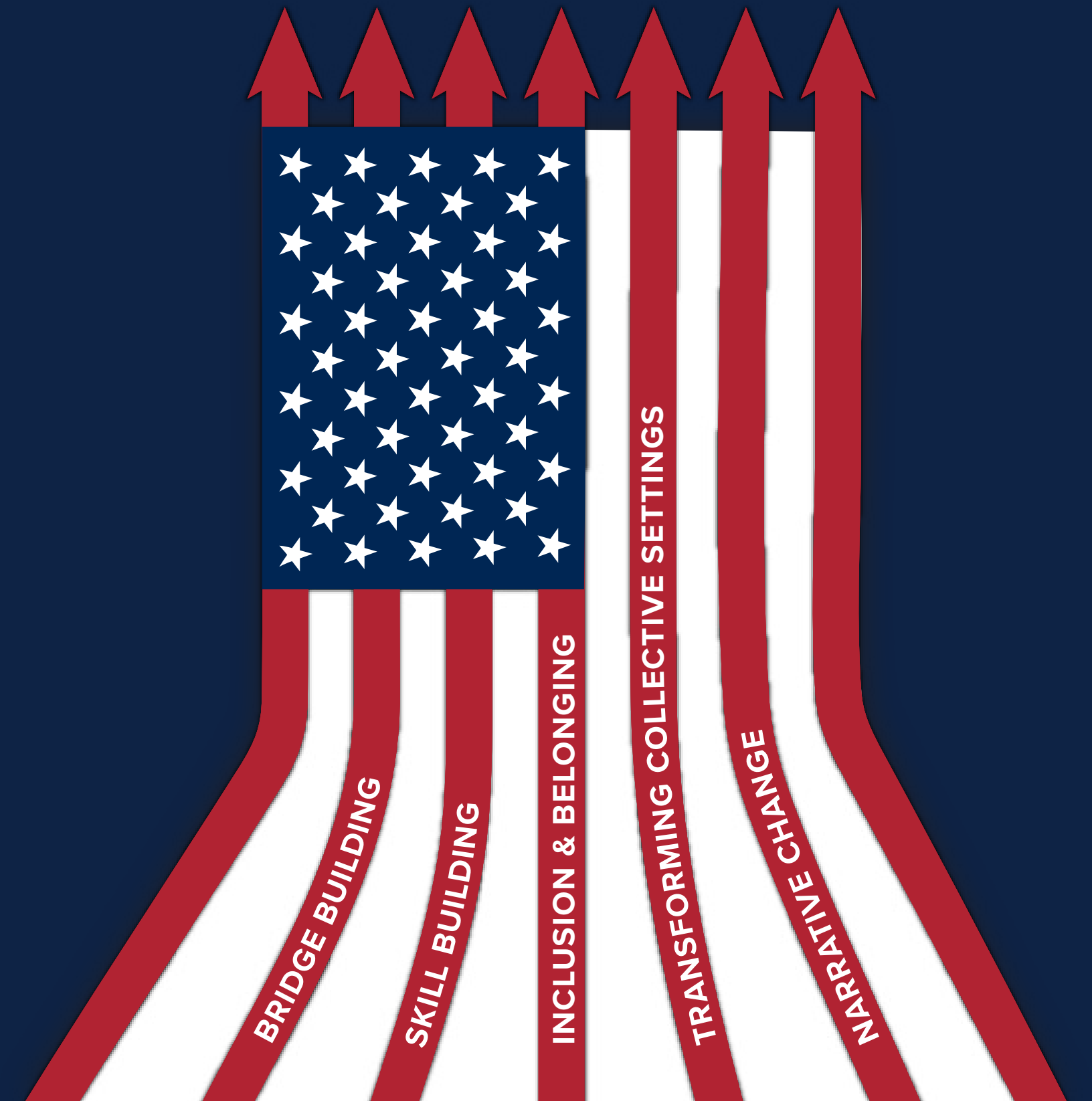
CULTURAL CHANGE

Change process that involves shifting the norms, values, skills, assumptions, and behaviors that shape the way we see each other and ourselves.

Citation: New Pluralists (n.d.). Approach.

In the first half of the guide, we describe the work of organizations, practitioners, and funders whose efforts are geared toward reducing affective polarization and deepening social cohesion. We broadly outline some of the major theories of change for advancing social cohesion, with a few illustrative examples of specific approaches under each. In the second half, we turn to ways funders can support these strategies. Finally, we conclude with a set of open questions we believe those working on or funding social cohesion need to grapple with.

5 Pathways to Build SOCIAL COHESION



5 Pathways to Build SOCIAL COHESION

BRIDGE BUILDING

Strengthening relationships, deepening understanding, and achieving shared goals between individuals across divides.

SKILL BUILDING

Building individuals' capacity and skill to engage across difference.

INCLUSION AND BELONGING

Building an inclusive culture that embraces pluralism and promotes belonging.

TRANSFORMING COLLECTIVE SETTINGS

Reconfiguring collective settings where people already gather to focus explicitly on building social cohesion and combatting affective polarization.

NARRATIVE CHANGE

Connecting people through stories, reshaping our collective imagination, and building a "surround sound" that amplifies pro-democratic and pluralist messaging.

BUILDING SOCIAL COHESION

The funders and practitioners described in this guide are building social cohesion by leveraging relational and cultural change.

Among their various efforts is an emerging set of complementary and inter-dependent theories of change that collectively chart a path toward a more socially cohesive democracy. While organizations working to advance social cohesion often deploy cross-cutting strategies, we believe it is useful to describe five distinct pathways through which practitioners and funders are seeking to leverage relational or cultural change to evolve a more socially cohesive democracy.

We explore each pathway in detail, describing methodologies and highlighting examples of organizations who embody various approaches to change. These examples, while intended to broadly orient funders to a vast network of social cohesion builders, are not comprehensive; nor do we mean to imply that these are the "best" or "only" organizations doing this work.*

As you read this guide, we invite you to consider:

- Which of these pathways to building social cohesion best align with your ethos, practices, values, and goals as a funder?
- How do your grantees already contribute to or detract from social cohesion?
- How might a lack of social cohesion be inhibiting or undermining your philanthropic goals?
- How important of a problem is social cohesion to you?

* Funders looking to invest in this area should reach out the Democracy Funders Network, Civic Health Project, or New Pluralists teams for customized guidance and information that can inform giving. Our contact information can be found on the last page of this guide.

BRIDGE BUILDING

Strengthening relationships, deepening understanding, and achieving shared goals between individuals across divides.

Bridge building, also known as "bridging," is a term used by many organizations to refer to bringing individuals together across divides to foster relationships or achieve common goals. While the term is broad, and some practitioners differ on what activities qualify as bridging, within this guide we use the term to refer to activities that intentionally bring people together—in a curated, semi-structured, noncompetitive environment—in service of building stronger relationships, understanding, and connectivity across difference.[11]

Among other academic theories, bridge building is grounded in intergroup contact theory, which states that under the appropriate conditions, contact between members of different groups is an effective strategy to reduce prejudice and conflict.[12] Whereas some social cohesion efforts described later in this guide center relationships between similar people, bridging centers those who are dissimilar, often along partisan lines.[13] Hundreds of bridging organizations realize these outcomes in myriad ways.

A community of organizations working on bridging is undergoing rapid growth and transformation. In 2017, the ListenFirst Project, Village Square, Living Room Conversations, and National Institute for Civil Discourse co-created the #ListenFirst Coalition, aiming to aggregate, align, and amplify what at the time were diffuse bridging efforts. Today, the coalition consists of more than 400 bridging organizations. The coalition helps coordinate communications, campaigns, and projects across the bridging field, and runs an annual "National Week of Conversation" to showcase bridging organizations and modalities such as deliberation, open conversation, deep canvassing, and collaborative problem solving. Additionally, coalition members have organized themselves into working groups to focus on strategic imperatives for the bridging movement, such as establishing goals and measures, running large-scale awareness campaigns, and engaging policymakers.

To parse the large and diverse bridging landscape, in which many organizations deploy multiple interventions simultaneously, we offer below a useful if imperfect model. In general, we find that most organizations' methodologies and goals exist somewhere on a continuum between:

- **Relationship-oriented bridging:** bridging primarily as a means to foster stronger relationships, promote understanding, and build connectivity across divides; and
- **Goal-oriented bridging:** bridging primarily as a means to advance an external goal (e.g., community-based systems change, policy recommendations, and/or structural reforms).

RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED BRIDGING

Bridging primarily as a means to foster stronger relationships, promote understanding, and build connectivity across divides.

Many bridging interventions focus on convening people—across ideological, socioeconomic, racial, and geographic divides—to have conversations, share diverse perspectives, and engage in reflection for the sake of building healthier relationships and connectivity. These interventions help deepen understanding of different perspectives, diversify social networks, and build a culture of valuing differences. Relationship-oriented bridging directly targets the interpersonal bonds that serve as the foundation for our society and democracy.

The evidence shows that building a culture of deliberation, establishing deliberative norms, and upholding those norms through facilitation or moderation are key components of successful, high-quality bridging interventions.[14] By emphasizing the complexity of topics discussed in these types of discourse-based interventions, facilitators can help participants avoid binary thinking and generate more constructive outcomes.[15] Insufficiently structured, non-facilitated discussions can instead lead to increased polarization.[16]

While such deliberative-style interventions show potential for mitigating America's polarization problem, some have questioned their ability to scale, as they are resource-intensive to implement on a per-person basis. Questions also remain around self-selection bias in these types of bridging efforts, as these opt-in engagement opportunities tend to reach those who are already receptive to bipartisan and deliberative norms, not necessarily those who are most at risk of affective polarization.

One well-known practitioner in the bridging space, Braver Angels, brings together small groups of partisans to engage in structured conversations that seek to identify areas of commonality, help participants learn, and minimize assumptions related to the other side.[17] This model of reciprocal group reflection, inspired by marital counseling and deployed by Braver Angels in its workshops, typically lasts

several hours per engagement.[18] Researchers have shown that this model of intervention can significantly reduce partisan polarization.[19] Braver Angels also attempts to mitigate self-selection problems by ensuring there is a roughly equal number of conservative and liberal participants.[20] Living Room Conversations and Engaging Differences are two other examples of dialogue-focused practitioners aiming to build understanding and relationships.

GOAL-ORIENTED BRIDGING

Bridging primarily as a means to advance an external goal (e.g., policy recommendations and community-based solutions, and/or finding common ground on polarizing issue areas).

While relationship-oriented bridging efforts focus primarily on building understanding and relationships for their intrinsic value, goal-oriented bridging interventions build relationships and understanding across difference in order to achieve shared goals such as policy reform or progress on community projects.

Bridging efforts targeting large-scale policy reform bring together cross-sector, cross-partisan groups of elected officials, activists, community leaders, and others to co-create solutions that result in policy recommendations and action. Convergence Center for Policy Resolution is just one group among many working to depolarize decision makers and advance policy solutions in areas like education, healthcare reform, and the federal budget process. The Convergence dialogue-to-action model has four key steps: (1) identifying and researching an issue, (2) convening stakeholders and building trust through facilitated dialogue, (3) developing shared recommendations through sustained dialogue, and (4) taking action by activating stakeholders and outside partners to implement a shared action plan.[21] These engagements take time, with some involving as many as 14 facilitated meetings over the course of roughly one and a half years.[22] In the end, Convergence projects increase participants' willingness to partner with those they disagree with, help participants forge new relationships, and result in policy recommendations that have been included in federal and state legislation.[23] The Convergence dialogue-to-action model shows promise for strengthening bonds between decision makers to advance bipartisan policies and recommendations.[24]

Other bridging work aims to identify communal needs and make progress on community-based goals. For instance, the Center for New Democratic Processes is host to projects like the Pierce County (WA) Rural Climate Dialogue, a five-day citizen jury which brought together a randomly selected, politically representative group of Pierce County residents to create a shared, community-based response to climate change to inform future community planning and decision making. During the process, participants learned about climate trends in Pierce County, identified local impacts of climate change on public health, and developed recommendations for actions that could be taken in response to these impacts.[25]

Another well-studied model, deliberative polling, involves members of the general public working

collaboratively to weigh competing arguments in a mutually civil and diverse discussion.[26] In 2019, America in One Room, a national controlled experiment in deliberative polling conducted by the Center for Deliberative Democracy, brought together a random representative sample of 526 registered voters for one weekend to deliberate on 26 policy proposals across five polarized issue areas (including the economy, the environment, and immigration).[27] After deliberation, researchers found that Republican and Democratic partisans moved closer to one another on 22 out of 26 proposals—decreasing issue polarization and affective polarization between members of opposing parties.[28] These effects were largest for participants with the most polarized issue positions prior to deliberation.[29] Final results from the experiment also included group consensus on a range of policy proposals (e.g., Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership).[30] Interventions like these can build understanding between partisans, while also providing a window into the body politic that can inform politicians and legislation. Bridging models like deliberative polling, while resource- and time-intensive, show an ability to shift participants' attitudes and behaviors.[31]

BRIDGING VS. BREAKING IN A PARTISAN ENVIRONMENT

At a grassroots level, deep canvassing has emerged as a political organizing tool that centers listening, understanding, and trust-building to produce transformative change and achieve various policy outcomes.[115] The Deep Canvass Institute—an initiative of People's Action and the New Conversation Initiative—aims to build capacity for deep canvassing by training thousands of canvassers to have non-judgmental, respectful, and values-based conversations with people across the political spectrum and across the country. For example, People's Action has all of its canvassers sign an agreement that they will never argue, but instead focus on listening, understanding, and sharing stories. This strategy has proven effective at reducing polarization among canvassers and voters.[116] While often used to advance political objectives, deep canvassing also has the potential to transform the way people engage politically across difference.

SKILL BUILDING

Building individuals' capacity and skill to engage across difference.

A healthy democracy requires informed, engaged, and civically prepared citizens. A broad cadre of organizations works to strengthen democratic fluency, build civic skills, and equip citizens with the tools and information needed to confront the challenges facing our republic. Within the broader arena of civic education are strategies that work to build individuals' capacity and skill to interact and engage across difference, with the ultimate aim of turning down the heat of affective polarization.

Some organizations conduct skill building through intermediaries such as schools where an infrastructure for mass collaboration and learning already exists. For example, education-focused organizations such as Facing History and Ourselves, Civic Spirit, AllSides for Schools, and Caring Schools Network of the Making Caring Common Project work through schools to help young Americans develop empathy, achieve personal and collective goals, and establish and maintain healthy relationships.[32] These organizations coach educators to improve their civic education offerings, provide online curricula or lesson plans around encountering others and building relationships, and create classroom tools for students and educators to use to explore topics related to civics and bridge building.

Other organizations train individuals—youth and adults alike—directly in bridge building or civic skills. For example, Citizen University works to develop a culture of powerful, responsible citizenship by equipping Americans to be "civic culture catalysts."[33] Their Civic Saturdays gatherings, for example, are designed to be a civic analog to faith gatherings. In their Civic

THE EMPATHY MOVEMENT

Organizations focused on empathy, like Empathy Academy, FuelEd, the Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom, and the Center for Building a Culture of Empathy, provide a host of courses and skills trainings that help individuals build important soft skills around empathy and care. Many theorists see empathy building as a core strategy for achieving a healthier democracy and kinder society.[117] Indeed, researchers identified that individuals high in empathic concern—which includes feelings of sympathy, compassion, and altruism—were more comfortable with the idea of interacting with opposing partisans than individuals low in empathic concern.[118] However, empathy can be a double-edged sword.[119] The same researchers also found that individuals who are high in empathic concern are more likely to be biased toward members of their own party and are also more likely to show increased hostility toward opposing partisans.[120] Empathy, perspective-taking, and other habits of mind can have positive and negative effects when applied in the real-world.[121]

Seminary, fellows from communities across the country gain ideas, tools, and relationships to help convene people in their communities to build new bonds and foster a sense of shared purpose.[34]

Other work focuses mostly on civic skill building in adult populations, where partisan attitudes and polarization are most entrenched and divisive. Resetting the Table, drawing from mediation, peacebuilding, and group therapy frameworks, explicitly centers partisan bridging in their skill building efforts, training individuals on how to have difficult conversations about polarizing political issues and engage across differences in constructive ways.[35] Another group, Essential Partners, hosts workshops to train people on how to have effective conversations across difference using its reflective structured dialogue (RSD) method, which is informed by family therapy strategies, professional mediation, conflict resolution, interpersonal communication theory, appreciative inquiry, and neurobiology.[36] Evaluation suggests the RSD method is effective at increasing social cohesion, boosting community resilience, generating a sense of belonging, and promoting participants' use and retention of skills.[37]

There is also a growing movement, not exclusive to skill building, to leverage technology to reach more people than those reached with face-to-face bridging interventions. For example, Constructive Dialogue Institute provides a suite of online evidence-based learning tools to help individuals gain the mindsets and skillsets to foster mutual understanding, appreciate differences, recognize shared humanity, find common ground, and communicate across difference. The results of a randomized controlled trial of its online learning program demonstrated positive impacts on adult learners including, but not limited to, improvements in intellectual humility, affective polarization, and binary thinking.[38] Starts With Us—which was launched by the Lubetzky Family Foundation in partnership with 125 cross-sector leaders, entrepreneurs, thinkers, and entertainers—aims to use technology to help people form and maintain positive relational habits. Starts With Us is working on an app that will gamify the process of building social cohesion and incentivize a daily practice of curiosity, empathy, and courage.[39] Recognizing the potentially sweeping impacts of tools like these, the Strengthening Democracy Challenge is currently crowdsourcing short, scalable online interventions from academics and practitioners to reduce antidemocratic attitudes, support for partisan violence, and/or partisan animosity among Americans. Approaches like these have the potential to reach millions of Americans and build individual civic capacity en masse.

INCLUSION AND BELONGING

Building an inclusive culture that embraces pluralism and promotes belonging.

Persistent inequality in the United States (racial, economic, geographic, and educational, among other forms) has left many communities excluded from full participation in American democratic society.[40] In this section, we highlight some of the strategies and organizations working to include the excluded and address the underlying hurt that fuels division.

Central to these efforts is the concept of belonging—namely, a version of American democracy in which all people can see themselves. Belonging, according to the Othering & Belonging Institute, requires mutual power, access, and opportunity among all groups and individuals within a shared society.[41] Work to address inclusion and belonging focuses on the inclusion of many sub-communities, such as people with disabilities, veterans, gender minorities, LGBTQ+ populations, and religious groups. For example, there is an area of work focused on immigrant inclusion, some of which we touch on below in our section on narrative change. There is another body of faith-based inclusion efforts, which we touch on in our section on transforming collective settings. However, because racial and economic factors are among the most significant drivers of affective polarization, we focus this section primarily on the racial and economic dimensions of inclusion and belonging interventions.[42]

PLURALISM

The state in which individuals holding many different perspectives, ideologies, and identities are able to coexist peacefully in the same society or political system, and no single group dominates economically, socially, or politically.

Citation: Holt, D. (2022). The case for pluralism in a tribalistic nation. The Hill; University of Delaware (n.d.). Pluralism.

BELONGING

Refers to a human emotional need for interpersonal relationships, identity, social connection, and being part of a group.

Citation: McLeod, S. (2007). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Simple Psychology; powell, j.a., and Menendian, S. (2022). On Belonging: An Introduction to Othering & Belonging in Europe. Othering & Belonging Institute.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION, RESTORATIVE JUSTICE, AND RACIAL HEALING

Acknowledging historical trauma experienced by racial minority groups and addressing its present consequences.

America's relationship with inclusive democracy has been tenuous, specifically as it relates to communities of color. Since the earliest days of our nation's founding, the seeds of racial and social injustice were sown by slavery, displacement, and genocide. The work of living up to our founding ideals and principles of equality remains unfinished, with positive steps forward

alongside profound failures. Racial healing efforts explicitly center such histories and seek to address the historic and contemporary effects of racism, while promoting healing and restoration.

Built on Indigenous, pre-colonial knowledge as well as truth and reconciliation models like those facilitated in post-apartheid South Africa (i.e., the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and post-genocide Rwanda (i.e., the Gacaca courts), these efforts aim to erode individual and societal beliefs in racial and social hierarchies.[43] Practitioners see these hierarchies as detrimental to everyone, as they assign disparate value and status to members of society based on race, gender, ability, and class without regard for universal human dignity and equality. They see countering and replacing this belief in racial and social hierarchies as critical to true healing, and a necessary prerequisite for transitioning to an inclusive and pluralistic democracy.[44] Racial healing interventions often deploy strategies similar to those discussed in other sections, such as in-group and intergroup dialogues, racial healing circles, and narrative change.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has been a major contributor to these efforts in the United States. In 2016, Kellogg facilitated a year-long community engagement process that culminated in a framework for Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) and, in 2017, the foundation committed $24 million to implement the framework in 14 communities across the United States.[45] Rx Racial Healing® Circles are a central component of the TRHT framework, and bring together diverse groups of people in a safe and respectful environment to acknowledge the effects of racism, unlearn beliefs in racial hierarchy, build a capacity for empathy, and affirm a common humanity between participants.[46] These circle processes, which find their roots in the spiritual and communal practices of many Indigenous cultures, have demonstrated their ability to shape attitudes and change behaviors (e.g., when applied in the criminal justice

ENCLAVE DELIBERATION AND BRIDGING

Homogenous spaces that exclusively center those who have been historically disempowered can be an important complement to intergroup processes such as cross-racial dialogues or bridge building. [122] As some researchers have identified, offering marginalized groups the time for enclave deliberation *prior* to deliberative engagements is a best practice in bridge building programs. Here, "enclave deliberation" refers to creating space for people to gather and caucus in affinity groups. This has been shown to allow members to feel included in bridging discussions, and mitigate power imbalances that often appear in deliberative forums.[123] Experts have suggested that the two be integrated in bridging programs to promote the inclusion of members from historically marginalized groups.[124]

sphere).[47] While there is some research on the efficacy of circle processes as instruments of racial healing, the evidence is not yet robust enough to make claims about the impacts of these interventions on social cohesion and affective polarization. Publication of a five-year national evaluation of the Kellogg Foundation's TRHT initiative later this year may shed some light on these outcomes.[48] However, research on interracial dialogues has shown that these interventions promote intergroup understanding, increase positive intergroup relationships, and foster intergroup collaboration and engagement.[49] While circle processes and intergroup dialogues on race have the ability to modify behaviors, build relationships, and promote positive feelings, these types of interventions typically select for those who are already open to changing their beliefs and, importantly, are willing to talk about race, which many people are not.[50]

ECONOMIC INCLUSION

Improving access to economic opportunity, bridging the urban-rural divide, and renewing America's economic promise.

Beset by forces of automation, urbanization, and globalization, and left unbuoyed by four decades of social disinvestment, millions of Americans find themselves less prosperous, less secure, and less upwardly mobile than at any other point in living memory.[51] Exurban and rural communities—both white and nonwhite—have been hit especially hard by these waves of change.[52] This hollowing out of America's middle class has left many to shoulder the uneven costs (and benefits) of economic progress and has helped drive polarization in this country.[53] In response, a subset of social cohesion builders are working with others—across political, racial, and cultural divides—to improve access to economic opportunity and renew America's civic and economic promise.

Some of this work focuses on bridging urban-rural economic and political divides. For example, organizations like Urban Rural Action use constructive dialogues and collaborative design processes to bring together Americans across the urban-rural divide. Similar to the cross-partisan dialogues discussed above, these interventions aim to decrease polarization along geographic divisions.[54] Another organization, Hands Across the Hills, has sought to repair political divides between two communities—one located in rural Massachusetts and the other in rural Kentucky. These types of urban-rural collaboratives and intra-rural community building efforts help bring individuals who have felt forgotten and unheard back into the fold.[55]

If civic infrastructure provides the scaffolding for all the ways Americans engage in public life, then economic opportunity should be thought of as the bedrock upon which a civic infrastructure is built.[56] As mentioned in the introduction, structural economic reform that can shift access to economic opportunity in the Rust Belt, Appalachia, the South, and other economically vulnerable areas, should also be seen as a key strategy for combatting affective polarization and promoting social cohesion.[57]

TRANSFORMING COLLECTIVE SETTINGS

Reconfiguring collective settings where people already gather to focus explicitly on building social cohesion and combatting affective polarization.

Collective settings such as workplaces, places of worship, schools, and community centers have been the places where social cohesion has historically and organically been built. Many are working to build on the natural strengths of such collective settings, where millions of Americans already gather, and transform them to further promote social cohesion, pro-democratic attitudes, and prosocial behaviors. Making social cohesion building an explicit component in these spaces has tremendous potential for creating impact at scale by meeting millions of people where they already are and reconfiguring these spaces to be engines of positive relational and cultural change.[58]

New Pluralists is a funder and field collaborative leading the conversation on transforming collective settings by promoting pluralistic ideas, attitudes, and behaviors in faith communities, educational settings, workplaces, and civic associations.[59] By reaching a larger audience, it aims to infuse pluralism into American daily life and transform our culture from the root. Another initiative, Reimagining the Civic Commons, emerged to help transform public spaces and develop civic infrastructure where people of all backgrounds can connect, cultivate trust, and build more resilient communities. Located in ten cities across the nation, this initiative focuses on two relevant outcomes in relation to social cohesion: civic engagement (e.g., visits to the civic commons, trust in local government and local institutions) and socioeconomic mixing (e.g., income and ethnic diversity, time spent with neighbors).[60] Reimagining the Civic Commons aims to repurpose or reclaim civic assets (e.g., parks, libraries, and recreational centers) to help build social cohesion at the hyperlocal, community level.[61]

By offering facilitation training for community leaders and clergy, Resetting the Table focuses on transforming faith spaces into opportunities to build social cohesion. Participants learn to lead their communities in cross-ideological conversations about challenging topics across political divides. Similarly, One America Movement works within faith communities to build resilience against affective polarization by training religious leaders and congregations on polarization, prosocial norms, and working with others across divides.[62] One America Movement has reached 1.3 million Americans in 2,100 participating congregations, which offers some insight into the scalability of social cohesion work within collective settings.[63]

Workplaces—which are also experiencing the effects of polarization—are another important hub for these efforts and may be a key area for focusing bridging interventions.[64] Braver Angels has expanded its services (e.g., facilitated trainings, team retreats, and keynotes) to corporations.[65] Another organization,

Business for America (which recently published this report on bridging divides in the business community), is working to connect corporate partners to bridging organizations. The aim of interventions like these is ultimately to build bridging capacity in corporate settings and scale bridging where millions of Americans already engage across difference.

Overall, collective settings—community hubs, faith centers, workplaces, and other apolitical spaces—that bring people together across partisan difference may be important sites for resolving America's affective polarization problem.[66] Funders can help scale a social and civic infrastructure that supports bridging opportunities by strategically investing in the spaces where millions of Americans already engage, work, and commune.[67] Parent-teacher associations, community volunteer programs, neighborhood watch groups, veterans' organizations, and so on are all integral threads in the social fabric—threads that have begun to fray due to affective polarization.[68] These settings, if slightly modified, can be important sites where we reweave our fraying social fabric.[69]

NARRATIVE CHANGE

Connecting people through stories, reshaping our collective imagination, and building a "surround sound" that amplifies pro-democratic and pluralist messaging.

It is through narrative that people make sense of the world, as narratives shape how we understand our history, communities, identities, economy, and political system.[70] Narrative builders and storytellers work to create more nuanced narratives around polarizing issues and increase engagement with democratic ideas such as pluralism, self-governance, and accountability.[71] Narrative change is a central component in the broader work of culture change and is a powerful tool for shaping values and shifting mindsets at scale, reinforcing all of the work described above.[72] In this section, we focus on how narrative change—through news and creative media—can build a surround sound that inoculates Americans against the forces of misinformation, division, and political sectarianism that drive affective polarization.

JOURNALISM AND NEWS MEDIA

Leveraging the role of journalism to depict nuance rather than driving people further apart.

To counter the negative impacts of an increasingly partisan media landscape, a host of news and journalism organizations have emerged that aim to inject evidence, balance, and objectivity into the media diets of Americans. Broader media reform is beyond the purview of this guide, though it includes organizations working to revitalize the local news ecosystem, provide more balanced journalism, and restore trust in news media.[73] Instead, we highlight efforts to replace oversimplified and polarizing media narratives with those that add complexity and nuance—media narratives that bridge communities rather than break them.

The media has a powerful role in reinforcing—or undoing—the narratives that keep people divided and prone to conflict. Organizations like Solutions Journalism Network have emerged to lead a global shift in journalism to emphasize how people are trying to solve problems. Journalist and author Amanda Ripley has called on journalists to "complicate the narrative" and "revive complexity in a time of false simplicity."[74] In her most recent book, *High Conflict*, she describes how polarized conflicts arise and offers strategies to overcome them.[75]

Often when framing America's affective polarization problem, the media and other narrative builders inadvertently increase affective polarization.[76] More in Common has published research pushing back on media narratives regarding America's "extreme partisan divides." By highlighting America's "Exhausted Majority" and Perception Gap, More in Common creates new depolarizing narratives about who most Americans really are: not left-wing or right-wing extremists, but ideologically-flexible individuals frustrated with political polarization and seeking common ground.[77]

Public Agenda's Hidden Common Ground® Initiative is another effort challenging persistent narratives around America's hopeless divide by publishing research and journalism that explores overcoming divisiveness.[78]

ENTERTAINMENT AND CREATIVE MEDIA

Leveraging entertainment and creative media to share stories that illustrate constructive alternatives to affective polarization.

Many social cohesion interventions focus on leveraging the entertainment industry—the major producer of culture and narrative in the United States—to generate positive social change. Film and creative media can impact everything from individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to the broader social conditions that facilitate or impede progress.[79] This strategy has already been effective in the context of international violence prevention, with organizations such as Search for Common Ground deploying media to influence millions in countries including Kenya, Sudan, and Indonesia.[80] Overall, entertainment can play an important role in reducing intergroup hostility and bias, humanizing partisan "others," and shifting social norms around how we engage across lines of difference—be they political, religious, or racial.

Some of this work involves creating content that fosters social cohesion, civic health, and democratic norms. For example, the Bridge Entertainment Labs, supported by Civic Health Project, seeks to inspire prosocial narratives that expose audiences vicariously to bridge building and socially cohesive characters, plotlines, and behaviors. The Reunited States, a documentary that follows the journeys of four Americans as they set out to bridge our political and racial divisions, and Purple, a short film by Resetting the Table that documents political conversations between Americans in rural Wisconsin and Iowa, are examples of bridging narrative efforts. This kind of content aims to humanize opposing partisans to one another and develop shared cross-partisan cultural spaces.[81]

Many of these creative media and storytelling efforts center on inclusion and belonging—aiming to disrupt dominant narratives that have helped produce and seek to justify persistent racial inequalities.[82] It has been shown that racially-divisive narratives—regardless of their veracity—polarize white Americans and shift them toward increasingly extreme policy positions.[83] Communicating new narratives and counternarratives around race, history, and healing can help to combat stereotypes, racial animus, and other forces that exacerbate racial division and affective polarization.[84]

The Othering & Belonging Institute, for example, has worked to push strategic, paradigm-shifting narratives that advance more inclusive "we" identities in civil society and shift the boundaries of who is considered "American."[85] The ultimate aim of this work is to eliminate racialized inequality, create empathetic identities that bridge differences, and promote an inclusive and responsive government.[86] Storytelling initiatives like Belonging Begins With Us—developed by the Ad Council in partnership with the American Immigration Council, Welcoming America, and other organizations—share

stories of belonging in order to foster a pluralistic and welcoming nation where everyone can feel at home.[87]

Donors have a strong role to play in supporting narrative change. The Becoming America Fund at the Pop Culture Collaborative is one example of a funder that hopes to shape public imagination and cultural values around inclusion, belonging, and pluralism by supporting creators, influencers, and organizers from historically marginalized communities. By immersing Americans in stories that shift how we perceive the "other" and targeting the mental models that hold social paradigms in place, the fund aims to fundamentally transform the American psyche in relation to belonging and pluralism.

AMPLIFYING SOCIAL COHESION

There are a host of organizations, collaboratives, and increasingly sophisticated working groups who are improving the efficacy and amplifying the impact of the cultural and relational change agents and strategies described above. We see important amplification efforts occurring across two key modes: field building and evidence building. In relation to field building, we are referencing the practitioners and funders working to support and weave networks of individuals and organizations aiming to build social cohesion and combat affective polarization. In terms of evidence building, we are describing the organizations who are advancing a more sophisticated understanding of the evidence behind various cohesion strategies and nurturing a culture of evidence-based practice across a wide set of actors. These efforts are essential for achieving impact at scale.

RELATIONAL CHANGE

Change process that involves building and strengthening relationships and trust in order to transform complex social problems.

Source: Milligan, K., Zerda, J., and Kania, J. (2022). The Relational Work of Systems Change. Stanford Social Innovation Review.

FIELD BUILDING

Supporting and weaving networks of individuals and organizations working to build social cohesion and combat affective polarization.

By connecting grantee organizations to peers, information, resources, and funding, funders are playing an essential role in weaving and supporting the capacity of those working to advance social cohesion.[88]

Currently, there is no one "field" of efforts working to advance social cohesion: While those working on these issues may share broadly aligned goals, they may identify with various fields and perhaps not self-identify as social cohesion builders at all. There is not a clear line, for example, between groups working to advance social cohesion and groups working on peacebuilding or combatting political violence. As experts have noted, organizations use varied language to describe the scope of their work and the problems they seek to address. The social cohesion constellation is in the process of developing a common language and knowledge base to align around a common purpose—combatting affective polarization, building social cohesion, and realizing the promise of an inclusive democracy.

Referenced above, New Pluralists is a cross-ideological, cross-disciplinary funder and field collaborative, comprised of innovators, researchers, storytellers, practitioners, and funders who are working together to foster a deep sense of belonging among people who live in the U.S. They approach social cohesion with a frame of pluralism that weaves across the above groupings. They describe pluralism as rooted in five principles: honoring human dignity; taking responsibility for repair; expanding the circle; finding strength in difference; and striving for a greater sum. By building and catalyzing field-level change, they aim to promote pluralistic norms and practices, attitudes, and behaviors in culture where people work, study, play, gather, and pray. New Pluralists sees spaces like faith communities, educational settings, workplaces, and civic associations as natural places for pluralism to flourish. They aim to infuse pluralism into American daily life—transforming our culture from the root.[89]

Another field builder working to deepen the impact of those working to advance social cohesion is Civic Health Project (CHP). CHP is a philanthropic nonprofit that raises and disburses funds to support depolarizing and bridge building interventions. Through grantmaking, advocacy, evaluation, and field building, CHP aims to expand and improve the efficacy of the rapidly growing U.S. bridge building field. Specifically, CHP provides targeted grants to existing organizations, invests in shared infrastructure to support the broader field, and incubates new, innovative projects with potential to influence societal norms at scale. CHP's work is supported by individuals and institutions seeking rapid, strategic, and scalable impact on affective polarization.[90]

EVIDENCE BUILDING

Conducting research and evaluation to inform social cohesion efforts and build a culture of evidence-based practice.

Evidence building—creating, compiling, and translating high-quality evidence, ensuring implementation fidelity, and monitoring and evaluating programming using scientifically sound research methods—is an important piece of ensuring that practitioners and funders are achieving their desired outcomes in relation to social cohesion.[91] While social cohesion is a somewhat abstract concept—one that cannot be easily reduced to a single outcome metric or variable—funders, academics, and practitioners must nonetheless strive together to define measurable goals and apply effective measurement tools to ascertain the impact of interventions.

Currently, there is a significant body of evidence that identifies affective polarization as a problem with American democracy, and there is a growing body of evidence on what solutions could effectively resolve it at both the strategic and tactical level. In the process of creating this guide, we wanted to highlight the organizations and programs with rigorous publicly-available evaluation – evidence you should see woven throughout the document. While many organizations lacked publicly available evaluation data during our review, that is not to say organizations lack an evidence-based practice or lack internal data related to the efficacy of their programming. Most practitioners recognize a deep need to root their efforts in empirical social, cognitive, and behavioral sciences in order to achieve impact at scale (and not cause unintentional harm).

There are currently several ongoing efforts around evidence building, including but not limited to establishing common goals and measures; developing evidence-based narratives; and applying research to scale and broaden the reach of social cohesion builders. For example, building evidence is one of the highest priorities for organizations in the #ListenFirst Coalition, and one that member organizations are studying intensively right now. There is deep and robust thinking happening with respect to measuring the effects of bridging interventions on participants, institutions, and Americans generally, as well as to measuring the capacity of bridging organizations themselves. One exciting initiative is the development of the Social Cohesion Impact Measure (SCIM), a set of survey items and results dashboards that organizations across the movement can use to track and compare impact across their interventions. This platform allows bridge building practitioners to evaluate the impact of diverse interventions on participants' expressed levels of affective polarization, tolerance for political diversity, open mindedness, intellectual humility, and so on. Organizations leveraging SCIM can use and adapt the tool to emphasize certain outcomes over others, to compare single events and/or evaluate their overall programming, and to assess the statistical significance, direction, and durability of outcomes. The SCIM platform, jointly funded by Civic Health Project and New Pluralists and supported by

the Bridging Movement Goals & Measures team, has the potential to help many bridging organizations come to a shared understanding of the impact of their work.

Moreover, there are dozens of organizations currently building a broader evidence base to support social cohesion work and amplify the efficacy of these efforts. Prominent examples include the P3 Lab and SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, which is dedicated to identifying and sharing research-based tactics for boosting civic participation and deconstructing the cycle of nonparticipation that has come to define American democracy.[92] The Polarization and Social Change Lab at Stanford University is conducting research on actionable solutions to check rising polarization and incivility in the U.S. They work to develop and rigorously evaluate interventions, using experimental and observational data, and share their findings with political leaders and the general public.[93] Other examples of evidence builders include: the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford, The Polarization Lab at Duke University, Making Caring Common Project at Harvard University, The Difficult Conversations Lab at Columbia University, and the Bridging Divides Initiative at Princeton University.

Other organizations disseminate existing research to the field, bridging the gap between theory and practice. Practitioners look to organizations like Beyond Conflict, Greater Good Science Center, and Over Zero to inform their methodologies with the latest expertise from the fields of psychology, sociology, international peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and behavioral and cognitive science.[94] Moreover, many individual organizations working on social cohesion have developed and deployed—either independently or in partnership with outside funders and advisors—rigorous, outcomes-based evaluation centered on assessing shifts in participants' attitudes and behaviors that either undermine or reinforce social cohesion.

POTENTIAL ACTIONS FOR FUNDERS

Now is a pivotal moment for funders to join the effort to combat affective polarization and build social cohesion. This work is essential to ensuring we have a healthy, cohesive, and sustainable democracy. Affective polarization in America poses risks not only to our own democracy but also to democracy globally.[95] To meet the moment, thousands of organizations, practitioners, and individuals are coalescing and aligning to drive shared visions and address challenges relating to their work, aiming collectively to scale social cohesion in the U.S. However, there is a yawning gap between the resources this growing and evolving set of strategies needs to achieve impact and the level of funding available to support these efforts.

Whether it entails funding individual organizations, community-based initiatives, multi-organizational collaboratives, or national narrative change efforts, this is a mounting crisis that will require all hands on deck. Funders have a central role to play in continuing to build out the shared infrastructure between seemingly disparate efforts and subfields working to build social cohesion and in supporting the development of goals, measures, and evaluation frameworks necessary to refine the evidence base for this work. In particular, there are a variety of ways that funders might engage within the complex social cohesion ecosystem. In addition to directly funding organizations, donors can:

- Fund field building efforts
- Invest in an evidence infrastructure
- Fund local, place-based efforts
- Support national efforts to build civic infrastructure
- Apply a social cohesion lens
- Support bridging capacity

FUND FIELD BUILDING EFFORTS

By connecting grantee organizations to peers, information, funding, and other resources, funders can play an essential role in weaving together and supporting the capacity of those working to advance social cohesion, while also raising awareness across grantee organizations about the impacts of polarization on their efforts (be they related to climate change, education, national security, or immigration).[96]

These field building and networking weaving efforts are already ongoing, but more work is needed. Funders are connected to vast networks of practitioners, many of whom are impacted by the rise of affective polarization. Funders can help practitioners identify affective polarization as a shared challenge. And they can resource efforts to convene actors working to advance social cohesion by supporting existing coalitions like #ListenFirst and Bridge Alliance.

INVEST IN AN EVIDENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

Philanthropy can contribute to a stronger culture and infrastructure of evidence-based practice by funding research and evaluation, supporting individual grantees' capacity to evaluate their work and measure their impact, and helping to grow a solutions-oriented evidence base for social cohesion efforts more broadly.

Large-scale research and evaluation is required to move the field forward and build a culture of evidence-based practice. Priorities for future research include which factors promote enduring (rather than temporary) decreases in polarization and which strategies are effective for building social trust (a subcomponent of social cohesion). Moreover, the field would also benefit from psychographic research to measure American mindsets around democracy, pluralism, belonging, and other democratic values. Outside of More in Common's Hidden Tribes research, there is very little of such data. This type of deep attitudinal research could help inform more precisely targeted and strategic interventions, which, in turn, could reach Americans across the political spectrum. Investing in an evidence infrastructure could also involve creating an evidence compendium (similar to the U.S. Department of Education's *What Works Clearinghouse* (*WWC*) that rates interventions based on the evidence of effectiveness for use by practitioners in the field who are adopting new tactics or adapting their strategies to achieve impact at scale.

FUND LOCAL, PLACE-BASED EFFORTS

By funding the cultural and relational change strategies described above within particularly vulnerable communities (e.g., border towns, communities experiencing large demographic shifts, and economically vulnerable communities), funders have the potential to combat affective polarization in the places where this work is needed most.

The drivers of affective polarization—persistent racial and economic inequality, rising demographic anxiety, and decades of social disinvestment—have been unequally felt in communities across the United States.[97] Because of this, some segments of the body politic are increasingly vulnerable to political intolerance and the appeals of authoritarianism, disinformation, and populism.[98] Civically healthy cities and strong communities are a bulwark against affective polarization, and remain sites where Americans can most directly engage with government and participate in democracy.[99] By funding a host of social cohesion strategies in a particular place and building the necessary infrastructure to sustain them, funders can aid in reducing antidemocratic attitudes and blunting wedges that have sharply divided communities.[100] This type of approach could be especially powerful for community foundations and other place-based funders, who are already anchored in communities and possess the key partnerships and trust necessary to produce change.[101]

SUPPORT NATIONAL EFFORTS TO BUILD CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

In our section on transforming collective settings, we discussed the many ways practitioners are helping Americans develop and practice democratic habits in the places where they already make meaning of their lives and communities, such as community boards, places of worship, and civic organizations.[102] Funders can help support national efforts to build civic infrastructure across the country to combat affective polarization.

As has been proposed by the American Academy of Arts & Science (AMACAD)'s Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship in the Our Common Purpose report, sweeping investments in civic infrastructure are vital to help individuals practice democratic habits, promote a shared sense of the collective good, and bridge disparate segments of American society.[103] Funders could support advocacy for a National Trust for Civic Infrastructure, which would allow the U.S. to scale social and civic infrastructure that allows people to form community bonds (modeled after the National Endowment for Democracy).[104] Recent national progress in this direction includes *The Building Civic Bridges Act*, which was introduced in the House of Representatives and would establish a nonpartisan Office of Civic Bridgebuilding within AmeriCorps to direct federal dollars to support bridge building initiatives.[105]

APPLY A SOCIAL COHESION LENS

Philanthropy has a role in lifting up social cohesion as a desired grant outcome within all giving, while ensuring grantmaking activities are not contributing to increased polarization. How work is funded is just as important as what is funded.

Philanthropy is not immune to polarization, and funders can inadvertently contribute to fracture through their grantmaking practices and strategies, as well as through their overall approach to civic leadership.[106] Staff of social purpose organizations, like all Americans, are susceptible to polarization—to "framing outcomes as win or lose, undervaluing relationships, and prioritizing short-term wins over long-term outcomes."[107] Philanthropies can help promote social cohesion by changing grant requirements and lifting up social cohesion and depolarization as desired grant outcomes, as well as by being conscious about their own potentially polarizing behaviors. Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) is convening a group of funders to develop, refine, and test a "social cohesion assessment" tool that funders can use to consider whether and how polarization dynamics are present in their grantmaking, programs, communications, and other activities. Funders can also continue to build relationships with unlikely allies, look honestly at their underlying biases, and prioritize the health of our democracy in their grantmaking, in part by lifting up social cohesion as a desired grant outcome.[108]

SUPPORT BRIDGING CAPACITY

While investing in bridging organizations is important, funders can also help cultivate bridging skills, practices, and mindsets across all of their grantees. Organizations can both experience affective polarization internally, while also contributing to affective polarization externally, in unintentional ways. Now more than ever, the social sector must look for ways to bridge—and philanthropies are uniquely positioned to help their grantees do so.

Funders can provide resources to support organizations in the process of integrating bridging into their work. As discussed in the section on transforming collective settings, it is key that we scale up the social, civic, and democratic infrastructure that supports bridging opportunities.[109] This work should be focused on giving organizations the resources and training to integrate bridging into their efforts. Everyone is a stakeholder when it comes to solving America's affective polarization problem, and they need the tools with which to navigate these challenges.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Our intent with this guide is to represent the promising work already underway to achieve a more inclusive and socially-cohesive democracy, while also reflecting some of the open questions practitioners and funders must wrestle with to deepen our collective ability to make impact. Some of those questions are outlined below.

WHAT DOES ACHIEVING IMPACT AT SCALE LOOK LIKE?

While practitioners who are building social cohesion say they want to achieve impact at scale, there are different interpretations of what that means, particularly whether impact at scale might be achieved through reaching the most people or through reaching the right people. For some, impact at scale involves reaching as many individuals as possible in a one-on-one or group setting. Others see scale as using media or technology to interface with as many people as possible. Still others contend that the impact from bridging is most scalable when interventions are targeted at those with social or political power, who can either directly change policy or shape norms in critical communities. Regardless of how one thinks of this question, it remains clear that no silver bullet will single-handedly address affective polarization at scale. Instead, many types of social cohesion partners—operating with one another on multiple levels (from the grassroots to the grasstops, local, regional, and national)—will be required.

HOW CAN WE BUILD UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN RACIAL HEALING AND BRIDGING?

There is an acknowledged tension between initiatives focused on racial healing and those focused on bridging. Practitioners in both areas wrestle with the potential for racial healing efforts to be experienced as polarizing and for bridging efforts to be perceived as papering over important American histories and experiences—particularly those of historically marginalized groups. Navigating this tension, and figuring out how to include everyone in both these efforts, is a high priority for leaders across both areas.

There are opportunities for those working on each to learn from one another. For the bridging movement at large, this could involve applying a racial justice lens to bridging efforts, as some leaders have suggested, by identifying and confronting aspects of bridging interventions that dissuade certain groups from participating (e.g., neglecting to address historical or current societal inequality).[110] The racial healing and justice movement in recent years has mobilized millions of people around the world to take action—a feat bridge builders may need to replicate to reach impact at scale.[111] For those involved in the movement for racial justice, learning to adopt a bridging mindset can similarly help bring more people into the conversation, including those who may not be bought into the cause or who are put off by particular terminology or framing.[112]

HOW DO WE ENSURE THAT PARTICIPANTS IN SOCIAL COHESION INTERVENTIONS ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC?

Some strategies for building social cohesion—like racial healing and bridge building—tend to appeal to more left-of-center audiences, while repelling more conservative audiences. Because of this, few organizations have been able to sustainably achieve an audience representative of national political identities, let alone one that is also representative along other axes of difference (e.g., geography, race, socioeconomic status, and age). Building social cohesion requires a representative group of Americans at the table. Practitioners continue to wrestle with the question of who should be included in their work, and self-selection bias remains a challenge.

HOW CAN WE BUILD A SHARED VISION FOR AMERICA?

Americans are not currently committed to a common vision for the future. Ongoing crisis framing around our shared problems feeds fatalistic thinking and disengagement, further eroding people's confidence in our civic and social institutions. How do we unite around a shared vision of a democratic America in which all people can see themselves?

While many actors are approaching this question in fields as disparate as political science, entertainment, and technology, few have answers, and fewer still are coordinated in these efforts.[113] Overcoming this challenge is worth the effort, as showing the benefits and possibilities of a positive shared future promotes the forward-looking, aspirational thinking necessary to strengthen our social systems and public structures.[114]

CONCLUSION

Our hope with this guide is to orient funders to an area of work critical to the long-term vitality and survival of American democracy. We are incredibly grateful to the funders and practitioners who contributed their time and expertise to help us paint a picture of a complex and ever evolving landscape.

In an attempt to make sense of a vast and overlapping ecosystem of subfields, terminology, and theories of change, we outlined five distinct and complementary pathways through which practitioners and funders are seeking to leverage relational or cultural change towards a more socially cohesive democracy. We described ways key actors are working to amplify these strategies by nurturing the field and building a robust body of evidence. We outlined a number of specific roles funders can consider in order to make an impact on social cohesion, in addition to grantmaking. Finally, we shared a set of open questions that will be up to all of us to explore.

Since this resource was intended to broadly orient funders to a set of strategies and actors, funders may walk away with questions about specific organizations in need of investment. If you have such questions, please reach out to the Democracy Funders Network team—or directly to our partners at Civic Health Project and New Pluralists—for customized guidance and information that can inform giving. Our contact information can be found on the last page of this guide.

We already know from our own history that a house divided against itself cannot stand. America will continue to be home to a dynamic blend of geographies, histories, identities, and belief systems. The survival of our democracy hinges on our ability to move beyond the current state of our union, which is marred by intolerance, partisan animus, and division. To survive, we will need to truly transform our relationships and culture from the people *up*.

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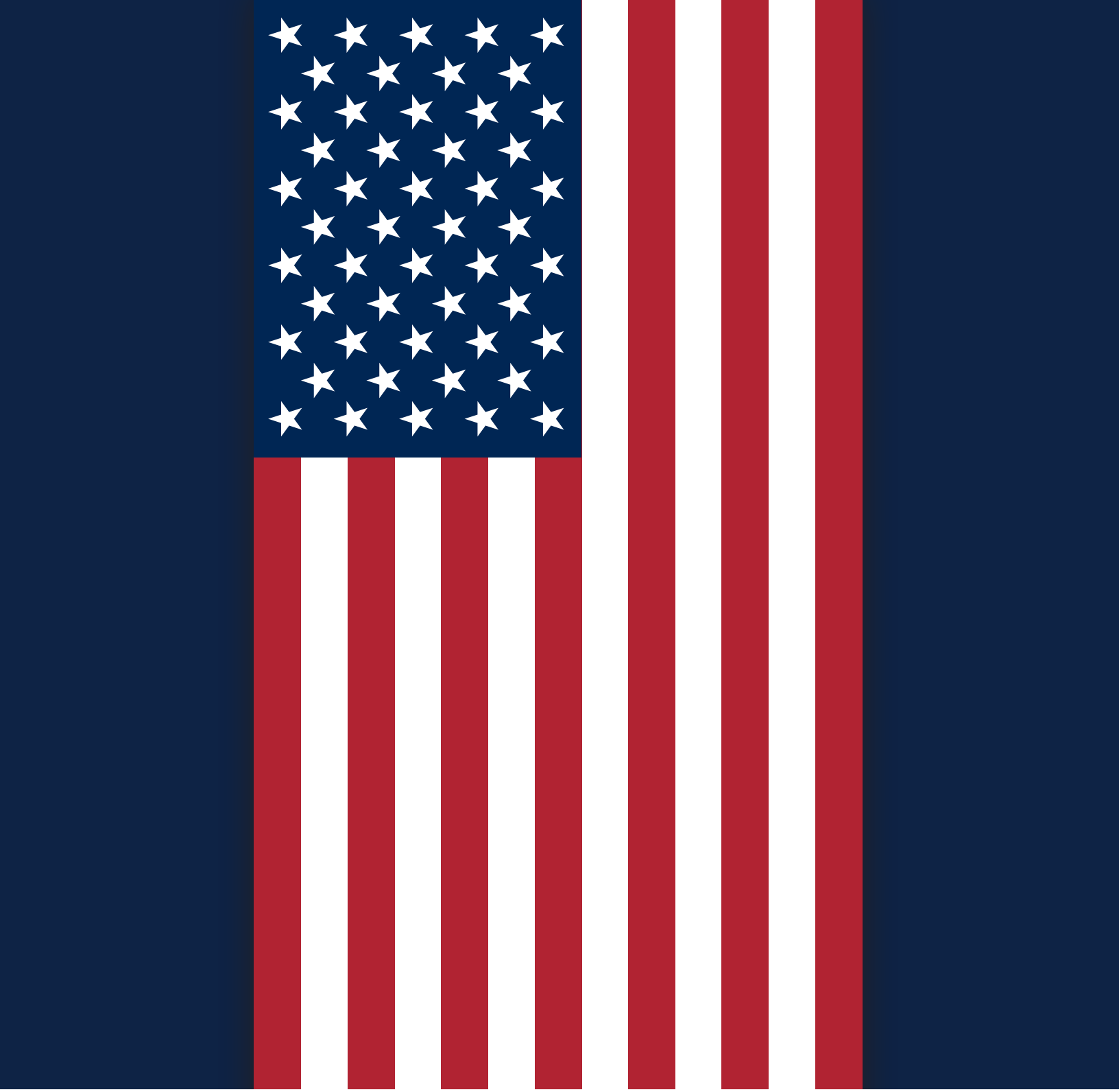

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