

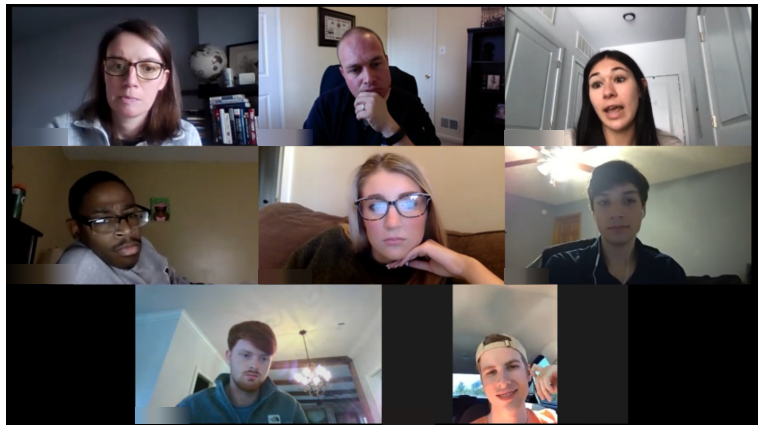
FixUS

Divided Nationally, United Locally: FixUS Focus Groups Explore What Values Unite and Divide Us

In 2020, America was reeling from COVID-19 and its economic fallout, civil unrest over racial injustice, and a bitterly divisive election. Against this backdrop, FixUS sought to take a step back and engage Americans on some basic questions with the hope of learning how we might overcome our polarized environment: *What do we value? What are the goals and aspirations we hold dear? What big national accomplishments or projects could unite us?*

Our hope is that engaging in open dialogue with each other as individuals and focusing on our common values, goals, and aspirations may serve as a bridge to close our gaps at the national level.

To begin this process, we fielded a [nationwide poll](#) with Ipsos that examined Americans' underlying goals and aspirations for themselves, their families, their communities, and the country. We followed this poll by launching a [National Dialogue on Common Values, Goals, and Aspirations](#), the first phase of which organized 13 focus groups over Zoom from October 2020 to early 2021.



Virtual FixUS focus group

Each focus group had between six to ten participants, and in totality had representation from 27 different states. Although we had diverse political representation in the groups, participants did not identify where they stood politically, and instead sought to engage in discussion with one another simply as fellow Americans who share common concern about the divided state of our country. Participants were presented with the results of the nationwide poll, and thereafter engaged in discussion surrounding what most resonated with them as a way of unearthing a deeper understanding of differing perspectives and possible paths forward for future rounds of dialogue.

The following are summarized findings from this first round of focus group discussions. Participants found that Americans appear largely divided on policy goals at the national level, but more united on individual and community goals and values. We also found certain topics, namely around the values of safety, patriotism, and honesty, require deeper understanding and engagement in order to identify ways to build empathy across divides. Lastly, we found an opportunity to engage in broader national dialogue around what might constitute a unifying moonshot – a national accomplishment that could unite the country and overcome our divisions.

Findings

We have much more in common with regard to individual and community values than national narratives suggest.

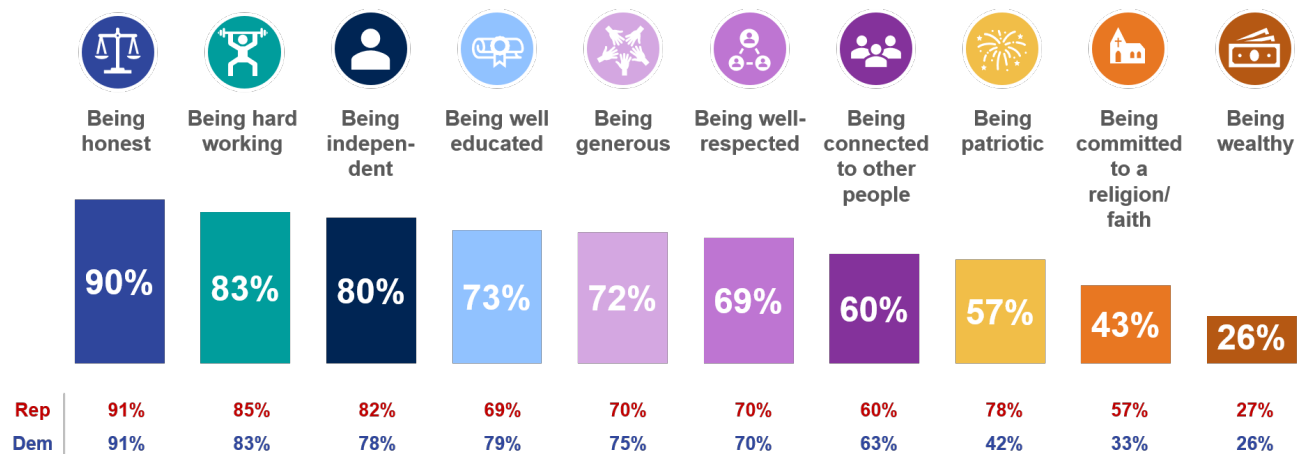
Poll results indicated that Americans had very different opinions on what priorities the country should address. For example, Democrats ranked improving healthcare affordability and racial justice as among their top priorities (64% and 51% respectively), whereas Republicans highly ranked the need for a strong and growing economy and putting America first (68% and 54% respectively).

By contrast, there was strong agreement among poll respondents regarding values and goals at the community and individual level. When asked what values were extremely or very important for themselves, being honest (90%), hard-working (83%) and independent (80%) dominated responses (see Figure 1). When asked about their top goals for themselves and their families, strong majorities ranked being healthy (80%), having financial security (74%), and having a loving relationship with a spouse or partner (67%) within their top five out of ten possible goals. There were no major differences by party, race, gender, or education levels.

Figure 1

How important are each of the following values, if at all, for you?

% Extremely Important/Very Important



Source: Ipsos-FixUS Poll. September 2020

Participants in our focus groups were both surprised and inspired that Americans shared many of the same core values and goals. Many found this to be encouraging because it hinted that our country might not be as divided as it appears, and that there is hope for us to unify around shared values.

“I was really encouraged when I saw this, you know, because even though we can have very big differences, it seems like the things that were common were really strong, whether you’re Republican or Democrat, and that really struck a chord with me and it just shows me that our values and what we want from the country are very similar. How we want to get there may be different, but that doesn’t mean we have to demonize or, you know, just realize that there’s good people trying to get to the same place in different directions.”

-Al (CA)

"I definitely think on the more community level there is more partnership and we're working together, just because I feel like the issues are a little less partisan in nature, in the sense that 'okay, do we fix a pothole?' I feel like that's less of making a decision and you have to think about your constituents and your overall party and going in line with them. So I do think the community is a better place to bridge the gap."

-Georgiana (MS)

"It was very promising that, you know, hopefully, we do have an opportunity moving forward here that we can find common ground and kind of get back to listening to one another."

-Sharon (WI)

"What struck me straight away was there was hardly any difference between Republicans and Democrats [when it comes to individual goals and values]...I began to ask myself, 'Why do we talk so much about not being united?'"

-P.K. (TX)

Despite this optimism, some participants questioned whether these individual values could be translated to a broader scale. There were individuals who pointed out that while people desire the same values and goals, we must recognize we have different views on how to achieve them.

"We actually all agree on most of our core values. We just disagree on how well we're doing and addressing those values and what we should do, like the mechanisms by which we could address those values and, which it seems to me, has always been the divide."

-Jessica (MA)

"We're all pretty much the same. We see this. We see that we want a lot of the same things. It's just that our lenses are slightly different. And sometimes...we process through our lenses and we pull in different information and process it differently."

-Lynnae (CO)

Safety can be a basic need, but could also mean protection from others.

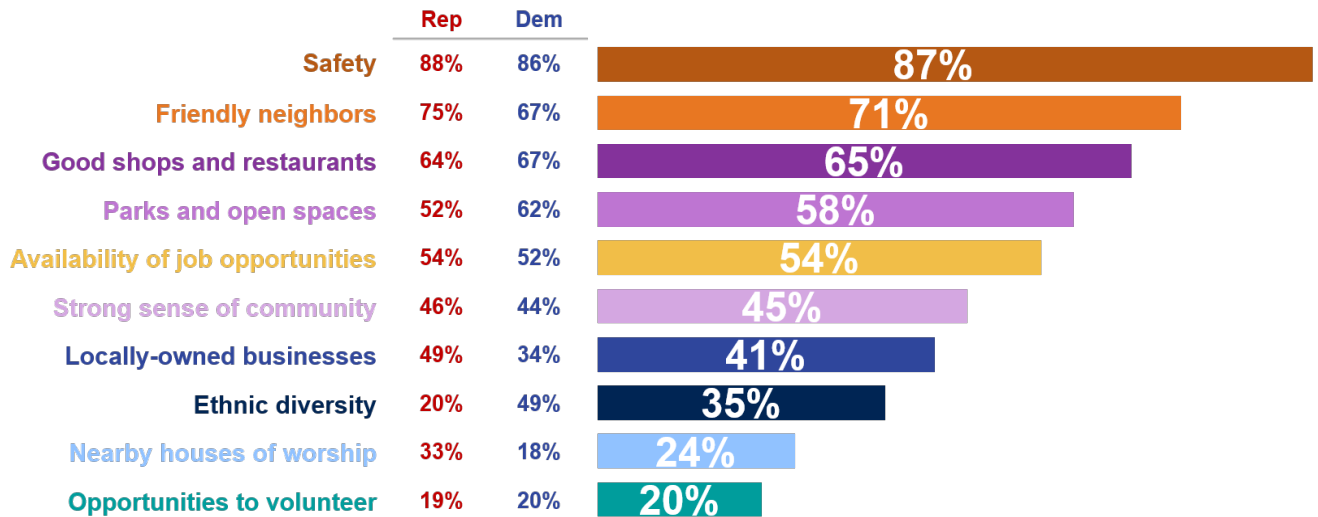
Poll results indicated that safety was the top attribute people wanted for their community. 65% of poll respondents ranked it number one or two out of ten possible attributes – the next top ranked attribute, friendly neighbors, was well behind at 32%. 87% ranked safety as a top five goal for their community, with little difference between Democrats and Republicans – 86% and 88% respectively (see Figure 2).

Our focus groups believed these poll results were logical because safety is such an essential part of living – without it, nothing else can function. Others explained that the pandemic has caused people to look inward in terms of how they were managing their daily lives.

Figure 2

Which of the following are the top goals you want in your community?

% Ranked as a Top 5 Need in his or her community



Source: Ipsos-FixUS Poll. September 2020

“Safety is one of Maslow’s hierarchy of basic needs. And if we’re trying to identify for our own country’s priorities, I think safety would come up probably all over the world....”

-Rick (FL)

“I think we all want safety. Because if you get safety, then you get those businesses, you get those opportunities to volunteer that will never happen if you don’t have safety...you are not going to have all those things that you need, you don’t have those opportunities to get mentored if it’s unsafe and you have to be home before dark.”

-Jason (NC)

“I would think with safety being at the top it is because we are at war with something invisible right now. You know, the virus. So I don’t know if people would describe that as feeling unsafe, but certainly in March I had friends express to me that they felt very unsafe.”

-Elin (WA)

The focus groups also noted that safety means different things to different people. Some felt their communities were safe, but other communities were not. Others suggested that a need to feel safe indicated a need to stick with their own tribes. This was most noticeable when viewed from a racial lens in light of recent civil unrest.

“I’ve been involved in a number of focus groups for various reasons over the years, and the one time I remember people putting safety at the top of their wish list was after 9/11...safety became less of an issue after that. So it really worries me that people now keep talking about ‘I want to be safe. I want to be safe.’ We’ve created an environment where people don’t feel safe...they may be saying people from outside my community don’t make me feel that safe and I need a community to feel safe of like-minded people and I’m concerned that we live in these enclaves where we feel safer if we just mix up with people like us.”

-Kathy (VA)

“I thought people thought safety was very important to them, but yet they didn’t feel safe...I feel safe because I’m in a certain community and part of a certain tribe. I’m safe because generally I feel safe in my community.

-Jim (WI)

“The fact that safety was so high for both Democrats and Republicans, I don’t know that safety meant the same thing. Like, when I’m talking about safety, it’s a very different thing than when someone else is talking about safety. When I’m talking about safety, it is the safety of my family to know that my sons can drive out of the house and my daughter can come back, that they come back alive. That’s what safety means to me. Sandra Bland, the way she behaved, I can see my daughter saying those things. I can see my daughter dying in that process.”
-Stella (NC)

Patriotism has become a divisive and loaded term.

When poll respondents were asked about patriotism as a defining value, there was a big gap between Republicans and Democrats – 78% to 46% respectively believing it was extremely or very important to them. There were also big gaps between generations – only 43% of people aged 18-34 ranked patriotism as extremely or very important, compared to 71% of people aged 55 and older.

Many focus group participants thought they personally were patriotic and expressed dismay that many poll respondents didn’t feel the same way. However, focus group participants provided explanations for why this might be the case. The most common explanation was how symbols and language around patriotism have become triggering and associated with one political party. They also highlighted how patriotism means different things to different people. Some considered patriotism to be loyalty to the military, while others considered it patriotic to act in ways that prevent unjust actions. Overall, participants thought there needed to be a concerted effort to find a common affiliation for the term rather than it being wielded as a partisan weapon.

“I can see why patriotism was ranked lower among people that identify as Democrats. It is not because they are not patriotic; it is because over the last four years, the American flag, the pledge, has been overtaken to some degree in a very harsh and negative way.”
-Isela (AZ)

“...if I said to somebody ‘I think we should cut the defense or military budget by 80%,’ a lot of people would say, ‘Well, you’re not a patriot because you’re not supporting the troops,’ etc. But other people would argue that I am a patriot because I’m arguing for building up the country, for using those funds to do something else. And I believe in the strength of the country and that is not defined purely by its military.”
-Benjamin (OR)

“...just getting a definition of what it means to be patriotic might help a lot because you have to create a counter narrative to what people hear in certain media environments allow them to feel comfortable participating in.”

-Dave (CA)

"The concern that I have about the term patriotism and the way that it's translated in our behavior, especially at the national level, is I'm very concerned that unvarnished patriotism actually runs counter to our interests and is somewhat anachronistic. Yes, we're citizens of this country and I love the American idea and I'm so sad at what's been happening to it recently. But we're also citizens of the world...I'm almost scared of the term patriotism in the same way that I'm scared of religious extremism. Religion is so important, but when it's carried to an extreme, it becomes so destructive."

-MJ (CA)

"I think the issue of being patriotic is more so 'do you identify with the goals and views of your country?' And I think right now why Democrats don't necessarily feel very patriotic with the United States, it is not some inherent hatred of the United States; I do not think it is a cynical view per se. I just don't really think that Democrats really see the U.S. reflecting their own values and beliefs, so I think that is where it is stemming from."

-Anna (MT)

"I was really disheartened [that] patriotism and faith were so lowly valued by our country, our citizens, and I believe that's because those terms have become weaponized...in such a way that people are not comfortable saying that that's a core value for them."

-Stella (NC)

"Being Honest" is a core value held by nearly all Americans, but its support surprised participants and requires deeper understanding.

90% of respondents in the nationwide poll said being honest was an extremely or very important value to them, with an overwhelming majority of both parties agreeing with the statement.

The focus group participants were pleased and surprised that honesty ranked so highly. Many pointed out that despite the high regard for honesty, many politicians were perceived as dishonest yet did not suffer any consequences. Others felt that honesty tended to take a backseat if people felt it was in their self-interest to do so. Many connected the problems of honesty with broader issues of trust and truthfulness throughout society. People want straightforward facts, but some found this was hard to find when there's a lack of trusted information sources. In turn, people don't agree on basic facts and therefore cannot be seen as honest. Many ultimately laid blame on the media environment – either for intentionally exacerbating tensions or for its gradual stratification over the decades.

"My concern with prioritizing honesty and trust is: do we really know what honesty is anymore? When you ask someone to prioritize honesty and trust, maybe there isn't a common definition of what honesty is and what trust is. Maybe in this world that we have, you choose your news sources, you choose where you want to live, you choose your politicians, etc. Unfortunately, I think we should concentrate on honesty and trust, but I'm not sure there's a common definition."

-Barry (CA)

"I was kind of shocked at the last thing there when it said personal values and I think honesty was number one...we say honesty is so valuable, but we have people representing us that are not necessarily honest and that was one that actually shocked me when I saw that, like, 'You're kidding me.'"

-Charlie (ME)

"I think we have to remember in politics there is a certain amount of posturing, different ways that you negotiate with people, different ways that you can interact with people, that aren't necessarily dishonest, but are different from how I would talk to you one-on-one...how you need to talk to your people to avoid panic, avoid different types of reactions is very measured and controlled. And so maybe there is something in kind of understanding different types of honesty."

-Hannah (DE)

"[My father] is now in his 80s and he has actually completely given up. He believes there is so much dishonesty, from everyone, even the people that he had faith in, that he's basically said, 'they don't care anymore' and walked away from anything political."

-Doug (TX)

"Because of the change in the way the media is structured in this country all we used to have was CBS, NBC, and ABC. It was local news and then national news and they were attempting, I think, to present, a fairly uniform and objective view. Now we're mostly reading or watching national news that's very, very polarized...So I think we're getting less and less local news, which would require us to think about the people next door, the people in the next city, the people in our state, and more and more national news where it's easier to say, 'well, it's this big team of us versus this big team of them.'"

-Benjamin (OR)

"Our media is suspiciously deciding, regardless of what the outlet is, to not tell the whole story. They're missing key facts, they're missing key information, whatever story I read, even from sources that I trust, I end up having to do extra research just to answer my own questions inside of the article...I feel like they dumbed it down because they don't respect that we have the ability to actually take in information and think for ourselves...and to tell you the truth, it is the most untrustworthy institution that we have."

-Jessica (MA)

"I wish we would get the news and not someone's opinion of the news...If you want to have channels like that and then you can go to them. But if I'm, you know, watching my nightly news, I want to know the news. I don't want to hear that reporter's opinion of what happened or the bits and pieces. If you're going to show something, give me the whole dialogue so that I can put it into context, instead of finding out later someone gave you a snippet that made you think one way when in fact it is not there to back it up."

-Sharon (WI)

"I think one of the things that struck me strongest was the honesty value...everybody wants it. And if there's one thing I find missing in today's media, it's honesty. I switch back and forth between Fox News and CNN quite frequently and hear the same stories reported and they're spun entirely differently, usually from a point of view of trying to market a position that's extreme, and they are definitely not reporting in a balanced way or objectively the truth."

-Mike (NY)

"I feel like there's missing that impartial judge, so to speak, that can articulate what's going on in communities. And it'll be interesting to see if people actually want that impartial judge in the first place because oftentimes, what I see in my own community and New Jersey, is people will self-segregate into the parts of the community where they feel the most comfortable and you're not really seeing much conversation across the aisle in terms of different groups that have self-segregated for how to come together on these very important issues."

-Samantha (NJ)

What could be a “Moonshot” idea to bridge our divides?

The final question we asked in our poll was based around “moonshots” – big accomplishments that could help unite the country for the common good. Unfortunately, the responses to this open-ended question in the poll didn’t follow any coherent theme. Many suggested defeating the other party in the 2020 election would be an accomplishment, or that there wasn’t any moonshot to be had given how divided we are.

So we asked our focus groups to put forward any ideas. Some participants struggled to answer this question, yet many offered ideas which touched on accomplishments surrounding infrastructure, climate change, public service, or heading deeper into outer space. Many also noted that any moonshot won’t come easily, but it was worth pursuing even if it meant taking smaller steps towards that goal.

“I was a history major, so I was going back through my mental Rolodex. The way the question has been framed, moments that bring the country together, I think it’s almost always been moments of disaster. I’m thinking of Remember the Maine, Pearl Harbor, Sputnik, 9/11, you know, it’s almost all like kind of bad things that tend to bring us together rather than positive things, which might make our division during COVID extraordinary. But I might think about it in terms of bad things: new cold war with China or, you know, external aggression.”

-Scott (VA)

“We got a lot out of going to the moon in terms of technological leaps forward. I think going back to the moon and going to Mars...I don’t know if that would unite the country but that, to me, the answer is in the question itself. It’s the same thing Kennedy did. Because it’s not just about we shall go to the moon, it’s about what aspirational national missions represented: all the service and effort and work ethic and ingenuity and pride that goes into it. It’s all the work. It’s the journey, not the destination.”

-Troy (NY)

“How about blanketing the country with broadband? Is that controversial? Is there somebody who would say we shouldn’t do that? Or I’m certain there are those who would say we can’t afford it. But that’s an idea.”

-MJ (CA)

“If we did more to preserve our public lands, that seems to unite a lot of people.”

-Lynnae (CO)

“I think what we need the most is to rebuild our infrastructure...when Franklin Delano Roosevelt took over from Herbert Hoover, one of the first things he did is start the WPA, CCC, and all those others...So I think if we had a big program of redoing our infrastructure, we would have a lot of tangible things to point to, and I think that would give us a moonshot.”

-Cella (NE)

"In terms of things that everybody can get behind, or many people can get behind, certainly not everybody, I think that climate change, but rephrased in a way that makes it more about saving the earth so that we can continue to live on it, would eventually be something that we can get behind."

-Benjamin (OR)

"...I've been thinking about this for a long time and my conclusion was we have to make the small steps that bridge divisions. I've just finished working on...fixing redistricting in Virginia and I'm thinking, well, maybe it should be ranked choice voting or the national popular vote. All the structures that we've set up have added to the divisiveness where we can't get to the moonshots that we all agree on."

-Kathy (VA)

"Eradicating gun violence...I know we all have different thoughts on guns here, but I think ending premature deaths at the hand of a gun would be something that everyone could get around (hopefully better than the War on Drugs)."

-Hannah (DE)

"I would like to amend The US Constitution, so we can set reasonable limits on special interest, big concentrated money in our government...This growing money in politics is a nemesis."

-Susan (MA)

"It's kind of idealistic, but I would like to see some kind of mandatory national service program where everybody, no matter who they are, has some kind of commitment and investment in the country and the betterment of the country and our value system..."

-Lyle (MI)

Next Steps

This initial round of dialogue and focus groups were insightful, and helped foster deeper understanding and empathy across differences from those who participated. Like many of the participants, we share their optimism that the polling and discussions on these topics may confirm that engaging in open dialogue with each other as individuals can help foster a sense that we share more in common than what divides us.

We also know we only scratched the surface on these issues, and real change requires greatly scaling up these types of discussions to allow for mass participation and discovering the best topics to engage with each other at scale.

In the coming months, FixUS will continue to hold rounds of dialogue and focus groups that delve deeper into the topics explored in this round, while working with partners to develop methods to scale engagement and participation. We will dig deeper into the underlying meaning of some of the values Americans appear to hold dear, while finding common answers to the elusive questions – such as a common definition of patriotism and what a top list of potential “moonshots” could be to unite the country.

The dialogue will run in parallel to other FixUS projects that are engaging subject matter experts and publishing reports that delve into the myriad causes contributing to our current environment – the political, economic, cultural, technological and other issues facing our country.



FixUS is committed to engaging fellow citizens to better understand and address our nation's growing divisions, dysfunction, and distrust in our political system. Through a number of research projects, public engagement efforts and partnerships, we seek to bring attention and visibility to these issues, build support for necessary changes, and ultimately help to regain a sense of shared aspirations, values, and a belief that there is more that unites us than divides us.

To learn more about the nationwide poll, or to sign up to be involved in future focus group discussions, visit FixUSNow.org