

Trump Has Divided the Country. Some Americans Are Trying to Bring Us Back Together

[Arlie Russell Hochschild](#) January 19, 2018 4:31 PM EST



U.S. President Donald Trump listens to a reporter's question as he walks on the South Lawn after arriving on Marine One at the White House Dec. 4, 2017 in Washington, D.C. Chris Kleponis/Pool—Getty Images

Between 2011 and 2016, I ventured across [America's political divide](#). I live in Berkeley, California, a liberal town in a liberal state, and in those years, I tried to step into the shoes of those living in a deeply conservative town, a center

of the petrochemical industry: Lake Charles, in a conservative state, Louisiana. It's a story I tell in my 2016 book, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. Nearly all the people I came to know [voted for Donald Trump](#) — most with hope and excitement. Since the book came out, I've returned to Louisiana three times, perused my Facebook feed and invited some to my own home to learn if and how their feelings have changed over the course of [President Trump's first year](#). As Trump's efforts to "make America great again" paradoxically pull us apart, I wondered: Was there hope that we would not lose each other?

It is not difficult to see that the wedge between Republicans and Democrats is formidable. [According to a recent Pew survey](#), 71% of Democrats believe the government should do more to help the needy; only 24% of Republicans do. Sixty-four percent of Democrats think discrimination is the main reason blacks can't get ahead; only 14% of Republicans do. Eighty-four percent of Democrats believe [immigrants strengthen the country](#) with their work ethic and talent; only 42% of Republicans do. The average gap between Democrats and Republicans on ten subjects has grown from 15% in 1994 to 36% in 2017. Two decades back, the blue-red divide on a range of issues was about as wide as that between blacks and whites (about 14% typically); today it is much wider.

A year after they voted for Trump, all the Trump supporters I talked to remained committed to him. Some did so with a sigh: "Why can't he stop tweeting?" "Why can't he be more presidential?" But others had risen up as defiant moral bodyguards. When Trump was quoted as speaking of some African nations as "shithole nations," saying Haitians "all have AIDS" and describing Norwegian newcomers as desirable, many of his supporters felt embarrassed for him and by him. But one Louisianan I knew responded, "I'm sorry but those African countries are terrible places to live," and another angrily rebuked Trump's critics on Facebook, "Democrats feign horror when

[Trump calls a COUNTRY a 'shithole'](#) but praise Hillary for calling a PEOPLE deplorable," and again, "You're a Democrat if you think its horrible that Trump called a country a 'shithole,' but that its okay to murder an unborn child." Surely people have seen members of both parties furiously pointing out the moral hypocrisies of their opponents.

But is that partisan hatred the only story? No.

It is harder to see, but a nationwide grass-roots movement has been quietly growing, and it seeks not to eliminate difference but to remove its bitter edge. The first signs I saw of this came as email messages from my readers. One woman wrote, "I'm part of an Episcopalian congregation here in western Massachusetts. Can you put me in touch with a congregation in Lake Charles?" Another woman said, "I live on a dairy farm in Kansas, in a conservative state, and I'd liked to get some high school kids from California to see how we live out here." When a Trump supporter I profiled in *Strangers* came with her children to visit my family in Berkeley, we conducted an 8-person right-meets-left "Living-room Conversation" — part of a project that's the [brainchild of a local mediation lawyer, Joan Blades](#) — to see if we could find common ground on how to clean up the environment. We began by going around the room, each person, left and right sharing his or her personal goals for America, and for its environment and found them fairly similar — though as the conversation we wandered between points of agreement (clean energy) and disagreement (the government subsidizing clean energy). Usually in Livingroom Conversations, the group meets eight times, though we could only meet once. And while we experienced no aha-breakthrough moment, all of us felt glad we'd tried.

Even among the most ardent and extreme people I met over five years of research in Louisiana, I found specific issues on which there was potential for coalition — for example, safeguarding children on the Internet, reducing

prison populations for non-violent offenders, protecting against commercialization of the human genome, pushing for good jobs and rebuilding our rail system, roads, bridges – America's infrastructure. In fact, most of my Louisiana Trump supporters wanted to mend its *social* infrastructure too.

Signs of a desire to reach out extend far beyond my inbox and living room. Listed on the website of [the Bridge Alliance](#), a non-profit non-partisan umbrella group, are over [seventy cross-partisan groups](#) based in towns scattered across the country with such names as Common Good, Better Angels, American Public Square, AllSides. Virtually all of these small groups rose from local efforts to restore a culture of respect while exploring potential points of agreement. Common ground is there to be explored. By some estimates, over one in ten [people who voted for Bernie Sanders](#) in the Democratic primary ended up voting for Trump in the presidential election. Experts also estimate that between 6.7 and 9.2 million people who voted for Trump in 2016 had also [voted for Obama in 2012](#).

As of October 2017, the Bridge Alliance had three million supporters. As we head into the next three years with a divided media and a speak-to-one-base president, more of us need to reach out to people we disagree with. We may not be as polarized as we think. And even — or really, *especially* — if we are, we need to restore the spirit of the public square.

In the past, we had ways of bringing together Americans who differed: the compulsory draft, labor unions, public schools and libraries and nightly TV news programs everyone watched, like *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*. Increasingly today we lack these ways of sharing each other's worlds. So we need to strengthen the old ways or reinvent new ones — perhaps more Living Room Conversations among some of those Bernie-Obama-Trump crossovers. By itself, the simple act of crossing the partisan divide will not

resolve our crisis. But it could help us slowly rebuild a nation in which we feel as if we know each other again.