

# The War on Polarization

## An Open Letter to President-Elect Biden on the Science that Offers Us A Way Out

Dear President-Elect Biden,

It was fitting, albeit chilling, to see you stand near Cemetery Ridge on the battlefield at Gettysburg recently to remind us of the potentially horrific costs of runaway American division. The serenity of the sunny pastoral scene behind you belied the blood-soaked history of the landscape, where 50,000 of our boys and men were cut down at the hands of their own brothers over three days of carnage in July, 1863. Such *mêlées* represent nations at their nadir, and today ring out as a harbinger of our future.

While there are countless opinions on the roots of our current discord and the remedies necessary for changing course, few survive the harsh light of systematic, empirical research. However, decades of investigation into how [deeply divided societies](#) like ours change course suggest that *how* leaders view and approach these entrenched problems – [especially early on in their tenure](#) – can make all the difference. Just as we need to leverage our best science to combat COVID-19, so should we apply it to combat toxic polarization – the other pandemic facing America today.

### **We are at a dangerous precipice.**

America is more divided today than we were in [the late 1800s](#), just after our Civil War. Terrifying incidents of [political violence](#) have been breaking out on our streets, and public [attitudes](#) supporting these acts have been on the rise. The chasm between us today is as evident in [Washington](#) as it is on [Main Street](#) – and is doing us great harm. We see it in the levels of [contempt](#) partisans harbor for their neighbors, the [perceptual distortions](#) we hold of the other's views, and in the degree to which this enmity has [spread](#) to the more mundane corners of our lives. This is [damaging](#) our families, friendships, neighborhoods and workplaces to a degree not seen before in our lifetime, and pointing us toward violence.

### **This is not about Trump.**

The current spike in partisan hostilities is not due only to Donald Trump. Such rancor is largely a symptom of a [decades-long trend](#) in our society that goes back to the late 1960s. In other words, our current political crisis grew from the soil of our widening [geographic and cultural divisions](#), which are much more [deeply rooted](#) and enduring than any politician. This [trend](#) created the conditions that led to a such a divisive presidency in the first place, and it is the underlying *trend*, much more than the current administration, that we should be concerned about.

### **This is a problem of the first order.**

Extreme polarization not only damages our health and communities, but it also impairs our capacities to come together sufficiently as a nation to address the other [existential crises](#) baying at our door. When extreme natural disasters like COVID-19, wildfires, floods and hurricanes fail to unify a nation and are instead [weaponized](#) as yet more partisan ammunition, our future looks bleak.

## **We are trapped in an epidemic of hate.**

Like COVID-19, the spread of polarization we are experiencing today is highly contagious and mutable. This means that it will continue to grow exponentially if not contained and can mutate into new forms as the latest events become weaponized by extreme partisans. However, unlike COVID this epidemic of enmity will not be cured by a vaccine. It has become so pervasive, culturally-embedded and self-perpetuating that it will resist most good faith attempts to solve it. Such [change-resistant problems](#) play by a different set of rules entirely.

## **Addressing this trap will require a new kind of leadership.**

[Research](#) has found that major transformations of chronically-troubled institutions are most likely to occur when new leaders come into office after a major [political shock](#) has destabilized the status quo, much like COVID has brought on today. Former leaders often have strong vested interests in present circumstances, while new leaders who are less socialized and incentivized to the ways of a system are often better able to *see problems and solutions differently*.

This is essential to the capacity of your administration to mobilize our citizens to come together to fight against toxic polarization – it must learn to think and lead differently on this one. Politics as usual – taken to extremes – have got us into this quagmire in the first place, and more of the same will just drive us in deeper.

What is required to address *this* hate-filled national standoff is a somewhat counterintuitive approach to problem-solving, what some have called [jujutsu](#) leadership. This is based on the martial arts principle of using the [energy](#) of an attacker against them, rather than directly opposing it.

For our purposes the “attacker” is the problem of chronic runaway polarization. Rather than attempting to unilaterally target and fix this change-resistant pattern through introducing new policies or programming, jujutsu requires us to work from the outside in. That is, to obtain a thorough understanding of the system of considerable forces dividing us – *as well as those already working tirelessly to hold us together* – and then to redirect or bolster the considerable power and energy of these forces toward reunification. In other words, to build on what is resonant and already working across America – a bottom-up public health approach. [Decades of research](#) have offered robust support for the value of these types of interventions when faced with highly discordant societies.

## **How might a Biden-Harris administration adopt this approach to depolarization?**

**1) Announce a full commitment to *defeating toxic division in America*.** Although you should be commended for immediately appealing for [national unity and bipartisanship](#), research has long established the unique mobilizing power of framing goals as [threats](#) versus opportunities. Evidence suggests it is also likely [too soon](#) to ask people to unite or heal after decades of enmity and division. This will enrage and repel too many on both sides. However, highlighting the [deleterious](#) effects of our divisions on our personal health and wellbeing, as well as that of our children, families, communities and nation, will be much more likely to mobilize a period of détente and cooperation. If a joint problem-solving initiative takes hold and proves fruitful, the

language can eventually shift to one of tolerance, healing and reunification. But aiming too high too soon will likely backfire.

[Research](#) has also found that in highly escalated conflicts where distrust and suspicion reign, dramatic changes in political strategies are often best done intentionally, declaratively and strategically. Such [tension-reduction strategies](#), when done right, can begin to weaken the certainty around outgroup vilification and lead to less rigidity in decision making. This declaration would need to be announced publicly, enacted soon thereafter, and be both meaningful, wide-ranging and verifiable. It would begin with inviting *all* Americans – especially Republicans across the country – to join with you in this fight against our [common enemy](#). However, it must also emphasize that your intention will be to work to reduce toxic polarization and contempt whether reciprocated or not, as doing so is vital to the wellbeing of all Americans and to functioning American democracy

## **2) Launch a radical listening tour to better comprehend our many sources of division.**

Entire swaths of America have been feeling largely neglected, invisible and left behind for decades, which has fueled populist fervor on the right and the left. [Research](#) has shown that when members of such disenfranchised groups begin to feel listened to and understood by those in power, it can open them up to constructive shifts in their attitudes and actions. However, in order for your administration to address this need for voice and informed action from these groups, it will need to participate in some form of [radical listening](#). This is a method used in [narrative medicine](#) and development work for partnering with community stakeholders in identifying locally feasible and sustainable solutions to their problems.

A national initiative could involve venues such as post-election town halls, national surveys, virtual drop-boxes, and employ methods of data mining of social media to begin to identify and respond to the most central grievances and proposed remedies in particular regions of the country. [Large-scale initiatives](#) like these, when they are transparent and result in substantive follow-through, have been shown to go a long way in healing painfully-divided communities.

## **3) Strengthen our national immune system.**

One of the lessons gleaned from international [peacebuilding](#) and [humanitarian](#) work is that many of the more effective, sustainable interventions that help communities transition out of intergroup strife come from within them. They are often [local initiatives](#) that have sprung up in response to specific community challenges, some of which manage to thrive under extraordinarily difficult circumstances and prove sustainable. These groups are often labeled [positive deviants](#) because they are able to address problems and increase wellbeing in places where most others fail.

Fortunately, today, there are thousands of [bridge-building groups](#) across our country that fit this description and offer a way out. Many are focused on promoting and facilitating community dialogues across the red-blue divide. Others work in different sectors, like journalism, education, technology and healthcare, to bring interested parties together across ideological divides in service of promoting progress through negotiation and compromise. These groups represent the immune system of our nation actively fighting against the pathologies of hate and vilification and working tirelessly to grow the moderate middle. But perhaps more importantly, these groups often help participants move beyond dialogue and create bipartisan alliances that are well positioned to take on many of the structural incentives that divide us. *This step is critical to*

*substantive change. We will never [talk](#) our way out of this division, it must lead to real [structural change](#). This nascent ecology of unification could be strengthened and brought to scale by careful and targeted recognition and support from the Federal government.*

**4) Model Change.** [Research](#) on addressing intractable conflicts has found that when disputants believe, implicitly, that people and situations don't ever *really* change, they tend to disengage from the other side, give up, and cling to the status quo. So, of course, things are less likely to change. However, when people come to believe that groups and situations are mutable and can change, they are much more likely to work to do so. This simple shift in mindset helps make it conceivable to see and realize solutions to problems where others see inevitable dead ends. And when our leaders model this capacity to change their ways, the consequences can be profound.

One means of modeling substantive change would be for your administration to bring on a group of cabinet members who take up their roles in a dramatically different way – one that *steadfastly privileges national unity and good governance over political power, that offers a compelling vision of solidarity for America (and the international community), that strikes an optimal balance between respecting our cherished traditions and promoting more fair and inclusive progress.*

To realize this, you could require all new members to take a [Pledge of Constructive Political Discourse](#) where they publicly commit to focusing on issues and refraining from personal attacks in their remarks, acknowledge and build on the ideas of others without denigrating them, and advocate for their policies by including dissenting views without disparaging them. You could also ask prospective members to develop and present *political-cultural integration and reunification plans*. These would entail action plans that would specify a series of priorities and action steps for mobilizing their work that privileges the gradual reunification of the nation.

**5) Offer a National Strategy on Depolarization and Reunification.** These bottom-up efforts to systematically listen and learn about the sources of our division and the existing solutions serving to mitigate it must eventually culminate in follow-through and action. Imagine if in your first *State of the Union* address, you were to announce the results of a year-long listening and leaning tour resulting in the launch of a *National Strategy on Depolarization and Reunification* (NSDR). This initiative, informed by the concerns and ideas of our citizenry and shaped by [evidence-based practices](#) on promoting cooperation and constructive conflict management, could serve to reset our course, and point us toward a new era of functional democracy.

### **Building Back Better.**

The tumultuous era of Trump + COVID + racial injustice has shined a hard light on many of the inequities, cleavages and vulnerabilities of contemporary American society. These fissures have been too easily weaponized by those who seek to divide us. In order to *Build Back Better* effectively and sustainably, we will need to do so fully mindful of these most basic challenges, and of the many promising remedies emanating from resilient communities across our land. Doing so will require a radically different approach to leadership – one that is much less focused on our political leaders and much more on the perils and potential of We the People.