American Identity Project
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Toward A New Birth of Patriotism

The American Identity Project Advisory Group

In 1776, the authors of the Declaration of Independence proclaimed a new republic founded upon revolutionary ideas about individual liberty and political equality. Two hundred and fifty years later, however, many Americans — particularly young Americans — seem disillusioned with the world's longest-running experiment in representative democracy.

Polling shows a sharp generational divide on questions of patriotism and democracy. A 2025 poll found only 36% of young adults said they are "extremely" or "very" proud to be an American (compared with 65% of those over age 65).[1] In a 2023 poll, nearly one-third of youth agreed that "Democracy is no longer a viable system, and Americans should explore alternative forms of government" (compared to only 5% of those over 65).[2]

There is, of course, a great deal of variation among America's 50 million young people, and the twin challenges of instilling a love of country and democracy show up differently across class lines. Polling of the broader public finds that college-educated Americans, who are materially blessed, paradoxically express lower levels of patriotism toward their country than working-class Americans.[3] At the same time, low-income and working-class Americans are much less likely to say that democracy is the best form of government.[4]

What explains the loss of enthusiasm for America and its democracy, and what can be done about it? The best empirical evidence suggests a braided cord of explanations.

In an era of deindustrialization, leaders have failed to deliver on the core American promise of social mobility. In 2025, 70% of Americans reported they no longer believe that if you work hard, you'll get ahead;[5] and another survey found skepticism about the American Dream runs particularly high among young Americans.[6] In addition, many Americans have been fed up with the inability of leaders to control the nation's borders. Unlawful immigration generates a sense of social disorder and chaos and violates a deeply-felt belief that borders have moral significance because a nation's people owe more to one another than they do to people from other countries.[7] So too, elite failure to prevent the collapse of financial markets and to extricate Americans from foreign wars has further eroded people's confidence in America and its democracy.

In addition, young Americans have grown up in an age of rising illiberalism on the political right and left. They have witnessed leaders on the right who have resisted the peaceful transfer of power, and articulated a disturbing vision of an America defined mostly by blood and soil.[8] Meanwhile, on the left, many suggest it is acceptable to shout down speakers; that racial and ethnic identities are more important than a shared American identity; that America is defined less by the vision enunciated in 1776 than by white supremacy and the importation of enslaved people in 1619; and that America is more often a force for evil than good in the world. Finally, America's education system has become so focused on particular identities, "global citizenship,"[9] and careerism that it has failed to convey to young people the extraordinary nature of their civic inheritance. Young people of privilege, facing intense pressure to attend certain schools, secure plum jobs, and adopt certain opinions, lose sight of how fortunate they are to live in the world's oldest constitutional democracy. Our schools and colleges dwell so heavily on negative aspects of the American story that an astonishing four in 10 Gen Z respondents are more likely to describe the Founders as "villains" than as "heroes."[10]

For all this discouraging news, however, we have hope. America has seen recurring episodes of cynicism about the American Creed throughout its history, and each time, its citizens have dug deep to apply the founding ideals of liberty and political equality in new ways to shape a better future. After a bloody Civil War, Abraham Lincoln called for a new birth of freedom. After the betrayal of elites during the Gilded Age, Theodore Roosevelt enacted the Square Deal. In the 1930s, when economic misery and inequality were much greater than they are today, Franklin Roosevelt rallied America around a New Deal. And in response to decades of crippling Jim Crow laws, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders helped codify old principles of equality into new laws.

We also have hope because America's backbone — its multiracial working class — has refused to give up on the country.[11] Some 62% of Asian Americans, 70% of Black Americans, and 76% of Hispanic Americans say they are "proud to be an American," compared with just 34% of progressive activists,[12] the vast majority of whom are white and college educated.[13] And America's source of rejuvenation — its new immigrants — express higher levels of patriotism than those who are native born,[14] perhaps because immigrants know America offers greater freedom to speak one's mind and to prosper than do their countries of origin.

What should governors, state legislators, members of Congress, and educators do to promote a renewal of liberal democracy in our nation's 250th year?

First, policymakers should strengthen, rather than abandon, the country's universal system of public schools, including public charter schools. Public schools should emphasize a common American identity based on the mutual rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. This vision rejects both the notion that American

identity is bound up more with ethnic heritage than the nation's classically liberal ideals and thinking, which exalt tribal identities and call liberties such as freedom of speech smokescreens for power and oppression.[15]

America was founded not on the basis of any particular race, ethnicity, or religion, but on a set of ideas that pair liberty and political equality. As the nation grows increasingly diverse, it is all the more essential for students to come to terms with the founding ideals of the country that are the equal inheritance of all of us. Of course, place and rootedness matter. But ultimately, it is our national ideals — that "all men are created equal" and endowed with "unalienable rights" to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" — that serve as the glue that holds together the country's astonishing array of diversity.

The good news is that most Americans support this creedal vision of America. A 2025 survey found large majorities of Americans think being "truly American" is connected to believing in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, in individual freedoms such as freedom of speech, and accepting people of diverse racial and religious backgrounds. By contrast, fewer than half of Americans associate being truly American with being of a particular religious faith or racial background.[16]

Because one-third of young people believe America should look to alternatives to democracy, students should be taught what in fact it is like to live in nondemocratic societies that stifle human freedom. They should be taught an honest and, therefore, hopeful, account of American history, which directly faces the country's flaws and also highlights democracy's capacity for self-correction. Students should be given opportunities to develop their civic muscles through non-partisan projects seeking to bring about change at the local level. And our political leaders should take up the torch from John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Bill Clinton to challenge the ethos of entitlement and call on young people to serve others and their country.

Second, America must engage in a new age of reform in which policymakers restore America's promise of social mobility and give priority to raising living standards for hard-working Americans who are struggling to get into the middle class or stay there. Just as the civil rights movement used liberal democratic tools (free speech, assembly, nonviolent demonstrations) to work with policymakers to remove barriers for racial minorities to enjoy the American Dream, so young people today can use those same tools to reduce the roadblocks to social mobility. We would like to see reforms in a variety of realms, from education to tax law, to provide what Lincoln called "an open field and a fair chance" for those who work hard to apply their talents. And policymakers should find a way to protect our borders against illegal immigration while also ensuring that America remains a haven for people lawfully coming to our country in search of liberty and opportunity.

Third, America needs a cultural and spiritual revival. Over the course of its history, America has lived through many cultural dispensations. The Gilded Age was a period of America's past that clearly mirrors where we are today: a time of great polarization and political animosity, widening economic inequality, and cultural clashes as the demographic characteristics of the country changed rapidly. Toward the end of the Gilded Age, social movements, like the labor movement, journalists and storytellers, like Jacob Riis and Ida Tarbell, and broadly popular social innovations, like settlement houses and public libraries, elevated a moral spirit that helped remind Americans that we're all in this together and gave rise to the Progressive Era that helped usher in a period of greater unity and equality. In the 1950s, as well, American culture was more strongly communal. People lived and worked within big institutions, like the military, unions, and large corporations. Respect for authority was strong. A culture of self-effacement was prevalent—I'm no better than anybody else, but nobody is better than me. Starting in the 1960s, American culture became more individualistic, with emphasis on personal liberation, a rejection of authority structure, an appeal to individual creativity, technological innovation, and self-expression.

This culture of individualism produced many great outcomes, but it has now run its course, producing a society with low social trust, atomization, and a poisonous level of social resentment. We are living today at yet another moment when an era of social innovations is needed, a new set of dominant mores, a new set of unifying ideals, a new way to reconcile individual freedom and social cohesion. There has to be a multi-generational effort to come up with a social vision that both young and old can believe in, a new image of the good life, of the American dream that balances the individualism that helps America flourish with a common sense of national purpose.

Successful efforts to make life better for young people, coupled with education aimed at instilling an appreciation for the genius of American democracy, coupled with a new burst of cultural creativity, could spawn a new birth to liberal patriotism that merges a love and appreciation of country with clear-eyed recognition that the United States has a long journey on the way to its "more perfect union." Two hundred and fifty years after America's independence, young people can be at the forefront of creating anew the world's finest model of how a multiethnic democracy can work.

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