June 2025

WEAVING THE DREAM

How Opportunity and Personal Agency Can Shape a Common Vision for America





ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

This report is published by More in Common, an organization working to build more united and inclusive democratic societies. Our mission is to understand the forces driving societies apart, find common ground, and bring people together to tackle shared challenges. We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media and government to connect people across lines of difference.

ABOUT THE BEACON PROJECT

This report was produced by the Beacon Project at More in Common, a multi-year effort to develop a new civic vision that speaks to modern challenges. For more on the Beacon Project, visit beaconproject.us.

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FOREWORD

In 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, the historian James Truslow Adams envisioned a society "in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable...regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." He called it the American Dream.

In the decades since, the American Dream has been a touchstone in the American imagination. For the millions who have come to America in search of a better life, it represents a source of inspiration. For others who had their dreams thwarted by bad luck or an unfair system, it is a source of bitter irony. For them, the American Dream remains just that—an unfulfilled fantasy.

What would it take to turn this dream into reality for all Americans?

This report seeks to answer this question. Led by Dr. Daniel Yudkin, it explores topics intimately related to the American Dream: namely, the extent to which success depends on opportunities provided by society versus people's own actions and decisions, or "personal agency." It finds that solutions emerge when we transcend false binaries and escape the "us-versus-them" dynamics of tribal psychology: Americans of all stripes deeply believe in the power of individuals to surmount life's challenges. Yet most also recognize the need for society to remove unfair obstacles that hinder people from achieving their goals.

Today, many Americans are despairing at the divisions affecting their country. Nine in ten say our country has never been so divided, and nearly as many say our political system needs major changes. Meanwhile, our society is undergoing a series of rapid changes, ranging from the advent of artificial intelligence to pitched political battles over diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). These changes are resurfacing age-old questions about how to build a fair, prosperous society in which everyone can thrive.

In the midst of these challenges—and as our country approaches its 250th anniversary—this report may serve as a beacon of hope. And it offers a path forward: a common vision for America that emphasizes people's right and responsibility to pursue "morally-directed agency" to improve their own lives and the lives of the people around them.

This report is the first from the Beacon Project, a multi-year initiative from More in Common that focuses on the threads that, when woven together, can repair America's fabric. The Beacon Project combines polling data, insights drawn from philosophy, psychology, and political science, and cutting-edge methods in data science to develop a new civic vision that can reawaken Americans' sense of common purpose and shared fate. It seems fitting that the first report of the Beacon Project should focus on a question so central to the American experiment: Can we shape our collective destiny?

Tim Dixon (Co-founder) Jason Mangone (Executive Director)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the roots of every ideology there are premises about the nature of causation [and] the appropriate ways for explaining complex events. - Robert Lane, political scientist (1917 - 2017)

This report identifies an opportunity to reverse the polarization between Americans in recent years.

The opportunity starts with each of us asking ourselves how much controlor "personal agency"-we have over our lives. While this question has plagued philosophers for centuries, it is also one that ordinary people grapple with every day. Undoubtedly, there are certain aspects of life that are outside of our control: for instance, the family we are born into, or the opportunities available to us in childhood. Yet the choices we make also have a deep and lasting impact on the people we become.

Questions of personal agency also arise in political discourse. Arguments about tax rates, for example, often revolve around the question of how much credit the wealthy can claim for their success, which in turn informs how much their wealth should be redistributed to the less fortunate. Questions of personal agency also creep into many other political disagreements on topics ranging from personal health to benefits programs to the future of DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) initiatives. In each instance, policy decisions are guided in part by assumptions about how much control, or agency, people have over their own life outcomes, and what the proper role is for society to improve these outcomes. Understanding Americans' beliefs about agency, and how they shape their views on social issues, is thus essential for navigating today's polarized political landscape.

Understanding how people think about luck, opportunity, and personal agency is essential for navigating today's polarized political landscape.

The purpose of this report is to understand how Americans think about agency today, and the social and political consequences of these beliefs. Using a dataset of 40,000 Americans, hundreds of in-depth interviews, and large representative datasets collected in Britain, France, and Germany, we explore Americans' views about this topic, how these beliefs shape political opinions, and what sets the United States apart from other countries. In better understanding how agency beliefs underpin areas of disagreement, this report sheds new light on old debates, ultimately identifying a set of widely shared values that can shape a common vision for all Americans.

Key Findings

A majority of Americans across every demographic group share a faith in individuals' power to transcend negative circumstances.

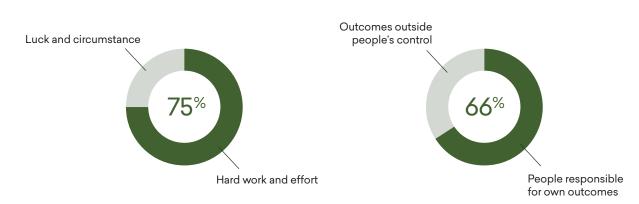
Two in three (66 percent) believe people are primarily responsible for their own outcomes in life (Figures E1 and E2), and seven in ten believe that individual choices largely determine their success (versus one in five who cite external forces; see Figure E3). Furthermore, some of the proudest moments in people's lives are times when they exercised personal agency (Figure E4).

Fig. E1 Americans value personal agency

Three quarters of Americans believe that "hard work and effort" played a larger role than "luck and circumstance" in getting them where they are today, and two in three believe "people are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life."

Which played a greater role in getting you where you are today?





Question wording (right panel): "Which statement do you agree with more?" (1 - People's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control; 2 - People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life). Data: Combined Dataset (N = 39,652)

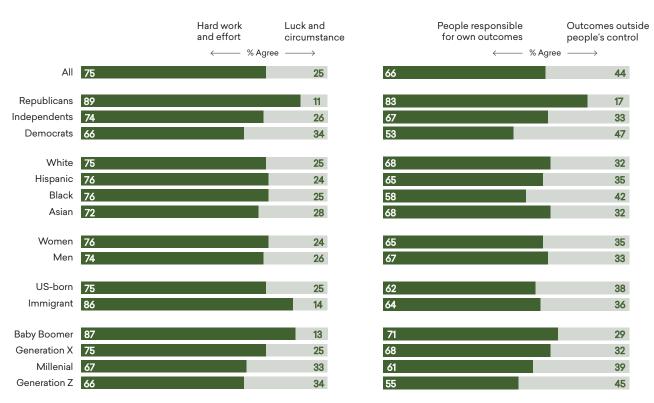
Source: More in Common, 2018-2025

Fig. E2 Belief in personal agency spans major demographic groups

Two thirds of Democrats, three in four Black Americans, and almost nine in ten US immigrants say "hard work" played a greater role than "luck and circumstance" in getting them where they are today.

Which played a greater role in getting you where you are today?

Which do you agree with more?



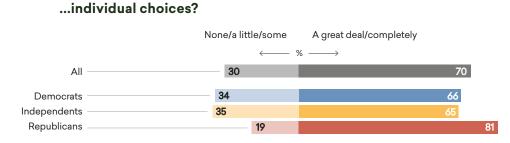
Question wording (right panel): "Which statement do you agree with more?" (1 - People's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control; 2 - People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life). Data: Combined Dataset (N = 39,652)

Source: More in Common, 2018-2025

Fig. E3 Agency beliefs transcend politics

Large majorities of Americans of all partisan affiliations believe that individual choices determine success more than outside forces.

To what extent is success in life determined by...



...forces outside of people's control?



Data: April Poll (N = 2,419) Source: More in Common, 2025

Fig. E4 Sources of pride

Americans' proudest memories concern hard work and relationships.



What is the proudest moment of your life?

Question wording: "What is the proudest moment of your life? Think back to that moment: why did you feel proud? Who were you with (if any)? What were the things that stand out most to you when remembering it now?"

- Participants' responses were grouped into the following categories:
- hard work and agency: individual actions to achieve a goal
- relationships: responses about family memories and pride for loved ones and their achievements
- luck: memories that reflected serendipitous moments or decisions that worked in the person's favor. Data: Americans in Conversation Qualitative Panel (N = 250)
- Source: More in Common, 2022

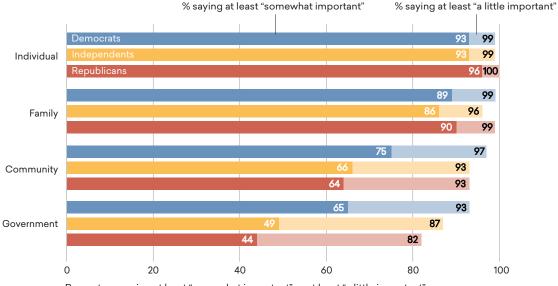
Regardless of political party, Americans believe that the most important determinants of success are the individual, followed by family, community, and the government.

Americans of all parties—including 93 percent of Democrats—believe that the individual is a "somewhat" or "very" important contributor to success. This is followed closely in importance by family and community (Figure E5). About two thirds of Democrats and slightly less than half of Republicans say the government is at least "somewhat" important in ensuring success, and more than four in five Republicans (82 percent) say the government is at least "a little" important to ensuring success.

Fig. E5 Contributors to success

Americans of all political persuasions agree about the role of the individual, family, and community in shaping success, but differ on the importance on government.

How important is each of the following in contributing to an individual's success?



Percentage saying at least "somewhat important" or at least "a little important"

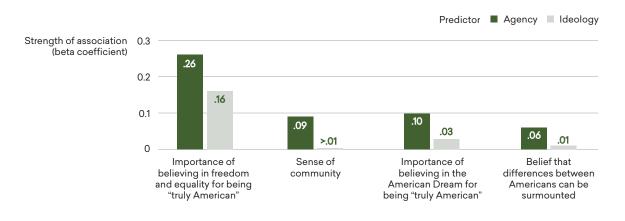
Responses on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 – "Not at all important" to 4 – "Very important". Data: April Poll (N = 2,419) Source: More in Common, 2025.

Agency beliefs predict views about what it means to be an American better than political ideology.

For instance, people's views on agency are strong predictors of whether they believe that being "truly American" means pursuing the American Dream or upholding ideals like freedom and equality (see Figure E6). (For investigations into the role of agency beliefs in psychology and American history see <u>Appendices A</u> and <u>B</u>.)

Fig. E6 How agency beliefs predict political opinions

Americans' beliefs about agency outperform their political ideology (i.e., whether they identify as liberal or conservative) in predicting their views about American identity and community.



Each set of bars reflects the results of a regression analysis with ideology and agency beliefs as predictors and the x-axis variable as the dependent variable. Each bar represents the strength of the relationship ("beta coefficient") between agency beliefs (or ideology) and the variable listed on the x-axis, controlling for ideology (or agency beliefs). For example, the strength of the association between someone's agency and their sense of community, controlling for ideology, is .09, while the strength of the relationship between ideology and sense of community, controlling for agency beliefs, is >.01. Data: Hidden Tribes (N = 7,957) Source: More in Common, 2018

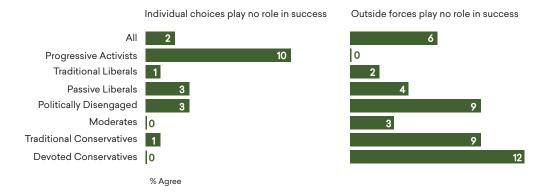
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A small proportion of vocal Americans reject the role of the individual or outside forces in shaping life success.

More in Common's <u>mapping of the values of the American population</u> finds that about one in ten of a small group of Americans who belong to a segment termed "Progressive Activists" (a left-leaning group particularly engaged in politics, see <u>Appendix C</u>) believe that individual choices have no role in shaping life outcomes. On the other side, about 9 percent on average of Traditional and Devoted Conservatives segments—and the same percentage of Politically Disengaged—believes outside forces play no role whatsoever in shaping life outcomes. Yet the share of Americans who hold these views is only 2 percent and 6 percent of the population, respectively (Figure E7), showing most believe both have some role to play.

Fig. E7 Hidden Tribes' beliefs about personal agency

Progressive Activists are five times more likely than the national average to say that individual choices play no role in success, and Traditional and Devoted Conservatives are about twice as likely to say outside forces play no role.



Question wording: "To what extent is success in life determined by each of the following? "Individual choices"; "Forces outside of people's control." Percents indicate the proportion of respondents who selected "None" for each option, respectively. Data: April Poll (N = 2,419) Source: More in Common, 2025

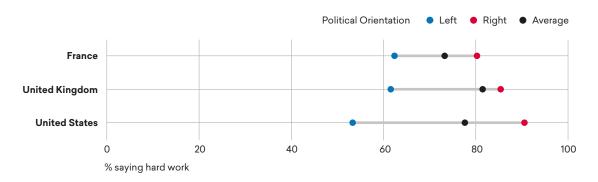
Americans are <u>not</u> more likely to believe in personal agency than their counterparts in other Western democracies.

Average beliefs in agency are as high in Europe as they are in the U.S. What does set Americans apart, by contrast, is the *politicization* of these beliefs: agency beliefs are more strongly correlated with other political opinions in America than in other countries, and there is a wider gap between left- and right-leaning people in America than in other countries, with a 47 percentage-point gap between left and right in America, compared to 24 percent in the UK and 18 percent in France (Figure E8). In other words, while the average belief in agency is similar across countries, American partisans (both left and right) hold more divergent views than their counterparts in European countries.

Fig. E8 The relationship between agency beliefs and politics in the US and abroad

While overall belief in personal agency is similar across comparable democracies, the gap between people who identify as politically "left" versus "right" is greater in America.

Which played a greater role in getting you where you are today?



Question wording: Which played a greater role in getting you where you are today?" (Luck and circumstance; 2 - Hard work and effort). "Right = self-identifying as ideologically "right" or "conservative"; Left = self-identifying as ideologically

Right = self-identifying as ideologically right or conservative ; Left = self-identifying as ideologically "left" or "liberal".

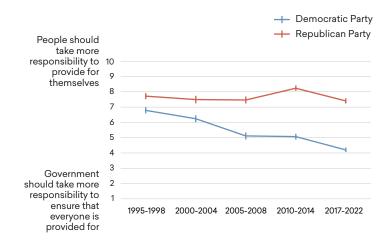
For additional information see <u>Appendix C</u>. Data: Fault Lines: Finding France (N = 4,008); Britain's Choice (N = 10,385); Hidden Tribes (N = 7,957). Source: More in Common, 2018-2022

Beliefs about personal agency have become significantly more polarized over the last 30 years.

A longitudinal investigation shows that the gap in Democrats' and Republicans' agency beliefs has tripled since the late 1990s (Figure E9).

Fig. E9 Agency beliefs over time

Democrats' agency beliefs have diminished significantly over the past 30 years, while Republicans' beliefs have remained unchanged.



Question wording: "Now I'd like you to tell me your views on various issues. How would you place your views on this scale? I means you agree completely with the statement on the left; 10 means you agree completely with the statement on the right; and if your views fall somewhere in between, you can choose any number in between."

Source: World Values Survey, 1995-2022. Surveys of 1,542 to 2,596 US adults.

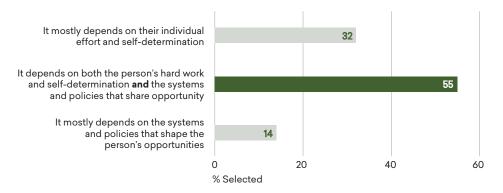
A majority of Americans believe that achieving the American Dream requires a combination of agency and opportunity.

For example, Americans are most likely to say that success depends both on people's hard work and self-determination *and* good systems and policies. Similarly, Americans are more likely to say they want to live in a country where people strive to be the best version of themselves, *and* where the government ensures everyone has the opportunity to do so (Figure E10). Finally, 80 percent of Americans agree that Americans have the right and responsibility to pursue their potential and give back to their communities—what we term "morally-directed agency" (E11).

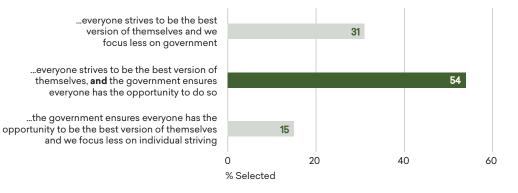
Fig. E10 — Weaving agency with opportunity

Americans prefer a "both-and" to an "either-or" approach to governance

Which one of the following best describes what determines whether someone is successful in the United States today?



I want to live in a country where....

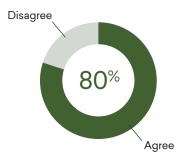


Data: April Poll (N = 2,419) Source: More in Common, 2025

Fig. E11 A Common Vision

More than 4 in 5 Americans support a message of morally-directed agency.

America should be built on a deal of rights and responsibilities. The country should guarantee its citizens what they need to live up to their full potential: education, opportunity, and dignity. People in turn have a responsibility to use that potential to improve themselves and give back to their country and community.



Data: American Fabric (N = 1,142) Source: More in Common, 2020

Weaving the Dream

Our findings have implications for the contentious cultural and political debates playing out in America today. Rapid social and economic changes in America including advances in artificial intelligence, shifting demographics, and changes in the labor market wrought by globalization—have reinvigorated age-old debates about the responsibilities of citizens and government in building a fair and prosperous society.

These debates have historically been deeply politicized. On one side, liberal and progressive Americans have tended to downplay the role of personal agency, fearing it may distract from efforts to address structural injustices. These Americans may also be attuned to the times in this country's history in which people were systematically denied the opportunity to exercise their agency. On the other hand, many conservatives downplay the importance of fair opportunity due to a worry that social efforts to address inequality will eliminate incentives to work hard.

Our research shows that while such positions may resonate with a vocal minority on the political wings, they do not reflect the views of the majority of Americans. Americans do not view an effective government and personal agency as mutually exclusive. Instead, they want to build a society in which all Americans experience the responsibility and opportunity to *exercise* their agency. In sum, these findings point towards a narrative that has the potential to unite a broad coalition of Americans: a "politics of empowerment" that asks individuals to exercise morally-directed agency *and* works to ensure everyone has the opportunity to do so.

A common vision for America asks individuals to exercise agency in pursuing lives of purpose and prosperity and seeks to ensure everyone has the opportunity to do so.

A unifying vision for the future must acknowledge the role of luck and privilege without overriding Americans' deeply-held convictions about the power of personal agency. Weaving together threads of agency and opportunity can help everyone achieve the American Dream.

Key Report Takeaways

- Personal agency and justice are not mutually exclusive
- Efforts to build a fairer society should be framed in ways that *build on*, rather than *downplay*, the power of personal agency
- Americans support a "politics of empowerment" in which people are afforded the opportunity to pursue their potential
- A common vision for America would center around "morally-directed agency," where everyone has both the right and responsibility to develop their unique gifts and give back to their community

INTRODUCTION



The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not "Eureka" but "That's funny..."

- Isaac Asimov, writer (1920-1992)

The idea for this report grew out of an unexpected discovery. In 2018, More in Common released a report entitled *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape.* The report laid the foundations for the work that More in Common has been doing ever since. It revealed how important "core beliefs" are in shaping our political opinions and experiences. Core beliefs—the underlying values and assumptions we hold about the world—impact our lives in countless ways, from how we interpret the news to how we treat others.

These findings spurred us to probe even deeper into the core beliefs that shape American life. Our hope was that, by understanding where these beliefs converge and diverge, we could help people communicate better across lines of difference, improve mutual understanding, and find creative new ways to overcome political division.

Plumbing the Depths

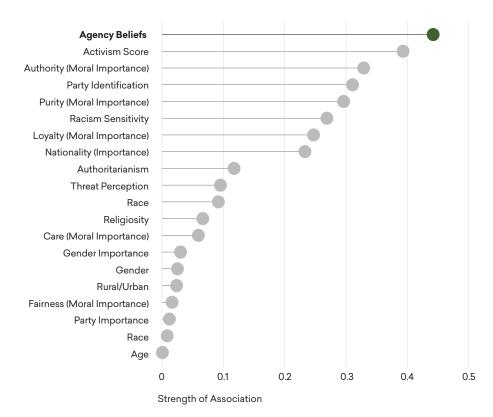
Like a geologist mapping a fault line to locate its epicenter, we conducted listening sessions with hundreds of Americans, asking them about their deepest commitments and concerns, including the role of family, community, identity, faith, government, and other topics. We also conducted numerous wide-ranging surveys involving thousands of Americans across the country over seven years.

We noticed a recurring thread connecting the way Americans think and speak about their most important concerns: namely, the amount of control people feel they have over their lives. While some Americans acknowledge the role of luck and circumstance in shaping life outcomes, others maintain a commitment to the importance of one's own choices in determining one's fate. And indeed, when we conducted an analysis comparing how well each of the different core beliefs predicted which tribe someone belonged to, we found that "agency beliefs" were the most powerful predictor (Figure A and Box 1). We define agency beliefs as convictions people hold about their own and others' ability to determine the course of their lives.

Fig. A

Beliefs about personal agency predict "Hidden Tribe" better than other core beliefs

The y-axis lists various core beliefs and other demographic variables tested; the x-axis reflects the "strength of the relationship" between each variable and people's Hidden Tribe. (For more information on the Hidden Tribes typology, see <u>Appendix C</u>.)



"Strength of association" = R² values obtained from separately run multinomial logistic regressions with each variable on the y-axis as predictors and "tribe" as the dependent variable. Data: Hidden Tribes (N = 7,957) Source: More in Common (2018)

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Box 1 "Agency Beliefs": Survey Questions

- 1 Which statement do you agree with more?
 - People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life
 - People's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control
- 2 Which of the following played a greater role in getting you where you are today?
 - Hard work and effort
 - Luck and circumstance
- 3 How much control do you feel most people have over the way their life turns out?
 - Some people's situations are so challenging that no amount of work will allow them to find success
 - People who work hard can find success no matter what situation they were born into

Questions of personal agency and responsibility have long played a central role in human psychology and American political discourse (for overviews, see <u>Appendix A</u> and <u>Appendix B</u>). But our analysis showed that these issues may be deeper and more influential than previously recognized.

The idea that agency occupies a central role in the American story is supported by recent scholarship and practice. For example, work by Clay Routledge and colleagues at the Archbridge Institute argue that agency is central to human flourishing¹. The entrepreneur, writer, and educator Ian Rowe places agency at the center of the curriculum in his successful charter school, Vertex Partner Academies², and his book on the same subject³. In her book *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*, the philosopher Agnes Callard argues that people are responsible for striving to become better versions of themselves⁴. And the political scientist Hahrie Han argues that experiences of civic agency are crucial in a flourishing democracy.⁵

Experiences of civic agency are crucial in a flourishing democracy.

Questions of agency also shape today's political debates. Consider how President Donald Trump has spoken about dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and replacing them with a system that is "colorblind and meritbased." At the heart of the debates about DEI are assumptions about agency and responsibility. If unequal outcomes are entirely due to actions and decisions within people's control, then there is less reason to institute policies aimed at addressing them. If, by contrast, unequal outcomes are partly the result of luck or an unfair system, then policies aimed at rectifying these inequalities make more sense. While a number of other factors shape peoples' opinions about these issues, agency beliefs represent a primary axis around which disagreements on these topics revolve.

Routledge (2022)

² https://www.vertexacademies.org/3 Rowe (2022)

⁴ Callard (2018)

⁵ Han, Baggetta, & Oser. (2024)

A Central Tension

These observations illustrate an important tension. On one hand, evidence from social science illustrates the wide range of environmental factors that shape people's lives, including their access to quality healthcare and education, their family upbringing, the safety of their neighborhoods, and subtler forms of discrimination.^{6,7} This is particularly true for Black Americans, who have long been subjected to laws and policies that prevented them from attaining positions of power and prestige.⁸

Yet, as this report demonstrates, when Americans look at family, friends and colleagues, they often see first-hand the power of personal agency. Within the boundaries of people's communities and personal experiences, some get further ahead than others. Often, those who do are the ones who work hard and make good decisions. Moreover, feelings of personal agency are correlated with a sense of wellbeing, empowerment, and purpose. This helps explain why, as we see in Chapter 1, Americans maintain an enduring faith in the power of the individual — a belief that transcends race and gender, age and political party, geography and immigration status.

Indeed, our conversations with hundreds of Americans suggest that their deepest and most enduring feelings of pride, hope and meaning come from experiences in which they feel a sense of agency. As one participant put it:



I think you as an individual determine success in life, because the opportunities are right in front of you. You just got to motivate yourself to go get it.

- 35-year old Black woman, Traditional Liberal, North Carolina

And in the words of another:

My proudest moment in life was graduating from high school. All odds were against me because of my situation at the time. My grandparents, my mom, and my dad got to see me walk across the stage and receive my diploma.

- 32-year old white man, Traditional Conservative, Michigan

This presents a challenge to those focused on addressing injustices in American society. It suggests that those who reject the power of personal agency face an uphill battle, because they risk divorcing themselves from one of Americans' deepest sources of meaning and purpose.

In <u>Chapter 4</u> of this report we highlight the significance of these findings, and suggest a path forward. We suggest that achieving a fairer, more inclusive, healthier democracy rests less on a rejection of people's faith in the power of the individual than a revitalization of it: a "politics of empowerment" that asserts people's right and responsibility to exercise morally-directed agency to improve their own and other's lives. This, we suggest, can form a basis of a common vision that resonates with most Americans.

By seeing more clearly how the path to individual justice runs *through*, rather than *around*, personal agency, we may go further toward building the fair, prosperous nation that we aspire to be.

⁶ Darity et al. (2018) 7 Gee & Ford, 2011)

⁷ Gee & Ford, 2011 8 Bixby (2024)

Methods and Data Summary

This report relies on data obtained from thirteen large-scale surveys collected by More in Common between 2017 and 2025 involving over 60,000 individuals. Surveys were collected in collaboration with data vendors YouGov and Dynata, as well as several in-depth focus groups and one-on-one interviews. For more information, see <u>Appendix C</u>: Methods and Data.

Combined Dataset: Consists of nine surveys collected in the United States from December, 2017 to April, 2025 (N = 39,652).

Threads of Texas. Data collected by More in Common in the state of Texas in July and August, 2020 (N = 4,000)

Americans in Conversation: In-depth interview panel collected by More in Common from April through November, 2020 (N = 250).

International Dataset. Combined dataset taken from surveys conducted in the UK (N = 10,385), France (N = 6,000), and Germany (4,000), 2019-2020.

"ALL ODDS WERE AGAINST ME": HOW AMERICANS VIEW LUCK AND AGENCY



What determines success are the opportunities available to you and the motivation you have to make the best out of those opportunities.

- 27-year old woman of mixed racial background, Traditional Liberal, Georgia



Lf you are struggling, when you are working many jobs, lack health care, have diminished access to transportation and housing, it is very hard to get out from under.

- 49-year old Hispanic woman, Progressive Activist, Florida

How do Americans think about the role of luck, choice, and personal agency in determining success in life? In this chapter, we present a detailed breakdown of Americans' responses to agency-related questions taken from seven years of survey data collected by More in Common. The key findings outlined in this chapter are as follows:

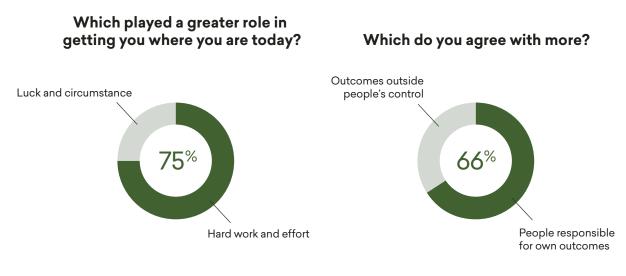
- A majority of Americans across all major demographic groups share a faith in the power of personal agency.
- Democrats and Republicans agree that the individual plays the most important role in determining personal success.
- While Democrats put more weight on community and government, Americans of all parties believe the government plays at least some role in ensuring success.
- Many of the proudest moments in people's lives consist in moments in which they exercised agency.
- Progressive Activists, a small group of Americans on the political left, are the only group who believes outside forces play a larger role than individual choices in determining success.
- Only small percentages of Americans deny the role of the individual choice or outside forces in shaping life success.

Americans' Belief in Hard Work and Personal Agency

A majority of Americans place great value on hard work, agency, and personal responsibility: three quarters of Americans (75 percent) say hard work and effort played a greater role than luck and circumstance in getting them where they are today (Figure 1.1). And two in three Americans say that "people are responsible for their own outcomes in life."

Fig. 1.1 Americans prioritize personal agency

Three quarters of Americans believe that "hard work and effort" played a larger role than "luck and circumstance" in getting them where they are today, and two in three believe "people are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life."



Question wording: "Which statement do you agree with more?" (1 - People's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control; 2 - People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life). Data: Combined Dataset (N = 39,652) Source: More in Common, 2018-2025

Agency and Political Affiliation

The importance of personal agency carries across the political spectrum. For instance, nine out of ten (89 percent) of Republicans say that hard work played a larger role than luck and circumstance in determining their lives, but so do nearly three quarters of Independents (74 percent) and two thirds of Democrats (66 percent; see Figure 1.2). Thus while Republicans have a significantly higher commitment to personal agency than others, even a majority of Democrats hold the same commitment.

Americans' belief in personal agency transcends political affiliation.

A similar pattern emerges when Americans are asked how much control individuals have over their lives. On average, nearly two thirds (66 percent) of Americans believe that people are responsible for their own life's outcomes. This pattern is also reflected on the party level — 84 percent of Republicans and 67 percent of Independents believe individuals have control over their life's outcomes, and more than half of Democrats (53 percent) agree. Regardless of their partisan identity, most Americans emphasize personal agency and responsibility over luck and circumstance.

Fig. 1.2 Belief in hard work transcends partisan identity

shaped their lives more than luck and circumstance.

Luck and circumstance **66**% <mark>89</mark>% **74**% Hard work and effort Republicans Independents **Democrats** Which do you agree with more? Outcomes outside people's control **67**% 83% **53**% People responsible for own outcomes Republicans Independents **Democrats**

Which played a greater role in getting you where you are today?

A majority of Republicans, Independents, and Democrats say that people are responsible for their own outcomes in life, and that hard work and effort

Data: Combined Dataset (N = 39,652) Source: More in Common, 2018-2025

Individual Choices or Outside Forces?

The analysis used above relied on a binary question format which forced participants to choose between two options. This approach is useful for measuring people's intuitive preferences for one versus another worldview. But it also raises the question of how strongly Americans endorse agency beliefs when they are not forced to choose in this manner.

To answer this question we asked participants in a recent survey (April 2025) to indicate the extent to which "success in life" is determined by "choices people make" and, separately, "by forces outside of people's control" (thereby avoiding

the forced choice). Here, too, Americans indicate much more agreement with the former than the latter: the proportion of respondents who say that individual choices contribute a "great deal" or "completely" to success (70 percent) is more than double the proportion who afford the same importance to outside forces (28 percent; see Figure 1.3).

This pattern persists even when looking at the responses according to partisan identity. Indeed, as Figure 1.3 shows, regardless of partisan identity, more people emphasize individual choices over circumstances. Even among Democrats, two thirds (66 percent) say "individual choices" matter a great deal — a rate almost double the importance they afford to "outside forces" (35 percent). The ratio is even starker for Republicans (81 percent versus 22 percent).

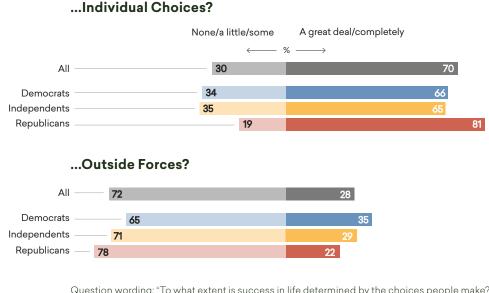
Two thirds of Democrats (66 percent) say "individual choices" have a great impact on success.

In sum, Democrats emphasize the importance of personal agency in determining life outcomes even in continuous response measures. This may seem counterintuitive, given the extent to which Democrats are perceived to blame unequal outcomes on systemic rather than individual factors. This may be explained by the prominence of the views of Progressive Activists, who on this issue (and several others) are outliers, not only compared to the American population but even to Democratic voters. The extent to which Progressive Activists differ from other parts of the American population are discussed in more detail in connection with Figure 1.10.

Fig. 1.3

Even Democrats emphasize personal choice

Large majorities of Americans of all partisan backgrounds believe that individual choices play a larger role than life circumstances in life success.



To what extent is success in life determined by...

Question wording: "To what extent is success in life determined by the choices people make? "and "To what extent is success in life determined by forces outside of people's control?" (None, A little, Some, A great deal, Completely). Data: April Poll (N = 2,419) Source: More in Common, 2025.

What-or Who-Contributes to Success?

How Americans understand the different forces that shape their lives is also revealed in responses to a question concerning the extent to which each of the following contributes to success.

- Individual
- Family
- Community
- Government

Americans overwhelmingly consider individuals to be the most important factor in determining success in life, with more than nine in ten (93 percent) saying the individual is "somewhat" or "very" important (see Figure 1.4). This holds across parties, with 94 percent of Republicans and 92 percent of Democrats agreeing.

Democrats and Republicans also agree on the importance of family (with 89 percent and 90 percent saying at least "somewhat" important, respectively).

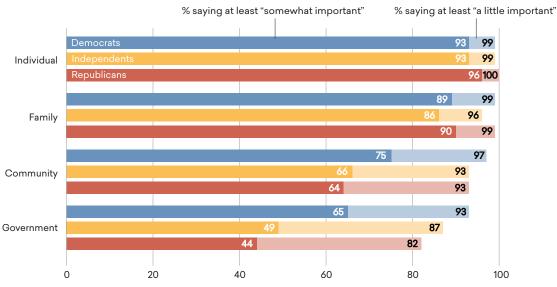
They also agree that the government has the least important role to play in promoting individual success. Yet they differ somewhat in this assessment, with 44 percent of Republicans saying the government is at least "somewhat important," relative to 65 percent of Democrats. Nevertheless, 82 percent of Republicans agree that government is at least "a little" important, suggesting that even they agree the government has some role to play in securing individual opportunity.

In sum, while Democrats, Republicans, and Independents agree about the importance of the individual and family in determining a person's success in life, Republicans are significantly less likely to cite the government than their counterparts.

Fig. 1.4 Contributors to success

Americans of all political persuasions agree about the role of the individual, family, and (to a lesser extent) community in shaping success, but differ on the importance on government.

How important is each of the following in contributing to an individual's success?



Percentage saying at least "somewhat important" or at least "a little important"

Responses on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 – "Not at all important" to 4 – "Very important". Data: April Poll (N = 2,419) Source: More in Common, 2025.

Agency and Pride

How do Americans think about agency in their own lives? Qualitative analysis shows that the majority of Americans' proudest memories concern moments when their hard work and sacrifice resulted in success, such as buying their own home or turning their life around after a difficult situation. As Figure 1.5 shows, when reflecting on the proudest moments in their life, Americans are most likely to reflect on topics having to do with the exercise of hard work and agency, followed by moments connected with close personal relationships (which often include the achievements of family members). There are no significant differences among Republicans, Democrats and Independents on this issue. This shows how central a role agency plays in the meaning people make of their lives.

Sources of pride **Fig. 1.5**

Americans' proudest memories concern hard work and relationships.



What is the proudest moment of your life?

you feel proud? Who were you with (if any)? What were the things that stand out most to you when remembering it now?'

Participants' responses into the following categories:

- hard work and agency: individual actions to achieve a goal;

- relationships: responses about family memories and pride for loved ones and their achievements

- luck: memories that reflected serendipitous moments or decisions that worked in the person's favor. Data: Americans in Conversation Qualitative Panel (N = 250)

Source: More in Common, 2022

Themes of family and educational accomplishment are especially common as people reflect on these moments of deep pride:

My proudest moment was when I graduated from college, because I was the first person in my entire family who went to college and who obtained a professional degree. It was very hard for me because some family members did not approve me going to college because I was a woman and we did not have a good financial situation, **but I got a full scholarship** and went against all the odds and obtained my degree with academic excellence.

- 36-year old Hispanic woman, Moderate, Tennessee



My proudest moment in life was graduating from high school. All odds were against me because of my situation at the time. My grandparents, my mom, and my dad got to see me walk across the stage and receive my diploma.

32-year old white man, Traditional Conservative, Michigan



The proudest moment of my life was being on an operating table for an emergency c-section to give birth to my first child. I was alone, no husband by my side. I endured without anyone's support. The nurses were too busy to be helpful for my emotional state. I conquered the fear on my own. I did it. When I heard my baby crying I called out her name. She is mine and mine alone and I will raise her the best I can. I did just that. It was a very proud moment for me and will always be.

- 57-year old white woman, Politically Disengaged, Washington

These quotations show that many of the most impactful or proud moments in people's lives come from times in which they felt a capability to overcome obstacles or negative circumstances-that is, times in which they exercised personal agency. Experiences of agency, in other words, represent a core aspect of what gives people a sense of meaning or purpose.

How Belief in Agency Differs by Race



You either hit the racial lottery or you are doomed. Race determines your life.

- 29-year old Black woman, Traditional Conservative, Georgia



Hard work determines success in my opinion.

- 39-year old Black woman, Traditional Conservative, Texas

One of the most striking indicators of racial inequality in income and wealth is that the average wealth of white households is seven times that of Black households in the United States.⁹ Black Americans have experienced discrimination throughout American history-in domains including education, work, housing, benefits, healthcare, security and other services. Disparities have persisted not just because of the intergenerational nature of wealth accumulation and transfers but also due to subtler forms of bias and discrimination.¹⁰

Given these circumstances, Black Americans might be expected to hold a heightened awareness of the ways life can be shaped by forces outside of one's own control. Indeed, Black Americans are 11 percentage points more likely than white Americans (42 percent to 31 percent) to say that people's lives are determined by outside forces. And two in five Black Americans (42 percent) agree that "people who work hard can find success no matter what situation they were born into," compared to 52 percent of white Americans.

Yet Black Americans also maintain remarkably high levels of commitment to personal agency, with a majority (58 percent) saying people are responsible for their own outcomes in life and a full 75 percent saying "hard work and effort" played a greater role in getting them where they are today than "luck and circumstance" (see Figure 1.6).

This suggests that experiences of systemic bias do not displace Black Americans' belief in individual agency. Indeed, a heightened awareness of the role of hard

work in shaping their own lives may reflect a recognition of the ways in which the deck is often stacked against them — that one must be, as the adage goes, "twice as good to get half as much."

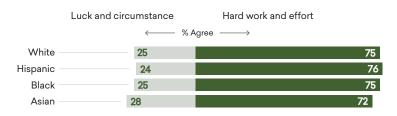
 Experiences of systemic bias do not displace Black Americans' belief in individual agency.

Fig. 1.6

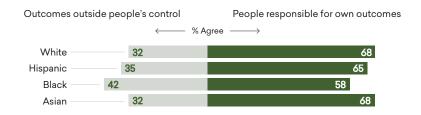
How belief in the value of hard work varies across Americans of different racial backgrounds

Majorities in each racial group believe that hard work has played a greater role than luck or circumstance in their lives.

Which played a greater role in getting you were you are today?



Which do you agree with more?



Question wording: "Which statement do you agree with more?" (1 - People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life; 2 - People's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control).

Data: Combined Dataset (N = 39,652) Source: More in Common, 2018-2025

How American Immigrants Perceive the American Dream

The "American Dream" has long served as a beacon for people around the world seeking a better life in the United States. Many immigrant stories follow a common arc: parents arrive in America and work to provide their children with opportunities unavailable in their home countries. These narratives emphasize personal agency as the key to success. Given this, it is essential to examine whether the belief in the American Dream — the idea that anyone can succeed through grit and determination — still resonates with the very communities it has historically inspired.

More in Common's Threads of Texas report (2021) compared agency beliefs among Texans with immigrant backgrounds versus the rest of the population. The results confirmed that Texans with immigrant backgrounds hold more firmly to the American Dream than natural-born citizens: the percent of people who believe that people who work hard can find success is ten points higher among people who were not born in the USA than those who were (see Figure 1.7).

Immigrants to America are if anything more committed to the importance of hard work and agency than those who were born in this country.

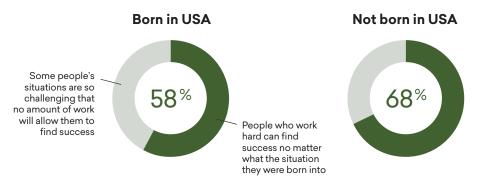
A similar trend emerges when we ask about the role of luck versus hard work. Immigrant Americans are eleven percentage points more likely to say that "hard work" has played a greater role in getting them where they are today than "luck and circumstance."

This data shows that the men and women who came to America in search of a better life nourish a particularly robust faith in the power of agency and the promise of America.

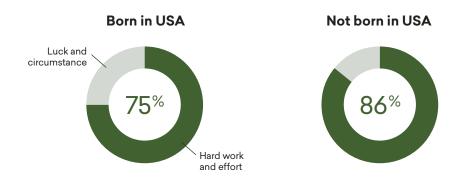
Fig. 1.7

Immigrants to America especially value hard work and agency

Texans who immigrated to America are ten percentage points more likely to believe that hard work will lead to success than those who were born in the country. They are also more likely to emphasize the role of hard work in getting them where they are today.



Which played a greater role in getting you where you are today?



Data: Threads of Texas (N = 3,993) Source: More in Common, 2021

Agency Across Age and Gender

Emphasis on personal agency holds across all gender and age groups in America. For example, about three quarters of men and three quarters of women say that hard work and effort played a larger role than luck and circumstance. And a majority of Americans of all generations say people are responsible for their own outcomes (see Figure 1.8 and 1.9).

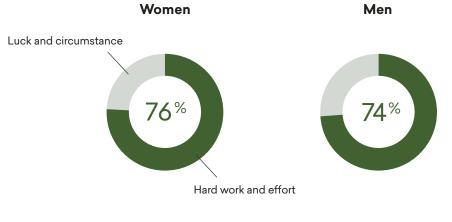
At the same time, there are some notable intergenerational differences. For example, while 71 percent of Baby Boomers say that people are responsible for their own outcomes in life, only 55 percent of Gen Z Americans agree. One possible reason for these differences is that as people progress in their lives, their effort and decisions have more influence on their current position. This might raise the salience of agency in their minds. Another is that young people may inhabit spaces (such as university settings) that emphasize a more progressive view on the role of structural inequalities in determining life outcomes, which could contribute to reduced emphasis on agency among younger people. Finally, younger generations like Gen Z may have grown up during periods of higher economic uncertainty and rising awareness of systemic inequality, which could shape a more enduring belief that life outcomes are shaped by external forces.

Regardless of the reason, despite their increased relative skepticism, even a majority even of Gen Z Americans prioritize individual responsibility over outside forces.

Fig. 1.8 Agency beliefs and gender

Americans do not differ significantly by gender in their beliefs about the role of hard work versus luck and circumstance in shaping their life outcomes.

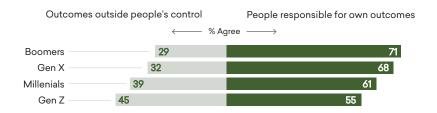
Which played a greater role in getting you were you are today?



Data: Combined Dataset (N = 39,652) Source: More in Common, 2018-2025

Fig. 1.9 Agency beliefs differ by generation

While majorities in all groups emphasize the role of personal agency over outside forces, generational differences are significant.



Question wording: "Which statement do you agree with more?" (1 - People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life; 2 - People's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control). Data: Combined Dataset (N = 39,652)

Source: More in Common, 2018-2025

How the "Hidden Tribes" Help Explain **Views on Opportunity and Agency**



L I think people are responsible for their own outcomes in life. If you work hard and are determined to succeed in life, you can.

- 55-year old white woman, Disengaged, Louisiana



Everyone has to work hard, but some people have to work harder because they do not have anything to fall back on.

- 21-year old Black woman, Progressive Activist, Georgia

The findings described thus far show there is widespread agreement – even among left-leaning Americans – of the importance of individual agency. Yet they also raise a question; why do Americans seem so divided when it comes to addressing social inequality? If so many Americans are on the same page regarding the cause of personal success, why is this topic a source of such heated debate?

More in Common's Hidden Tribes-which identifies seven groups in the American electorate defined by their values and sense of identity (see Appendix C)-offers a useful lens through which to consider this question.

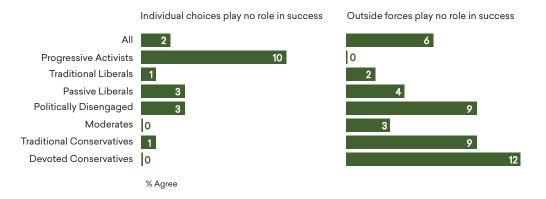
If so many Americans are on the same page regarding the cause of personal success, why is this topic a source of such heated debate?

Among Progressive Activists-the eight percent of the population that is most active politically on the left-about ten percent say that individual choices have no role in shaping life outcomes. This is about five times the national average. On the other hand, about nine percent of Traditional and Devoted Conservatives-and the same percentage of Politically Disengaged-believes outside forces play no role whatsoever in shaping life outcomes-proportionally, about 50 percent more than the national average of six percent. Yet the percent of Americans who hold these views is very small: two percent and six percent of the population, respectively (see Figure 1.10).

This data therefore suggests one reason why the conversation about agency appears so polarized: small, vocal minorities of Americans may contribute to the impression that their side places no value on either individual agency or outside forces in shaping people's lives. But the reality is the vast proportion of Americans acknowledge the importance of both of these forces.

Fig. 1.10 — Hidden Tribes' beliefs about personal agency

Progressive Activists are more likely than the national average to say that individual choices play no role in success, and Traditional and Devoted Conservatives more likely to say outside forces play no role.



Question wording: "To what extent is success in life determined by each of the following? Individual choices" and "Forces outside of people's control". Data: April Poll (N = 2,419) Source: More in Common, 2025

Agency and Income

It is often assumed that agency beliefs are closely correlated with income: the wealthier a person is, the more they feel they deserve their financial success, and thus the more committed they are to a belief in personal agency. With this assumption in mind we examined the relationship between self-reported income and agency beliefs across each of the Hidden Tribes and major racial groups in America. We calculated an Agency Index, which reflects the relative importance people place on "individual choices" versus "forces outside of people's control" in determining success. If someone has a positive score on the Agency Index, it indicates they believe the individual matters more; a negative score means, outside forces matter more; if their score is zero, it indicates they believe they matter equally.

Notably, the correlation between income and the Agency Index is quite low, with a value of r = .13 (r can range from -1 to 1, with 0 indicating no association). This suggests that wealth may not be as powerful a predictor of a belief in personal agency as might be assumed.

The analysis also sheds light on the unique psychology of the various tribes. In <u>Figure 1.11</u>, the segments are divided into four quadrants according to their average Agency Index score and average income. Four have relatively high incomes, along with relatively high Agency Index scores: Traditional and Devoted Conservatives, Moderates, and Traditional Liberals.

The Politically Disengaged segment has among the lowest incomes, yet their belief in agency is relatively high. In other words, despite their relatively lower position on the ladder of financial success, the Politically Disengaged tend to persist in their belief in certain core aspects of the American Dream.

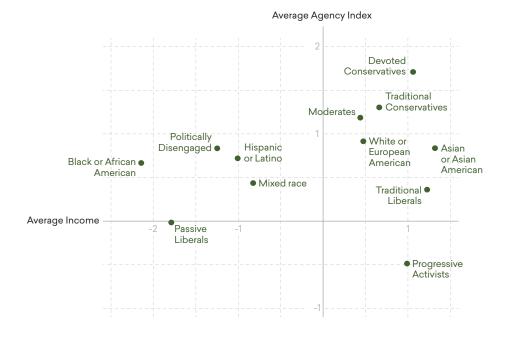
Progressive Activists, though a tribe with fairly high income, have the lowest belief in agency—in fact, they are the only group to have negative scores on the Agency Index, meaning that they believe outside forces play a greater role than individual choice in determining personal success. (Passive Liberals' Agency Index score is statistically equivalent to zero.)

Progressive Activists, who are predominantly white, occupy a very different quarter of the grid than Black or Hispanic Americans, both of who have positive Agency Index scores, meaning they believe individual choice matters more. In other words, though Progressive Activists hold strong beliefs about the role of outside forces in determining success, their views about agency differ by a significant margin from those of the groups they often claim to represent, such as Black and Hispanic Americans.

Overall, this analysis shows that income and agency beliefs are not strongly correlated, and Progressive Activists differ in their agency beliefs relative to other demographic groups.

Fig. 1.11 — How different groups vary in agency and income

The Hidden Tribes typology finds unique characteristics among the outlier segment of Progressive Activists, who have among the highest income levels but the lowest agency beliefs.



Agency index computed by subtracting the importance of "outside forces" from "individual choices" in life success. Household income variable ranges from "Less than \$10,000" (8 percent of respondents) to "500,000 or more" (less than 1 percent of respondents). Data: Combined Dataset (N = 39,652) Source: More in Common, 2018-2025

Key Takeaways

None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody—a parent, a teacher, an Ivy League crony or a few nuns—bent down and helped us pick up our boots.

Thurgood Marshall

If this chapter has revealed one thing, it is the strength and pervasiveness of Americans' belief in the power of the individual. This belief transcends political affiliation, generation, gender, and immigration status. Even Black Americans, who have arguably borne the brunt of systemic discrimination in America, are as likely as white Americans to believe in the power of hard work in shaping their success, and are more likely than not to say that people are responsible for their own outcomes in life.

Some Americans disagree. Most notably, Progressive Activists are the only group who believes that outside forces play a greater role in shaping life outcomes than individual choices. And ten percent of them say individual choices have no role whatsoever in shaping people's life outcomes. On the other hand, about nine percent of Traditional and Devoted Conservatives say outside forces play no role at all in life success. Yet these percentages represent small fractions of the American population overall (about two percent and six percent, respectively).

These patterns suggest that a belief in people's capacity for self-improvement and self-advancement is an important part of the identity of Americans from all backgrounds. How this feeds into other political beliefs and attitudes—and what should be done about it—are examined in the following chapters.

"FREEDOM AND EQUALITY": How Beliefs About Agency Define American Politics

Many Americans believe that the choices that they make play a key role in shaping their lives. But how do these beliefs relate to views on other issues? This chapter explores associations between agency beliefs and other political attitudes.

Our topline findings are as follows:

- The gap between Democrats' and Republicans' beliefs about agency has roughly tripled in the past 30 years.
- Agency beliefs predict a number of important attitudes—including the view that "believing in freedom and equality" is central to being an American, and people's sense of community—better than political ideology does.
- Agency beliefs are also positively correlated with a number of important psychological indicators of mental wellbeing, including life satisfaction and a sense of meaning and purpose.

Changes over Time

A longitudinal analysis reveals that partisan differences in agency beliefs have grown substantially over the last 30 years. Data from the World Values Survey¹¹ on the question of whether people or government should take more responsibility to promote success, shows that on a scale of one to ten, Democrats and Republicans were within a single point of each other in the late 1990s (Dems: 6.9, Reps 7.9), but by around 2020 this difference had more than tripled (Dems: 4.1, Reps: 7.2). The change appears to have been driven primarily by changes in attitudes among Democrats (see Figure 2.1).

Similar (though somewhat less pronounced) patterns are evident on the question of whether hard work brings a better life. Here, differences between Democrats and Republicans doubled in twenty years (from a .5-point gap to a 1-point gap), with changes in Democrats' attitudes being more pronounced than Republicans' (notwithstanding a substantial dip for Republicans in the mid 2010s; see Figure 2.1). Notably, despite this change, Democrats remain more likely than not to embrace the view that hard work brings a better life, consistent with the findings in the previous chapter. However, as noted in the paragraph above, Democrats are also now more likely to emphasize government responsibility. This suggests that while they prioritize individual agency, they also see the government as more integral to securing individual opportunity than do Republicans.

Fig. 2.1 Growing partisan divergence

— Democratic Party + Republican Party People should In the long run, take more hard work usually 10 responsibility to 10 brings a better life provide for 0 9 themselves 8 8 7 7 6 6 5 5 4 4 3 3 Government Hard work doesn't 2 should take more generally bring responsibility to success it's more ensure that a matter of luck 1995-1998 2005-2008 2010-2014 2017-2022 1995-1998 2000-2004 2005-2008 2010-2014 2017-2022 everyone is and connections provided for

Democrats and Republicans show notable divergences in agency beliefs over the last 30 years

Question wording for left panel: "Now I'd like you to tell me your views on various issues. How would you place your views on this scale? I means you agree completely with the statement on the left; 10 means you agree completely with the statement on the right; and if your views fall somewhere in between, you can choose any number in between."

Question wording for right panel: "Now I'd like you to tell me your views on various issues. How would you place your views on this scale? I means you agree completely with the statement on the left; 10 means you agree completely with the statement on the right; and if your views fall somewhere in between, you can choose any number in between."

Source: World Values Survey, 1995-2022. Surveys of 1,542 to 2,596 US adults.

Agency Beliefs Across America Today

It is also possible to map how agency beliefs vary across America's geography by exploring the average prevalence of agency beliefs (a sum of responses to all three agency questions) in each state.

Results (see Figure 2.2) show that the states with the strongest agency beliefs are North Dakota, Arizona, and Nevada. Those with the greatest emphasis on luck and circumstance are Massachusetts, Oregon, and Vermont. While agency beliefs are not identical to ideology (i.e. liberalism or conservatism) across all 50 states, the correlation between agency and ideology of r = .40 shows that they are moderately related.¹²

Fig. 2.2 Agency beliefs by state

Agency beliefs differ across American states, and correlate only moderately with ideology.



Agency scores computed by averaging over the following three questions: 1. "Which statement do you agree with more?" (1 - People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life, 2 - People's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control); 2. "Which played a greater role in getting you were you are today?" (1 - Hard work and effort; 2 - Luck and circumstance); 3. "How much control do you feel most people have over the way their life turns out?" (1 - Some people's situations are so challenging that no amount of work will allow them to find success; 2 - People who work hard can find success no matter what situation they were born into). Responses were summed across questions an averaged to create score for each state. Data: Combined Dataset (N = 39,652) Source: More in Common, 2018-2025

Agency Beliefs Across Polarized Issues

An analysis of how beliefs about political topics differ between those who prioritize luck versus agency — from the role of government to views on gun control to issues of racial justice — shows a familiar pattern: endorsement of agency beliefs is associated with traditionally conservative political views (see Figure 2.3). For example:

Government intervention. Among those who say that life outcomes are more outside of people's control, some 3 out of 4 people (76 percent) believe more strongly that the government "should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for," in contrast to 39 percent among those who emphasize agency.

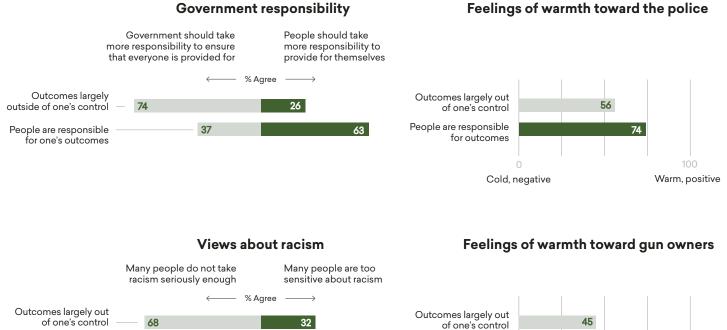
Attitudes toward police. Americans who believe that life outcomes are largely outside of one's control feel less warm towards police than those who emphasize agency—with 56 percent of the former group holding warm feelings towards police, compared to 74 percent of the latter group.

Racism. Significant differences in perceptions about race in America exist between those who emphasize agency and those who do not. For instance, 68 percent of those who emphasize agency also believe that many people nowadays are too sensitive about things to do with race, compared to just 32 percent of those who believe outcomes are out of one's control.

Gun control. People who believe that they are in control of their life's outcomes are more likely to believe they should be in control of their personal safety, which helps explain their more positive perceptions of gun ownership. On a scale from 0-100 those with stronger agency beliefs scored their views of gun owners at 64, compared to a score of 45 among those who emphasize the role of forces outside of people's control in shaping life outcomes.

Fig. 2.3 Agency beliefs and political views

Agency beliefs are correlated with views on a number of contentious issues.



 Outcomes largely out of one's control
 68
 32
 Outcomes largely out of one's control
 45

 People are responsible for outcomes
 32
 68
 People are responsible for outcomes
 64

Panel 1. Question wording: "Which statement do you agree with more?" (1 - Government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for; 2 - People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves).

Warm, positive

Data: Combined Set (N = 24,428)

Panel 2. Question wording: "For the following questions, we would like to get your feelings toward a number of groups on a 'feeling thermometer.' A rating of 0 means you feel completely cold and negative, while a 100 means you feel completely warm and positive. A score of 50 means you feel neither warm nor cold. Response option: "Police Officers".

Data: Hidden Tribes (N = 1,970) Panel 3. Question wording: "Which do you agree with more?" (1 - Many people nowadays don't take racism seriously enough; 2 - Many people nowadays are too sensitive about things to do with race). Data: Hidden Tribes (N = 1,999)

Panel 4. Question wording: For the following questions, we would like to get your feelings toward a number of groups on a 'feeling thermometer.' A rating of 0 means you feel completely cold and negative, while a 100 means you feel completely warm and positive. Data: Hidden Tribes (N = 1,947)

Source: More in Common, 2018-2022

What it Means to be American

The results of the analyses above show that agency beliefs are correlated with political ideology, with higher agency belief predicting more conservative views on a range of political issues.

To better understand how agency beliefs predict various attitudes toward American political life beyond that which could be explained via political ideology alone, we used a statistical technique called linear regression. Including both people's agency beliefs and their self-reported political affiliation (from "very liberal" to "very conservative") as "predictors" in the regression equation allows us to see which attitudes are particularly strongly associated with agency beliefs, controlling for political views.

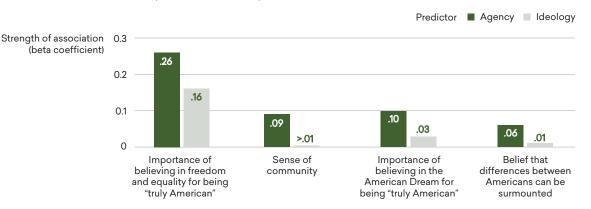
The results demonstrate the centrality of agency beliefs in American identity. For example, the strongest effect that emerges concerns how people define what it means to be "truly American." In particular, people with strong agency beliefs are more likely to say that being an American means "pursuing the American dream" and "believing in freedom and equality" (see Figure 2.4).

Agency beliefs also predict personal optimism and a strong sense of community. People high in agency beliefs are uniquely likely to say they are "part of a community - people who understand each other, care about each other, and help each other." This shows that being a part of a community is positively associated with a sense of self-reliance, suggesting that individual agency and communal mentality are not mutually exclusive. Finally, people high in these beliefs are more likely to agree with the statement, "The differences between Americans are not so big that we cannot come together."

In sum, agency beliefs uniquely predict viewpoints that are associated with what might be called the "American Creed": a belief in freedom and equality, a strong sense of community, and optimism in our ability to solve collective problems.

Fig. 2.4

Agency beliefs predict views on community and American identity, controlling for ideology



Agency beliefs outperform ideology in predicting views of American identity and community.

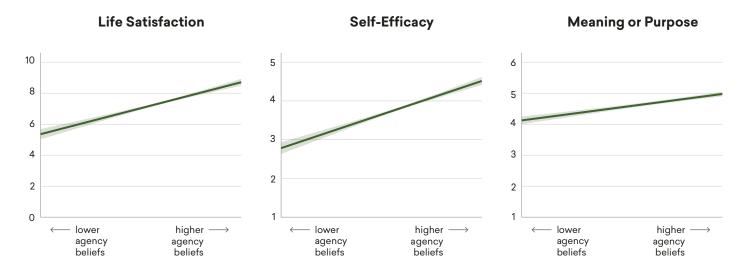
Each set of bars reflects the results of a regression analysis with ideology and agency beliefs as predictors and the x-axis variable as the dependent variable. Each bar represents the strength of the relationship ("beta coefficient") between agency beliefs (or ideology) and the variable listed on the x-axis, controlling for ideology (or agency beliefs). For example, the strength of the association between someone's agency and their sense of community, controlling for ideology, is .09, while the strength of the relationship between ideology and sense of community, controlling for agency beliefs, is >.01. Data: Hidden Tribes (N = 7,957) Source: More in Common, 2018

Agency, Efficacy, and Wellbeing

Psychological research suggests that agency beliefs are important predictors of wellbeing. For example, the perception of agency on a task is a strong predictor of actually succeeding at that task, irrespective of ability.¹³ Furthermore, belief in personal agency has been shown to predict wellbeing and life satisfaction.¹⁴

The same patterns hold true for Americans today. Agency beliefs are positively correlated with life satisfaction (r = .25), a sense of meaning and purpose in life (r = .22), and with "self-efficacy" (r = .28)—that is, the feeling that one is capable of surmounting life's challenges (see Figure 2.5). Overall, this corroborates past research demonstrating how agency beliefs predict positive thinking and wellbeing.

Fig. 2.5 Agency and positive psychological indicators



Panels 1 and 2: Agency = Agency Index score as reflected in difference between the effect on life success of "individual choices" versus "outside forces".

Panel 3: Agency = average of three "agency beliefs" questions. (Different calculations of agency due to availability of data).

Panel 1. Question wording: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?" (0 - Completely dissatisfied; 10 - Completely satisfied).

Data: April Poll (N = 2,419)

Panel 2. Question wording: "I can rely on my own abilities in difficult situations." (1–Does not apply to me at all; 5–Applies to me completely).

Data: April Poll (N = 2,419)

Panel 3. Question wording: "Do you agree or dis agree with the following statements? My life has a sense of meaning or purpose." (1—Strongly disagree; 6—Strongly agree). Data: January Poll (N = 2,003)

Source: More in Common, 2025

¹³ Bandura (1990)14 Dogan, Totan, & Sapmaz (2013).

Key Takeaways

The findings in this chapter underscore the power of agency in the American imagination. Agency beliefs are closely correlated with many of the views that people perceive as distinctly American, including the belief that freedom and equality are central parts of the American identity, a strong sense of community, life satisfaction, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

The correlations with other political beliefs suggest agency beliefs may also be implicated in a number of other political attitudes. For example, pro-gun positions may be associated with the view that gun ownership represents a form of personal authorship and self-reliance. Similarly, correlations with warmth toward police are consistent with a "law and order" approach to civic life that emphasizes the importance of individual choices in obeying national laws and a punitive response toward those who stray from established norms.

In sum, the findings presented in this chapter highlight the vital role of agency in the American narrative. Finding ways of honoring this view while acknowledging the ways that luck and circumstance shape people's opportunities in life will be a core challenge for any effort seeking to build a unifying narrative for the future.

GLOBAL CONTEXT: HOW AMERICA COMPARES TO OTHER WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

The previous two chapters illustrated how intimately related agency beliefs are to Americans' political attitudes and identity. These insights raise the question: is the emphasis on personal agency unique to America, or is it present in other countries as well? This chapter compares agency beliefs in America with those in three other large western democracies. It uses data collected by More in Common in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. For additional information on these surveys, see Appendix C.

Our topline findings are as follows:

- Americans are *not* more likely, on average, to believe in personal agency than their counterparts in other Western democracies.
- What does set Americans apart, by contrast is the *centrality* of these beliefs in political disagreement: agency beliefs are more strongly correlated with a host of political attitudes and identities in America than in the other countries surveyed.

Agency Beliefs in Four Western Democracies

On the surface, there are striking similarities between countries. For example, overall agreement with the question of whether people are responsible for their life outcomes is remarkably consistent across the US, Germany, France, and the UK, with nearly seven in ten of each country agreeing with this statement (see Figure 3.1).

Fig. 3.1

Belief in personal responsibility across countries

Across western democracies, prevalence of the beliefs that people are mostly responsible for their own outcomes in life are remarkably consistent.

People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life.



Question wording: "Which statement do you agree with more?" (1 - People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life; 2 - People's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control). Responses in France, UK, and Germany were on 1-4 scale which was collapsed into 2 response categories to render comparable to US.

Data: Fault Lines: Finding France (N = 4,008); Hidden Tribes (N = 7,957); Germany's Invisible Divides (N = 4,001); Britain's Choice (N = 10,385).

Note: in this chapter, to make data comparable in both size and time, we used the Hidden Tribes dataset for the US data instead of the Combined Dataset. Source: More in Common, 2018-2022

A similar pattern emerges when asked which factors play a greater role in getting people where they are today. Around three in four respondents in France, the US, and the UK agree that hard work, rather than luck and circumstance, have played a greater role in getting them where they are today (see Figure 3.2).

Fig. 3.2 Belief in hard work across countries

Across western democracies, there are similar beliefs that hard work has shaped the lives of respondents more than luck.

Which played a greater role in getting you where you are today?



Question wording: "Which played a greater role in getting you where you are today?" (1—Hard work and effort; 2 -Luck and circumstance). Responses in France were on 1-4 scale which was collapsed into 2 response categories to render comparable to US and UK. Data: Fault Lines: Finding France (N = 4,008); Hidden Tribes (N = 7,957); Britain's Choice (N = 10,385). Data from German not available for this question. Source: More in Common, 2018-2022

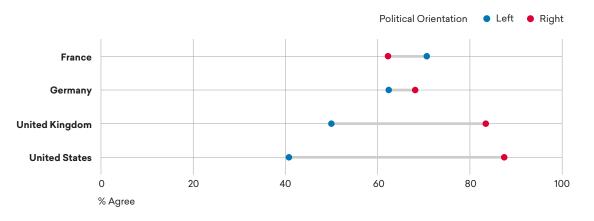
Partisan Differences in Agency

However, these cross-country similarities obscure what is distinct about the United States: the stark way in which beliefs in agency map onto America's political identities. Americans stand out in their level of disagreement: there is a split of almost fifty percentage points (41 percent versus 87 percent) by left/right identities on whether people are responsible for their own outcomes in life, as compared to differences of 33 percentage points (50 percent versus 83 percent) among respondents in the UK and 18 percentage points in Germany (62 percent versus 68 percent; see Figure 3.3)¹⁵. Surprisingly, respondents in France actually reverse the trend: left-leaning French respondents are more likely to agree that people are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life than those who lean to the right (70 percent versus 62 percent). Overall, this shows that in the US more than in any other of the nations surveyed, disagreements about the role of personal responsibility have a distinctly ideological flavor.

¹⁵ Readers may not a discrepancy between this finding that 41 percent of left-leaning Americans endorse agency, and the finding presented in Chapter 1 that a majority of Democrats do so. The difference is the result of a different calculation of "left" and "right" identities in this analysis, which was used to render the countries comparable. For more information, see <u>Appendix C</u>.

Comparing agency beliefs and left/right identities **Fig. 3.3**

People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life



More than in other countries, views on personal agency in the US map onto

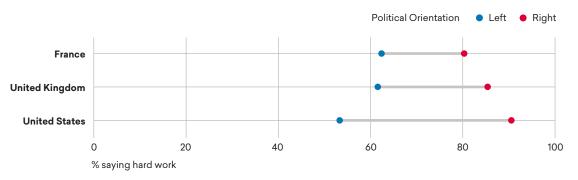
partisan differences.

All question wordings available in Appendix C. Responses in France and Germany were collapsed into 2 response categories to render comparable to US and UK. Data: Fault Lines: Germany's Invisible Divides (N = 4,001); Finding France (N = 4,008); Britain's Choice (N = 10,385); Hidden Tribes (N = 7,957). Source: More in Common, 2018-2022

A similar pattern emerges when respondents are asked whether hard work or luck played a larger role in getting them where they are today. Americans have the strongest split by left/right identities, with a forty-seven percentage-point split between left-leaning (53 percent) and right-leaning (90 percent) respondents. The second largest gap was in the UK with a 24 percentage-point gap (61 percent versus 84 percent), and France, with an 18 percentage-point gap (82 percent versus 80 percent; see Figure 3.4). Overall, this suggests that America, while not necessarily differing from other countries in its average levels of endorsement of the importance of hard work, stands out in the degree to which left/right identity maps onto differing perspectives on questions of hard work and personal agency.

Fig. 3.4 — Belief in hard work and left/right identities

Americans are far more likely to be divided politically on the influence of personal agency versus forces outside of people's control on their lives.



Which played a greater role in getting you where you are today?

All question wordings available in Appendix. Responses in France and Germany were collapsed into 2 response categories to render comparable to US and UK. Data: Fault Lines: Germany's Invisible Divides (N = 4,001); Finding France (N = 4,008); Britain's Choice (N = 10,385); Hidden Tribes (N = 7,957). Source: More in Common, 2018-2022

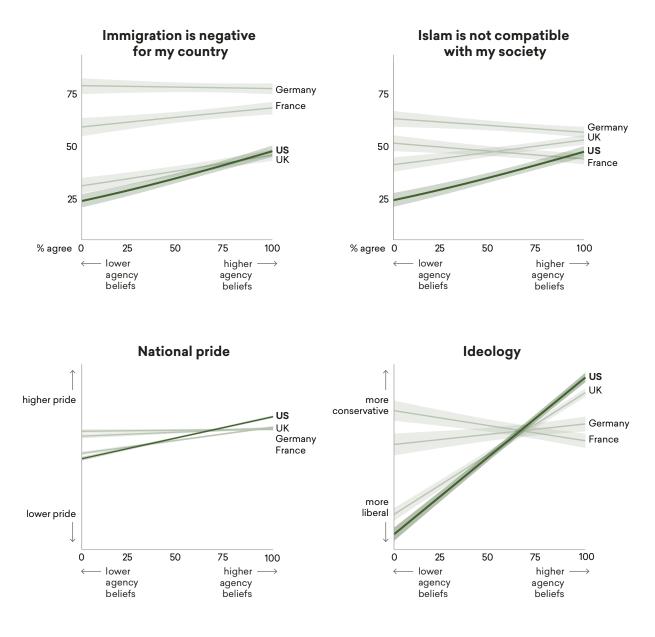
Correlations with Social Issues

Altogether, the picture that emerges is that agency beliefs map onto political differences more strongly in the United States than elsewhere. Further confirmation of this is found in exploring how agency beliefs correlate with various political topics.

Among the four Western democracies surveyed, agency beliefs are more strongly correlated with beliefs on immigration, beliefs about Islam, national pride, and political ideology in America than anywhere else (see Figure 3.5). For instance, for Americans, the stronger one's belief in agency as the primary driver of one's life outcomes, the stronger their national pride, and the stronger their anti-immigrant sentiment. This shows that beliefs about agency are more closely wrapped up in political topics in the U.S. than in other nations.

Fig. 3.5 Personal agency and political issues

The connection between agency beliefs and political attitudes—including views about immigration, Islam, and national pride—is stronger in America than in other nations.



All question wordings available in <u>Appendix C</u>. Ribbons represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Data: Fault Lines: Germany's Invisible Divides (N = 4,001); Finding France (N = 4,008); Britain's Choice (N = 10,385); Hidden Tribes (N = 7,957). Source: More in Common, 2018-2022

Key Takeaways

Americans' commitment to agency is similar to that in other countries. But what sets America apart is the centrality of agency beliefs in political disagreement. Agency beliefs are more closely correlated with ideology, with views about immigration, and with national pride.

These observations may strike readers as paradoxical given the findings in Chapter 1. How could it be that agency is both broadly endorsed by Americans *and* the source of so much controversy?

On a purely statistical level, the answer is that a majority of Democrats maintain a belief in agency despite their differences with Republicans.

On a deeper level, the explanation lies in the unique conditions of America's founding and the complex evolution of its national identity. As detailed in <u>Appendix B</u>, the country was built on ideals of optimism and self-reliance—values closely tied to agency. But from the beginning, these ideals stood in contrast to laws and practices that prevented some people from exercising that agency. American history may be understood in part as a struggle to reconcile this contradiction: the nation's deep belief in personal determination and progress, alongside historical practices that provided agency to some but not others. Seen this way, it becomes easier to grasp how agency can simultaneously unite and divide as both a shared aspiration and a source of conflict in the American psyche.

Agency is both a shared aspiration and a source of conflict in the American psyche.

AGENCY, OPPORTUNITY, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

This report has explored Americans' beliefs about agency, and how these beliefs relate to other political opinions and attitudes. In this final chapter, we explore the implications of these findings.

Our topline findings are as follows:

- Americans widely acknowledge the dual role of luck and agency in shaping life outcomes.
- They prefer a "both-and" to an "either-or" approach to governance that emphasizes the need to increase both agency and opportunity.
- A unifying vision for Americans is one in which people have both the right and responsibility to use their potential to improve their own lives and the lives of the people around them-or what we term "morally-directed agency."

The findings explored thus far reveal a central tension in our national identity. On one side, we have seen the power of agency in American life. Stories of grit and determination are among the most enduring sources of pride and hope for Americans-whether their families have lived here for generations or arrived only recently. A sense of agency is intimately connected with many of the values we hold dear, including a belief in freedom and equality and a sense of meaning and purpose. And moments in which people were able to exercise agency represent a deep source of pride in their lives. To deny the power of this belief would thus be to negate one of the most integral and electrifying parts of the national spirit.

At the same time, any cogent vision of the future must also contend with the evidence showing just how much people's lives are shaped by accidents of birth. Indeed, throughout American history, political and historical forces have conspired to deny certain groups and individuals opportunities for success. Failing schools¹⁶, food deserts¹⁷, unequal access to medical care¹⁸, structural barriers to employment¹⁹ and childcare²⁰, and unsafe neighborhoods²¹-all are examples of impediments to agency in America.

The challenge, therefore, is identifying a narrative that preserves people's existing agency while acknowledging the reality of these barriers. Herein lies the promise for a hopeful and inclusive vision of the future.

¹⁶ Johnson (2021)

¹⁷ Karpyn, Riser, Tracy, Wang, & Shen (2019)18 Yearby (2018)

¹⁹ Tsui, Enderle, & Jiang (2018)20 LaBriola & Schneider (2021)

In Their Own Words

To explore the features of such a vision, we spoke with hundreds of Americans about what they considered essential for achieving the American Dream. The responses offer revealing insights that point to promising opportunities for revitalizing our national narrative.

The key insight was the proportion of Americans who acknowledged the dual role of luck and agency in shaping life outcomes-and the need to increase both agency and opportunity in a flourishing society.

As one respondent stated:



To an extent outside forces contribute to life outcomes; however, hard work and perseverance can overcome many obstacles. It is true, we do not pick what circumstances were are born into and circumstances are different for everyone; however, we are responsible for the choices we make and the consequences of those decisions.

- 63-year old white man, Republican, Mississippi

Another said:



Everyone has to work hard, but some people have to work harder because they do not have anything to fall back on.

- 63-year old Black woman, Democrat, Georgia

And another:



I think it's a split down the middle on this. Yes, you can with hard work, change the trajectory of your life. But outside forces can keep even the hardest workers down.

- 63-year old White woman, Independent, Texas

These sentiments suggest that most Americans see success as depending on a blend of agency and opportunity.

Weaving the Dream

To further test the idea that a successful vision of the future would weave together agency and opportunity, More in Common asked a representative sample of Americans to indicate whether the American Dream is the result of individual effort, or social policy, or both.

Indeed, a broad majority of Americans endorse the idea that success depends both on individual effort and fair opportunity. For example, when asked what determines whether someone is successful in the United States, most Americans (55 percent) say that it depends on the person's hard work and self-determination *and* on the systems and policies that shape opportunity.

Similarly, most Americans (54 percent) say they want to live in a country where everyone strives to be the best version of themselves *and* they are provided the opportunity to do so.

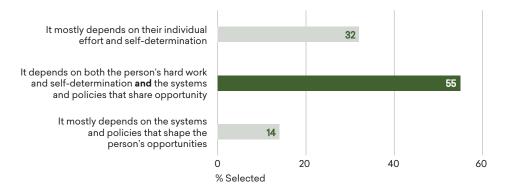
Finally, most Americans (71 percent) agree that, to achieve the American Dream people need to take personal responsibility for their own lives *and* the government should work ensure everyone has a fair shot (see Figure 4.1).

In each of these cases, the share of Americans who choose the dual approach to success is twenty percentage points or more higher than the percent who downplay the importance of opportunity, and two or more times greater than the percent who downplay the role of agency. In sum, Americans appear to support a "both-and" approach to agency and opportunity as opposed to an "either-or" approach.

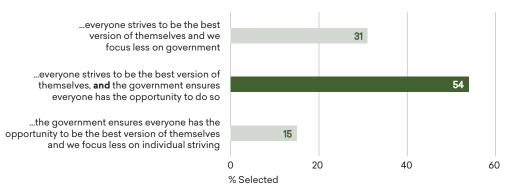
Combining agency and opportunity **Fig. 4.1**

Americans prefer a "both-and" to an "either-or" approach to governance

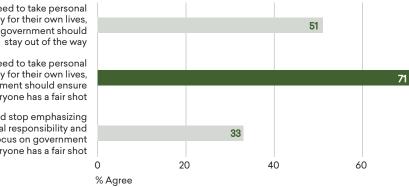
Which one of the following best describes what determines whether someone is successful in the United States today?



Which statement do you agree with most? I want to live in a country where...



Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement



People need to take personal responsibility for their own lives, and the government should

People need to take personal responsibility for their own lives, and government should ensure everyone has a fair shot

We should stop emphasizing personal responsibility and instead focus on government ensuring everyone has a fair shot

Data: April Poll (N = 2,419) Source: More in Common, 2025

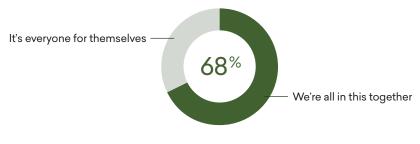
Solidarity

Americans' complex views about the importance of individual agency and social support are reflected in another way as well. When asked which sentiment they believe more—"We are all in this together" or "It's everyone for themselves"— more than two thirds of Americans (68 percent) selected the former (see Figure 4.2). This transcends party affiliation, with virtually identical proportions of Democrats (65 percent), Independents (63 percent) and Republicans (65 percent) agreeing. In other words, a majority of Americans hold a strong belief in the importance of mutual obligation alongside their commitment to agency.

Fig. 4.2 — Americans' sense of mutual obligation

More than 2 in 3 Americans agree that "We're all in this together."

Which do you agree with more?



Data: April Poll (N = 2,419) Source: More in Common, 2025

A Common Vision

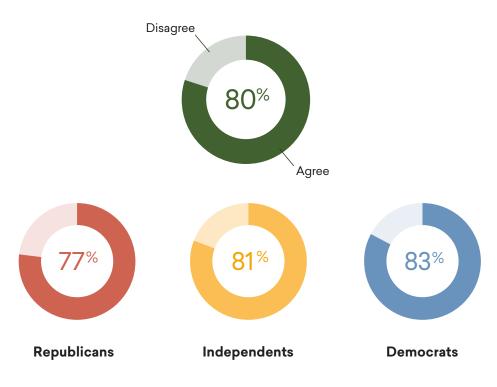
These findings hint at a more unifying narrative—one that emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between individual and society in building flourishing lives. As a final test of this possibility, More in Common explored a statement that captured this sentiment. The statement is seen on the following page. It emphasizes an interlocking set of rights and responsibilities: the *right* for individuals to have the basic building blocks they need to pursue their potential, and the *responsibility* they have to use their gifts in service of improving their own lives and the lives of the people around them. Critically, to the extent this statement emphasizes agency, it is *morally directed*—that is, agency toward self-improvement and the improvement of one's country and community.

Results show broad agreement with the statement, with four in five (80%) of Americans generally agreeing. Thus, it may offer a promising foundation for a common vision for America's future.

Fig. 4.3 Morally-directed agency

More than 4 in 5 Americans agree people have both a right and responsibility to give back to their communities.

America should be built on a deal of rights and responsibilities. The country should guarantee its citizens what they need to live up to their full potential: education, opportunity, and dignity. People in turn have a responsibility to use that potential to improve themselves and give back to their country and community.



Data: American Fabric (N = 1,142) Source: More in Common, 2020

Key Takeaways

This chapter shows that Americans prefer a "both-and" approach to the American Dream—one that recognizes the importance of individual agency *and* the importance of providing people opportunities to exercise that agency. What's more, Americans endorse a vision of agency that is morally directed—that is, used to enhance their own lives and the lives of others.²² This "politics of empowerment" may serve as the basis for a common vision for America.

²² A similar finding was noted in a recent report, "The Story of America: A Rebooted civic national narrative for the United States" by the Nationhood Lab at Salve Regina University (2025)



By looking at the everyday concerns of ordinary Americans—how they see themselves as responsible to themselves, to their families, and to their communities, we may begin to weave a stronger, more resilient social fabric.

CONCLUSION: REDISCOVERING Our common creed

We are not responsible for the environment we are born in, neither are we responsible for our hereditary circumstances, but there is a third factor for which we are responsible: namely, the personal response which we make to these circumstances."²³

- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1953)

Most Americans place great faith in the power of the individual to transcend negative circumstances and make the most of their lives. Yet they also recognize the importance of removing obstacles that can prevent people from exercising their agency.

Acknowledging the duality of agency should not undermine the very real impediments that many individuals continue to face today. This includes racial minorities, people who are economically disempowered, as well as those with disabilities, all of whom may be prohibited from exercising the full extent of their agency by circumstances beyond their control. With respect to such individuals, our priority should be in removing any external barriers that stand in their way.

At the same time, Americans' faith in the power of the individual suggests that policies that empower people to improve their own and others' lives are more likely to gain lasting support than those focused on redistribution or personal agency alone.

This vision—of a society that nurtures both the responsibility and the opportunity to exercise morally-directed agency—may define a common vision for America's future. It affirms an enduring faith in the individual and a collective commitment to ensuring that all Americans have not just the right but also the duty to pursue their potential in service of the common good.²⁴

As our country approaches the 250th anniversary of its founding, questions of our national values and identity become even more relevant. Yet in this moment, we are divided and distrustful of each other. We need to rebuild a shared narrative that resonates with every American that can offer us a shared vision for the future. The insights in this report may offer a helpful starting point in this effort.

²³ King (1953)

 ²⁴ For additional research on this idea, see: American Character (Woodard, 2016); The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America (Rosen, 2024); and Democracy and Solidarity (Hunter, 2024)

APPENDIX A: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AGENCY

Beliefs about personal agency shape how people view the world and themselves



Self-belief does not necessarily ensure success, but self-disbelief assuredly spawns failure.

- Albert Bandura, Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control, 1997

Research in psychology suggests that questions of personal agency are central to America's history not just because of this country's unique origin story, but also because these ideas are deeply connected to how people understand themselves and their social world. In this section we examine how agency relates to human flourishing.

Attribution: Explaining Others' Behavior

In 1958, Austrian psychologist Fritz Heider made an observation that would shape the field of social psychology. He claimed that people have an innate drive to seek out the underlying causes for others' behavior-that people are, as he put it, "naïve social psychologists trying to make sense of the world."²⁵ This tendency, he noted, is helpful because it allows people to predict how others will behave in the future. For example, knowing whether someone made a seemingly offensive remark at a cocktail party out of genuine malice or because they were having a bad day can help people determine whether or not to interact with that person again in the future.

Attributions are connected to agency beliefs because, like the latter, they shape how much control people believe they have over their lives.

Heider used the term "attributions" to refer to the explanations people give for others' behavior. The study of when and why people form such explanations is known as "attribution theory."

Heider noted that attributions can be divided into two categories: dispositional and situational. A dispositional attribution implies someone's behavior is the result of their character or personality; a situational attribution suggests that it is the result of their environment or situation.

Attributions and agency beliefs both reflect how much control people believe they have over their lives. Dispositional explanations tend to attribute success to factors within people's control, like hard work and discipline. By contrast, situational explanations tend to attribute success to factors that are outside of people's control, like access to healthcare, housing, and education.

The attributions people make, in turn, influence their views on collective versus individual efforts to reduce inequality. In a study of over 30,000 Americans, researchers found that attributing poverty to dispositional causes over situational forces is associated with reduced support for wealth redistribution.²⁶ This shows that the attributional divide that Heider observed in the 1950s has implications not merely for the way that people understand the behavior of others around them, but also for beliefs about the appropriate relationship between citizens and government.

The Fundamental Attribution Error

The advent of attribution theory set the stage for psychologists to begin exploring when and why people form various attributions and the consequences of these attributions for human affairs. The cognitive revolution that accelerated in the 1960s conceived of the human mind as an information-processing machine that, because of idiosyncrasies in its operation and design, was subject to "cognitive biases" — systematic deviations from the truth. With this conceptualization came questions about how people' attributions may fall prey to similar biases.

Pioneering research by the psychologist Lee Ross and his colleagues identified one pervasive trend in people's attributions. Ross noted that when explaining others' behavior, people tended to overemphasize the importance of dispositional factors and underestimate the importance of situational ones.²⁷

One famous study conducted in the 1970s illustrates this point. Students at a university were instructed to read an essay written by another student. They were told that the student had been assigned via a coin toss to write an essay either in support of Fidel Castro, Cuba's then President, or against him. After reading the essay, students were asked to guess the true attitude of the essay writer. Students attributed views expressed in the essay to the writers' genuine beliefs²⁸—believing, in other words, that people who had written the pro-Castro essay supported the leader, and that those who had written the anti-Castro essay disapproved of him. That is, they overemphasized the writer's dispositional factors and underestimated the importance of situational factors, despite having been explicitly told that the writers were randomly assigned to take a position.

When explaining others' behavior, people tend to overlook situational factors and concentrate on dispositional ones.

This study is just one example of how, when explaining others' behavior, people tend to overlook situational factors and concentrate on dispositional ones. This tendency is so pervasive and deeply ingrained that psychologists soon gave it a name: the fundamental attribution error.

²⁶ Piff, Wiwad, Robinson, Aknin, Mercier, & Shariff (2020)
27 Ross (1977)
28 Jones & Harris (1967)

Self-Serving Attributions: Explaining our Own Success

While the fundamental attribution error tends to cause us to emphasize dispositional attributions for others' behavior, similar forces come into play when we explain our own behavior. As psychologists wrote in 1970, "We attribute success to our own dispositions and failure to external forces."²⁹

These attributions are known as "self-serving" because they help people maintain a positive image of themselves — taking more than our share of the credit for positive personal outcomes and deflecting blame for negative ones.³⁰

In one well-known demonstration of this phenomenon, experimenters assigned undergraduate psychology students to teach arithmetic to 4th-graders. The undergraduate student teachers did not know that the 4th-graders' performance on their final arithmetic quiz was manipulated to be either high or low. The experimenters then asked the student teachers how much responsibility they bore for the performance. When the 4th-graders performed well, the student teachers claimed personal credit for the success, attributing the result to their superior teaching style. When the 4th-graders performed badly, on the other hand, the student teachers deflected blame, saying the result was the fault of the students themselves.³¹ These results show how people's attributions can be tailored to help them to maintain a positive self-image.

People's attributions can be tailored to help them to maintain a positive self-image.

People's tendency to overclaim personal responsibility for successful ventures extends to other domains as well. In one study, psychologists surveyed MBA students who had spent the semester working in study groups, asking them what percentage of the overall work they had contributed to the group. Ideally, the sum of the respective self-rated contributions of each of the group members would be 100 percent, since that would represent the total amount of work completed over the semester. Yet the sum frequently came to as much as 140 percent, suggesting that people overestimate their respective personal contributions (and undervalue the contributions of others) by a significant margin.³² Again, this demonstrates how easy it is for people to overlook the external forces that contributed to their success.

The Significance of Luck

The biases of individual psychology towards emphasizing agency in people's successes and all the more striking in light of growing research showing just how deeply people's outcomes in life are in fact shaped by their situations.³³ Indeed, research on economic and social mobility in America provides evidence of how strongly accidents of birth impact people's changes of success. Country rankings show that social mobility in the United States is lower than in comparable democracies, with the US ranking 27th in a 2020 report on social mobility.³⁴ When economists examined the chances that someone born in a lower economic bracket would make it out of that bracket, they found that the odds of someone making it from the lowest fifth of the income distribution to the top fifth is less than five

²⁹ Hastorf, Schneider, & Polefka (1970)

³⁰ Miller & Ross (1975) 31 McAllister (1996)

³² Schroeder, Caruso, & Epley (2016)

 ³³ Frank (2016)
 34 https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-social-mobility-index-2020-why-economies-benefit-from-fixing-inequality

percent. In contrast, the odds of someone born into the top fifth remaining in that income bracket is forty percent.³⁵ Studies of intergenerational mobility have identified persistent racial disparities between outcomes for racial minorities in America.³⁶

A similar pattern in the education system is found in US education. Here, economists have observed that gifted disadvantaged children are less likely to attend college than low-performing advantaged ones. Put another way, being born to a wealthy family makes a child more likely to attend college than acing their exams.³⁷

These observations underscore two distinct yet related realities: that people consistently overestimate the role that they played in obtaining success, and underestimate that luck plays a significant role in shaping success in life. As Michael Sandel says in his book The Tyranny of Merit, "the American faith in the ability to rise through effort and grit no longer fits the facts on the ground."38

The Upside of Agency

This research casts a shadow of doubt on our reflexive tendency to claim credit for our successes or blame others for our failures. But there is more to the story. Other research highlights the power of agency in human flourishing.

Consider self-efficacy, which consists in the belief that we have the ability to execute necessary actions to achieve our goals. Psychologists have shown that self-efficacy is crucial for persevering through challenges. For instance, when faced with difficult math problems, students who had higher self-efficacy were more likely than students with lower self-efficacy to keep persisting.³⁹ Selfefficacy also broadly relates to one's ability to regulate his or her emotions. Children who believed in their capacity and skills to navigate challenging social situations were better able to do so, which in turn translated to better performance in the classroom.⁴⁰

Evidence not only points to the importance of having agency beliefs, but also highlights the negative consequences of a lack of agency beliefs. As the quote at the start of the section implies, a sense of positive self-regard may not automatically lead to success, but not believing in one's self is a sure path to failure.

Having little or no belief in one's ability to influence one's outcomes can lead to a state of "learned helplessness." This concept, first coined in the 1970s, refers to the internalization of a loss of control.⁴¹ Researchers studied this phenomenon through a series of experiments on behavioral conditioning with animals. They administered shocks to several dogs and subsequently placed them in an escape-avoidance training box. Dogs that were not previously shocked were more inclined to escape and cross the training box barrier to go to a safer spot. However, dogs that were previously given shocks hardly tried to escape the shocks, but instead whined and sat down passively. Learned helplessness remains a core principle in human behavioral psychology, and the idea that a lack of agency eventually leads to thinking that outcomes are uncontrollable continues to be examined today in research on addiction,⁴² clinical depression,⁴³ and academic achievement.44

- 41 Seligman (1972)42 Shaghaghy, Saffarinia, Iranpoor, & Soltanynejad (2011)

³⁵ Urahn, Currier, Elliott, Wechsler, Wilson & Colbert (2012)36 Chetty, Hendren, Jones & Porter (2019)

³⁷ Wyner, Bridgeland, & Dilulio (2007)

³⁸ Sandel (2020)39 Jacobs, Prentice-Dunn, & Rogers (1984)

⁴⁰ Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Patorelli (1996)

⁴³ Maier (1984) 44 Filippello, Buzzai, Costa, Orecchio, & Sorrenti (2020)

Another set of experiments shows the power of agency beliefs in achieving goals despite adversity. Researchers who study motivation often cite the importance of one's "locus of control", a term first made popular by psychologist Julian Rotter in 1954.⁴⁵ Having an internal locus of control is akin to holding agency beliefs—that one's outcomes are a direct result of one's actions. Having an external locus of control on the other hand means attributing outcomes as a result of fate, chance, or someone else's actions. Because people with external locus of control tend to believe that they have less control over their environment, they experience anxiety more frequently, and handle stress by withdrawing from the situation rather than searching for ways to overcome it.

As these studies suggest, there is a connection between a person's sense of agency and their outcomes in life. While merely believing that one is capable of overcoming obstacles is not enough to actually do so, the absence of this belief makes obstacles far more difficult to overcome. When faced with difficulties, as we all inevitably are, it helps to believe that we have the necessary tools within us to overcome the challenge.

So while agency beliefs may not always be accurate, they remain important. No matter their starting point, people have some control over their lives, and the choices they make matter. The mere perception of agency, in other words, is important to our mental health and can strengthen our ability to surmount obstacles.

Finding Balance

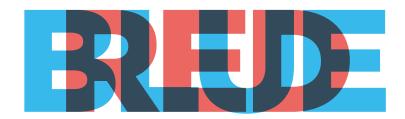
To account for this evidence in social and economic research, we need to find ways both to validate personal agency and to acknowledge the powerful role that luck and circumstance play in people's lives.

One possible way forward can be understood via analogy. The term "binocular rivalry" refers to the visual phenomenon of being able to see two different images separately yet simultaneously when these images are presented as distinct visual stimulus to each eye⁴⁶. For instance, if the word blue is shown to the left eye, and red is shown to the right, people will automatically switch rapidly back and forth between each image, instead of generating a superimposition of the two images in one visual plane.

Fig. B

Binocular rivalry: When two images alternate salience in the mind

In true binocular rivalry, separate images are presented to each eye. This visual analogy illustrates how one may view the role of agency and luck in shaping people's lives.



Source: More in Common (2025)

This idea of two co-existing but distinct stimuli can illustrate how we can navigate the tension between agency and luck when thinking about individual success. That is, we can think of both factors as existing concurrently in outcomes and events in a person's life. We, as perceivers, identify one factor more clearly over the other at any given time, even as the unseen attribution operates in the background.

Key Takeaways

As pervasive as luck and circumstance may be in shaping people's lives, there is value in believing in ourselves and investing in our abilities to achieve our goals. Outcomes in our lives are not isolated nor unrelated events. We work hard in school and at our jobs, which leads to opportunities and opens more doors, and this cycle continues until we are at a place in our lives that others describe as fortunate. We invest time, energy, and ourselves in our relationships, and they become stronger, more enduring and more rewarding. The reverse is also true. Feeling lucky can also enhance our experience of personal agency, motivating us even more. As the saying goes, "the harder you practice, the luckier you get."

This section has revealed a core tension: while circumstances in modern life impede people from reaching their full potential, it is helpful to believe in the power of individuals to overcome these obstacles. Appendix B shows how agency beliefs have played an important role in the forging of American identity. In this section, we have seen that it is also a core part of the human narrative. The role of circumstances beyond our control in life is undeniable. Yet we cannot flourish without believing that our efforts amount to something.

APPENDIX B: THE HISTORY **OF AGENCY IN AMERICAN** POLITICS

In this section, we show how disagreements about the role of luck and agency have reverberated throughout American history.

Tensions in how Americans think and speak about personal agency are aptly reflected in the words and policies of the nation's 25th President, William McKinley.

McKinley believed a strong and responsive central government was essential for human flourishing. In an 1890 in a speech to Congress, several years before becoming president, McKinley extolled the virtues of equality among citizens. "Equality of opportunity," he said, should be "a living birthright which the poorest and humblest citizen, white or black, native-born or naturalized, may confidently enjoy."47

Yet at the same time, McKinley also believed in individual responsibility. He would say that educational facilities in the United States were "accessible to every boy and girl, white or black"48 and that "individuality" rather than "circumstance or luck" determined success.49

By understanding where we began, we may better understand where we are today.

The tensions found in McKinley's rhetoric have echoed throughout American history. The ways we talk about opportunity, responsibility, and fairness today are deeply shaped by these past contradictions.⁵⁰ By understanding where we began, we may better understand where we are today.

⁴⁷ William McKinley, "The Federal Election Bill," July 2, 1890, in Speeches and Address of William McKinley, From His Election to Congress to the Present Time (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1893), 458.
48 McKinley, "Speech at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute," December 16, 1898, in Speeches and Addresses of William McKinley, From March 1, 1897 to May 30, 1900 (New York: Doubleday & McClure Co., 1900), 169.
49 McKinley, "Speech at Ipswich, Wisconsin," October 16, 1899, in ibid, 313; McKinley, "Address to the Officers and Students of the University of Pennsylvania, Academy of Music, Philadelphia," February 22, 1898, in ibid., 75.
50 Steven Lukes, "The Meanings of 'Individualism," Journal of the History of Ideas 32, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1971): 59–63; Eric Daniels, "A Brief History of Individualism in American Thought," in Donelson R. Forsyth and Crystal L. Hoyt, eds., For the Greater Good of All: Perspectives on Individualism, Society, and Leadership (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 69–84. For a dialectic history of political promotion and literary challenges to the reality of American Ideals, see: Cal Jillson, The American Dream: In History. Politics. and Fiction (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2016). The American Dream: In History, Politics, and Fiction (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2016).

The Young Republic: The Revolutionary Era to the Civil War

Historians have traced the "American Creed"-the founding set of national values -to the arrival of European settlers to our eastern shores in the 17th and 18th centuries. Central to those values is a sense of individualism.⁵¹ Many settlers were fleeing persecution and monarchical rule. Their sense of individualism was nevertheless different from today's understanding of individual freedom. As historians have pointed out, in Protestant and Quaker communities especially (less so among fortune-seeking Virginian settlers), the communal spirit dominated individual ambition, precisely because of religion, commitment to family, and service to community.⁵² In this world, individual and communal agency operated together.

In the revolutionary era, the related vision of the American Dream-that honest and hard work lead to success-took shape. Though the phrase was not actually used until the 20th century, drawing on Enlightenment ideals, figures like Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, Andrew Hamilton, and James Madison embodied a liberal spirit that valued individual worth and challenged prevailing conceptions of a natural hierarchy.53

Though the Founding Fathers debated the form, role, and rights of government, they ultimately produced a founding document, the Declaration of Independence, that guaranteed all men the unalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Happiness, a term referring to individual success and well-being, is the only value to appear twice in the paragraph.⁵⁴

Communalism and collective sovereignty were overriding components in the Declaration. As historian Barry Shain has argued, individuals' rights were to be determined by a majority.⁵⁵ Yet this assertion of universal rights was contradicted by the exclusion of Black Americans, women, and the poor from political participation.

As the young republic matured, debates about the rights of individuals continued. In the Jacksonian era, leading up to the Civil War, Democrats and the Whigs were divided about the role of the state. Democrats were suspicious of large federal government and national programs, such as asylums, schools, and relief aid. The Whigs believed in strong central government institutions and that national banks liberated individuals, rather than "robbed men of their freedom," as Democrats believed.56

This 19th-century debate in many ways resembles the debate today around luck and personal responsibility, though with some differences. Democrats, for instance, emphasized how social factors, such as privilege and upbringing, greatly influenced life outcomes, whereas the Whigs tended to believe that character defects were the root causes of social problems.

To many Black Americans, however, national debates about agency were meaningless until the practice of slavery-an overt impediment to the exercise of their personal agency-was ended following the Civil War.

⁵¹ See, e.g.: Seymour Martin Lipset, American Exceptionalism: A Double-edged Sword (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 1996); Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Polarization and the Politics of Personal Responsibility (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 24, Lawrence & M. Eppard et al, Rugged Individualism and the Misunderstanding of American Inequality (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2020).
 See: Barry Alan Shain, The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought

⁽Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Jillson, American Dream, 18-30. 53 For a history of the phrase, see: Jillson, American Dream.

⁵⁴ Thomas Jefferson, et al, Declaration of Independence, 1776. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declarationtranscript

⁵⁵ Shain, The Myth of American Individualism, 252. See also: Jillson, American Dream, 56.

For a history of the debate in this era, see: Lawrence Frederick Kohl, The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era (New York: Oxford University Press 1989), 29.

Age of Transformation: Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era

The changes of the latter half of the nineteenth century transformed views about the rights of individuals and the role of government. Starting with deep social divisions following the Civil War, this period witnessed the sustained ascendancy of the Republican party, first-wave feminism and the suffragette movement, technological change with the arrival of the telegraph, telephone, and lightbulb, the growth of public transit and public education, and major expansions of federal regulation.

These developments strengthened individual freedom and prosperity for large numbers of Americans. Freedoms were greatly expanded by economic, technological and social developments. Public transit, like railroads and streetcars, enabled greater freedom of movement.⁵⁷ Anti-trust regulation, food protections, and workplace reforms as a response to Populist and Progressive demands shielded individuals from the abuses of their employers.

Public developments enabled individual freedom and prosperity by removing structural barriers to well-being.

But the benefits of progress were not shared equally: Jim Crow laws limited the economic opportunities and voting rights of Black Americans.

Meanwhile, leading African-American intellectuals debated how to make progress, with differences that partially map onto current debates. Booker T. Washington, for instance, emphasized working hard and succeeding within existing structures, while W. E. B. Du Bois promoted more profound challenges to systems of civil rights and education.⁵⁸ To a degree, Washington and Du Bois' disagreement was a modern twist on the mid-nineteenth century debate between Frederick Douglass and abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, the former who applied Enlightenment ideals as an argument for Black liberation, while the latter advocated radical changes to the system.59

Inequality-and debates about it-were not limited to the Black and Native American communities. In the early 20th century, recently arriving Irish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese immigrants, and later, Jews fleeing the pogroms in Eastern Europe, faced new sets of social, legal, and workplace barriers, thereby limiting their agency. Meanwhile, the first wave of feminism swept across the United States, challenging the systemic and social barriers that women faced in America.

The Progressive Era saw a strong focus on change to the structure of the economy. As part of Teddy Roosevelt's Square Deal, the government sought to reign in corporations, protect consumers, and conserve the environment. At the end of the era, in 1920, the government banned the sale of alcohol, representing an apotheosis of "big government." This set the stage for the debates in the 1920s and 30s about the proper role of the federal government and individual responsibility.60

⁵⁷ For a study of this relationship, see: Barbara Young Welke, Recasting American Liberty: Gender, Race, Law, and the Railroad Revolution 1865-1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
58 See: W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co, 1903).
59 See: David W. Blight, Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).
60 Brewer and Stonecash, Polarization and the Politics of Personal Responsibility, 29.

Federal Expansion and Civil Rights: The Great Depression and the Cold War

Over the course of the 20th century, America cycled through periods of expanded efforts to correct systemic injustices, with the Progressive Era, New Deal and Great Society, and periods that emphasized individualism. Through these cycles, the contours of current debates around luck and responsibility began taking shape.

Prior to the Great Depression, Herbert Hoover had won the presidency on a platform emphasizing individual enterprise. In his final campaign speech on October 22, 1928—four years before he would be challenged by FDR—Republican candidate Hoover celebrated the qualities of a "rugged individualism" and warned of the "European...doctrines of paternalism and state socialism."⁶¹ Though Hoover had more interventionist leanings than is often remembered, he advocated for a "new" American individualism and believed greater social protections and the centralization of government would undermine "the individual initiative and enterprise."

Not even a year into Hoover's presidency, however, the stock market crashed, sending the U.S. economy in a tailspin and sparking one of the worst depressions in U.S. history. The causes are still debated among historians, but one question was unavoidable: could the government have prevented it? As Hoover failed to stanch the suffering, that turned into: could the government have helped more?

The Depression convinced Americans that their life circumstances were too often shaped by economic forces outside of their control, and the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 marked a historic shift. "The first obligation of Government," he announced in a radio address, "is the protection of the welfare and well-being, indeed the very existence of its citizens." It is a duty of the state, he said, to care for victims of "adverse circumstances."⁶²

"The first obligation of Government," FDR announced in a radio address, "is the protection of the welfare and well-being, indeed the very existence of its citizens."

As president until 1945, FDR's New Deal brought both short and long-term economic programs that greatly expanded federal government activity. Several programs, such as Social Security and a national minimum wage, endured.

Many Republicans challenged the wisdom of these programs, citing the erosion of individual freedom and agency.⁶³ Programs were also limited in their benefit to the wider population. Jim Crow continued in the South, and many Black Americans (as well as women) were often shut out of federal aid and employment opportunities.⁶⁴ The Democratic Party—led by FDR—had yet to shed its identity as the party of the segregationist South.

Debates around race and privilege developed significantly in the mid-century, shaped and driven by major events such as the Brown v. Board of Education ruling in 1954, Rosa Parks' resistance to bus segregation in 1955, and Martin Luther King's March on Washington in 1963. Over the course of decades,

⁶¹ Herbert Hoover, "Principles and Ideals of the United States Government," October 22, 1928, Miller Center, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/october-22-1928-principles-and-ideals-unitedstates-government

Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Call for Federal Responsibility," October 13, 1932, http://www.columbia.edu/~gjw10/fdr.newdeal.html
 See: Herbert Hoover, Further Addresses Upon the American Road: 1938–1940 (New York: Edgar Rickard, 1940), 7, http://www.columbia.edu/~giw10/fdr.newdeal.html

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Democrats, breaking with their predecessors, slowly traded party positions with Republicans, who had previously been the preferred party of Black Americans.

These political dynamics culminated in major civil rights reforms throughout the 1960s and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, when the United States not only enacted greater protection for people of color, but also established Medicare and Medicaid for the wider population. Johnson's emphasis on equality of outcome over equality of opportunity marked a major conceptual shift and a reimagination of the role of government versus individual responsibility. Together these reforms aimed to reduce the structural constraints of the disadvantaged, for the very purpose of promoting every individual's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They also enabled a broader participation in collective governance.

Johnson's emphasis on equality of outcome over equality of opportunity marked a major conceptual shift and a reimagination of the role of government versus individual responsibility.

Concurrently, scholarship on personal responsibility, justice, and economic policy developed significantly, launching major debates that continue to the present day. In 1971, John Rawls published *A Theory of Justice*, explicitly connecting notions of justice to arguments about the ways people's opportunities and social standing are determined by forces over which they have no control.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, policy debates were framed by the competing arguments of John Maynard Keynes (who advocated a large government role), Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman (who both advocated the opposite).⁶⁶ This work confronted the questions of who loses in capitalist systems, how we might judge their role in their outcomes, and what the government can do about it.

By the 1970s, as a result and reaction to preceding events, political movements, and intellectual discourse, elite opinions about luck and personal responsibility coalesced into specific party platforms.⁶⁷ The growth of the federal government, its direct engagement of poverty and civil rights, and economic policy were all bound by common questions of the rights and responsibilities of individuals and the role of the government to help them. Hoover, FDR, and the philosophical frameworks developed by Rawls and others helped to define the terms of the debate and act as party identifiers.⁶⁸

Defining the Debate: Reagan, Clinton, and the Modern Era

Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 brought individualism back to centerstage in American political discourse. A reassertion of the centrality of individual agency was at the heart of the resurgence in conservatism that culminated in the Reagan Revolution. Half a century had passed since the New Deal era, and conservatives contended that government had overextended, undermining ordinary Americans' freedom and sense of agency.

Catalyzed by the emergence of conservative think tanks, intellectuals and politicians, the conservative movement rallied behind fiscal responsibility, free

⁶⁵ For a deeper discussion of this academic debate, see: John E. Roemer and Alain Trannoy, "Equality of Opportunity," in Anthony B. Atkinson and François Bourguignon, eds., Handbook of Income Distribution, Vol. 2A (Amsterdam: Elsevier 2015), 220-229.

⁶⁶ Specific policy positions of Keynes, Hayek, and Friedman actually had a degree of overlap; nevertheless, their work was used to define the two spectrums of the debate.

See, for instance: Eric Foner, The Story of American Freedom (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 236.
 Brewer and Stonecash, Polarization and the Politics of Personal Responsibility, 17.

markets, religious faith, and individual agency and responsibility.⁶⁹ Conservatives criticized the failings of government, at a time when public trust in government was at a low.⁷⁰

The terms of the debate had changed. As political scientist Yascha Mounk has argued, individual responsibility, which had mostly been conceptualized as "duty to others" in earlier eras, became more equated with "personal accountability for actions and outcomes." If individuals couldn't help themselves as much as they were capable of doing, the collective obligation toward them was perceived to diminish.71

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the conceptual framework of accountability and individual agency dominated policy debates on inequality. On the one hand, there were growing public concerns about the expansion of welfare programs in many advanced economies. Welfare recipients became associated with stigmatizing stereotypes of federal aid recipients as moochers and "welfare queens."⁷². Critics argued that government programs undermined people's sense of responsibility and personal initiative. On the other hand, advocates on the left regarded these attacks on welfare as victim-blaming, often with racist overtones.

By the 1990s, Democratic and Republican leaders came into greater alignment about the risk of welfare policies trapping poor citizens in a cycle of dependency. and the need for policies that supported a transition to work and independence. President Clinton's welfare reform package was thus called "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act" (PRWORA). He lauded the bill's emphasis on "work and independence," noting that it "demands personal responsibility."73 It added time limits to aid, mandated work requirements and enforcement of child support, representing a scaling back of prior policy.

More recently, the focus of public concern has shifted back to systemic issues: after decades of globalization, the global financial crisis sparked anger over bank bailouts alongside widespread economic hardship, fueling protest movements on the left and right. Both Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party attacked a system that appeared rigged in favor of the rich and powerful. More individuals felt that their fates were tied to larger economic forces out of their control.

"An America built to last," Obama said in his 2012 State of the Union, "insists on responsibility from everybody."

On its face, Barack Obama's election in 2008 cut in exactly the opposite way. That a Black man with a single mother could become President of the United States seemed to prove that opportunities were boundless for every American. provided they work hard. Obama advocated both for reducing structural barriers for disadvantaged populations and also championed the American Dream. "An America built to last," he said in his 2012 State of the Union, "insists on responsibility from everybody."74

⁶⁹ Brewer and Stonecash, Polarization and the Politics of Personal Responsibility, 110-116.
70 "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021," Pew Research Center, May 17, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/

⁷¹ Yascha Mounk, The Age of Responsibility: Luck, Choice, and the Welfare State (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁷² See: Martin Gilens, Why Americans Hate Welfare Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 2009); Martín Carcasson, "Ending Welfare as We Know It: President Clinton and the Rhetorical Transformation of the Anti-Welfare Culture," Rhetoric and Public Affairs 9, no. 4 (2006): 655–92. Mounk, Age of Responsibility, 216.

Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address," January 24, 2012, White House, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/24/remarks-president-state-union-address

State of the Debate: Unfolding Ideas and Movements

By the time of Donald Trump's election to the presidency in 2016, partisan division on issues of luck and personal responsibility had further solidified. The policymaking impetus of the 1990s and 2000s—combining opportunity and responsibility—was, at the rhetorical level at least, increasingly challenged by pressures from the left and right flanks of politics. The framing of the debate mapped onto the two-party system and party identities. Democrats emphasized the effects of circumstances and structural barriers, especially with respect to income, race, and gender; Republicans, on the other hand, emphasized individual accountability and achievement.

A demand for greater inclusion and awareness of situational barriers was further advanced by the mass movements unfolding during the Trump presidency.

While the large-scale protest movements of Black Lives Matter from 2020 and the Women's March in 2017 were not about luck and agency per se, they built momentum in part because they were tied to debates about structural injustice and historical inequality.⁷⁵ The global COVID-19 pandemic, responsible for the deaths of more than one million Americans, sparked debate on individual versus society-wide responses, and on the reasons for its disproportionate impacts on specific groups.⁷⁶

In his remarks to the joint sessions of Congress in March, 2025, President Donald Trump announced his administration would do everything in its power to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in the federal government, private sector, and military. "Our country will be woke no longer," he said.

The statement echoed a claim President Trump made repeatedly on the campaign trail excoriating the evils of diversity initiatives and vowing to replace them with policies that are "colorblind and merit-based." The centrality of these claims in Trump's presidential plans raises questions about the nature of these policies, how Americans are thinking about them, and their relation to American society in general.

It is tempting for each generation to believe that they live in a new age, a break from the past. Yet as increasingly bitter conversations about police brutality, gun control, government spending, family leave, education, and other issues play out on social media and the nightly news, these national debates can appear like variations on a musical theme that gradually rise in volume. The thread that runs through these debates is a fundamental disagreement about the amount of agency people have over their lives. Our ability to navigate these disagreements and transcend them—will help shape the future of American democracy.

 ⁷⁵ Laura Putnam, Erica Chenoweth, and Jeremy Pressman, "The Floyd protests are the broadest in U.S. history – and are spreading to white, small-town America," Washington Post, June 6, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/06/06/floyd-protests-are-broadest-us-history-are-spreading-white-small-town-america/
 76 See, for example, Jason H. Wasfy et al., "Socioeconomic and Demographic Characteristics of Both Inpatients and

⁷⁶ See, for example, Jason H. Wasfy et al., "Socioeconomic and Demographic Characteristics of Both Inpatients and Outpatients with Positive Testing for SARS-CoV-2," Journal of General Internal Medicine 36 (2012): 2522-2524; Lindsay M. Monte and Daniel J. Perez-Lopez, "How the Pandemic Affected Black and White Households," U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, July 21, 2021, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/07/how-pandemic-affectedblack-and-white-households.html

APPENDIX C: DATA AND Methods

Our research consisted of a retrospective investigation of Americans' beliefs on personal agency and responsibility. The main analysis used a dataset that combined survey results collected by More in Common from 2018-2025 ("Combined Dataset"). The analysis of American immigrants used a dataset associated with More in Common's Threads of Texas report (2021). The qualitative analysis and quotes used data collected through More in Common's Americans in Conversation platform (2022). The international comparison analysis used datasets collected in the US, UK, France, and Germany from 2019 to 2020.

Combined Dataset

The quantitative data was collected over a span of seven years, from December 2017 to April, 2025, and includes responses from over 39,000 Americans across nine timepoints. This is supplemented by a longitudinal in-depth panel investigating which took place from June through September 2021. Below we provide methodological information on each survey.

Hidden Tribes

Starting in December 2017 and concluding in January 2018, our research partner, YouGov, conducted 7,957 online survey interviews of US citizens using interlocking Census targets from the 2016 American Community Survey and propensity score weights to achieve a representative sample by gender, race, age, education and geographic region. We posed questions on demographics, partisanship, ideology, cognition, moral values, group identity, political attitudes, and political and media consumption behaviors. The margin of error for questions on specific issue areas is +/- 1 percent, and the margin of error for individual Hidden Tribes segments are larger and differ by tribe, but do not exceed +/- 4 percent in any Hidden Tribe.

Election Integrity Project: Wave 1

More in Common conducted online survey interviews with 8,000 Americans in July–August of 2020 in collaboration with YouGov. The data was weighted to be representative of American citizens to a sampling frame built from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). The data was weighted using propensity scores, with score functions including gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a fourway stratification of gender, age (6-category), race (5-category), and education (4-category). The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 1.33.

American Fabric

More in Common surveyed a sample of 4,456 US adults from July 11–20, 2020 in collaboration with YouGov. Approximately 2,000 of the overall sample are a subset of respondents who had participated in a 2018 More in Common survey of 8,000 participants on political attitudes in the United States. This study has an overall margin of error of +/- 1.7 percent and higher for analyzing subgroups. Some sections were randomly assigned to half of the respondents, and for those

questions the margin of error is +/- 2.2 percent. The data was weighted using propensity scores and post-stratification, with a sampling frame built from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). The propensity score function included gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-category), race (4-category), and education (4-category). The weights were then trimmed at a maximum value of 7, and then recentered to have a mean of 1.

The Connection Opportunity

From 2023 to 2024, More in Common conducted a study on social connection across lines of difference in the US, using quantitative methods. The quantitative component included national, regional, and recontact surveys in partnership with YouGov, with samples weighted to reflect the US adult population. The research focused on four lines of difference—race/ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and political viewpoint—chosen for their significance in US society. Other important differences, such as sexual identity, age, gender, and immigration status, were beyond the scope of this project.

American Identity

From May to June 2022, More in Common conducted two studies as part of its American Identity Research Project, examining beliefs about U.S. history and national holidays. The quantitative studies consisted of a national survey fielded in partnership with international polling company YouGov, reaching a representative sample of 2,500 U.S. adult citizens. The data was weighted using propensity scores based on gender, age, race, education, and region, and post-stratified by 2020 Presidential vote choice and key demographic categories. The margin of error is +/- 1.96 for the full sample. The Fourth of July and Juneteenth surveys were conducted from May 17 to June 3, 2022.

Post-Election Poll

In November 2024, More in Common conducted a nationally representative study to examine how Americans understand party priorities, vote choices, and political division following the presidential election. The research was performed in collaboration with Dynata, a global company that performs consumer and business-to-business survey research. The research combined new post-election survey data with comparisons to findings from previous studies, including *Hidden Tribes* (2018), *Perception Gap* (2019), *Social Connection* (June 2024), and *Immigration* (October 2024).

The primary method was an online survey fielded from November 7–13, 2024, with a sample of 5,005 U.S. adults. The sample was weighted to reflect the U.S. population based on interlocked gender and age, ethnicity, education level, geographic region, and 2024 presidential vote and turnout. The margin of error is +/- 1.4 for the overall sample and higher for subgroups. To better understand patterns across worldview and engagement, More in Common also analyzed responses by *Hidden Tribes*, a segmentation model developed using hierarchical clustering to group Americans by core beliefs rather than traditional demographics.

January Poll

More in Common conducted online survey interviews among a representative sample of 2,637 adults February 21 to 27, 2025 in collaboration with Dynata. The data was weighted to be representative according to gender/age interlocked, ethnicity, education level, region, and 2024 Presidential vote and turnout. The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 2 for the U.S. average and higher for subgroups.

February Poll

More in Common an conducted online survey among a representative sample of 1,987 adults, with additional oversamples of 220 Gen Z adults (born in or after 1997), 215 adults who identify as "very liberal," and 215 adults who identify as "very conservative" from February 21 to 27, 2025. The data was collected in collaboration with Dynata. The data was weighted to be representative according to gender/age interlocked, ethnicity, education level, region, and 2024 Presidential vote and turnout. The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 2 for the U.S. average and higher for subgroups.

April Poll

More in Common an conducted online survey among a representative sample of 2,419 adults, with additional oversamples of 250 adults who identify as "very liberal," and 169 adults who identify as "very conservative" from February 21 to 27, 2025. The data was collected in collaboration with Dynata. The data was weighted to be representative according to gender/age interlocked, ethnicity, education level, region, and 2024 Presidential vote and turnout. The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 2 for the U.S. average and higher for subgroups.

Threads of Texas

In July and August 2020, More in Common in partnership with YouGov conducted online survey interviews in both English and Spanish with 4,000 adults living in Texas, about 7 percent of whom participated in the Spanish language version of the survey. We posed questions on Texan identity, the current and future state of Texas, Texans' view of their state vis-a-vis the country, and topical issues such as the coronavirus pandemic, racial justice movement, and the 2020 Presidential election. In addition, the research instrument covered demographics, partisanship, ideology, moral values, civic engagement, media consumption behaviors, and views on the education system, immigration, and race relations in Texas. The sample was weighted via propensity score weighting followed by post-stratification. The variables - gender, age, race, and education - were included in the propensity score formula. Weights were then post-stratified on the 2016 Presidential vote and a four-way stratification of categorical age, gender, education, and race. Sampling and weighting targets were drawn from the 2018 American Community Survey by weighted stratified sampling with replacement. The margin of error for the full Texas sample is +/- 1.92 percent.

Americans in Conversation

From April through November 2020, More in Common conducted a qualitative research panel with a total of approximately 250 participants, distributed across multiple waves of recruitment. Participants were recruited to represent an approximately representative sample of Americans, including by gender, race, age, geographic region and political party identification. Participants engaged in activities several times per week via an online research platform where they answered surveys, submitted text responses, uploaded self-recorded videos, participated in group discussions, and completed other activities. The topics explored on the platform ranged from national politics to cultural issues to their lives and identities. Respondents received compensation in return for their participation. Their quotes have been edited for punctuation, spelling and length, and all names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Participants were recruited to represent an approximately representative sample of Southerners, including by gender, race, age, geographic region and political party identification. Participants engaged in activities several times per week via an online research platform (Recollective), where they answered surveys, submitted text responses, uploaded self-recorded videos, participated in group discussions, and completed other activities. Respondents received modest compensation in return for their participation. Their quotes have been edited for punctuation, clarity, spelling and length, and all names have been changed to preserve anonymity. Any group differences mentioned in the report are significant at p < .01.

International Sample

German study. <u>Fault Lines: Germany's Invisible Divides</u> was a representative national survey of more than 4,000 German residents, conducted in partnership with opinion research institute Kantar Public (formerly TNS Infratest). The target group of the study was the resident population in Germany aged 18 and over. The survey took place from April to May 2019.

French study. <u>Finding France</u> was carried out in March and December 2019 with Kantar Public in France. The survey was a representative national sample (6,000 people) of French residents over the age of 18.

British study. <u>Britain's Choice</u> included four waves of quantitative research carried out over the course of 2020. Surveys were conducted online by YouGov among representative samples of the adult population in Great Britain by gender, race, age, education, and geographic region. The initial survey's sample size of 10,385 was the largest of the four surveys, and all subsequent surveys were conducted among recontacted subsets of this initial group. The first survey was conducted from February to March 2020 among 10,385 adults in Great Britain.

Variables Collected

Our primary analysis focused on three questions regarding Americans' views of agency and personal responsibility, which were asked in each survey, seen in Box 1 (p. 4 of this report). We selected these questions, which provide a snapshot of people's beliefs about the importance of agency in shaping life outcomes, due to their availability across every wave of the Combined Dataset. We note, however, that while this dataset presents a unique opportunity to investigate Americans' responses to these questions with a high degree of precision, it is also limited by the question format, which obliges participants to select a single response for each question. Thus we included a variety of followup questions in the Focus Panel and April Poll, which allowed us to obtain a more fine-grained understanding of how people think about agency beyond the limitations of multiple choice.

International Sample Question Wordings

Agency

German Survey: "Which of the following statements do you tend to agree?" (1—Fully agree with statement A; 6—Fully agree with statement B)

- A) Everyone is primarily responsible for what they achieve in life
- B) What you achieve in life is largely determined by circumstances beyond your control.

France Survey: "With which of the following statements do you agree the most?" (1-6)

- 1) Generally speaking, it is I who control what happens in my life.
- 6) Generally speaking, I have no control over the way my life unfolds.

UK Survey: "Which statement do you agree with more?"

- 1) People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life
- 4) What you achieve in life is largely determined by circumstances beyond your control.

US Survey: "Which statement do you agree with more?"

- People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life
- People's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control

Hard Work

France Survey: "In your opinion, which of the following are the most decisive factors in people's success?"

- 1) Work and effort
- 2) Luck and circumstances

UK Survey: "Which of the following played a greater role in getting you where you are today?"

- 1) Luck and circumstance
- 4) Hard work and effort

US Survey: "Which of the following played a greater role in getting you where you are today?"

- Hard work and effort
- Luck and circumstance

Ideology

German Survey (translated): One speaks again and again of "left" in politics "right". Where would you place yourself on a scale where 1 means "left" and 11 means "right"? (1-4 = "Left", 5-7 = "Center," 8-11 = "Right"

French Survey (translated): On a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 is left and 6 is right, where would you say you are? (1, 2 = "Left," 3, 4 = "Middle," 5, 6 = "Right"

UK Survey: "How would you describe your political position on a left to right scale?" (1—"Left", 2—"Center", 3—"Right")

US Survey: "Overall, which of the following best describes your political ideology?" (1, 2 = "Left," 3 = "Middle," 4, 5 = "Right")

National Pride

German Survey: "What do you think one can be proud of in Germany?" (1—One cannot be proud at all; 6—One can be very proud of it)

- the cultural heritage of the country.

France Survey: "Please read the sentences below and indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of them": (1–Strongly disagree; 6–Strongly agree)

- I am proud of the history of my country

UK Survey: "How proud are you to be British?" (1-Not at all proud; 7-Very proud)

US Survey: "I am proud to be American" (1–Not at all ; 7–Very)

Immigration

German Survey: "Would you say that immigration and the reception of refugees have had a positive or negative impact on Germany so far? (1–Very negative; 5–Very positive)

France Survey: "Generally speaking, would you say that immigration has had a positive or negative impact on France?" (1–Very positive; 5–Very negative)

UK Survey: "Would you say immigration currently has a positive or a negative impact on the UK?" (1–Very positive; 5–Very negative)

US Survey: "Which statement do you agree with more?"

- America's immigrant population is good for our country.
- America's immigrant population is a burden on our country.

Islam

German Survey: "Islam and German society are incompatible" (1–Strongly disagree; 6–Strongly agree)

France Survey: "Islam is incompatible with French society" (1–Strongly disagree; 6–Strongly agree)

UK Survey: "The values of British Muslims are so different to those of the rest of British society that they are unlikely to integrate." (1—Strongly agree; 4—Strongly disagree)

US Survey: "Islam and American society are incompatible" (1—Strongly disagree; 6—Strongly agree)

Hidden Tribes

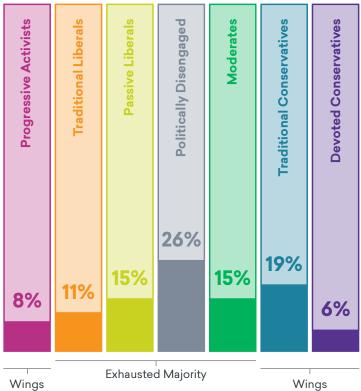
In the analyses that follow we refer to segments produced in the <u>Hidden Tribes</u> <u>project</u> (2018). That study used a statistical process called hierarchical clustering to identify groups of people with similar core beliefs. This revealed seven groups of Americans—what we call Hidden Tribes—with distinctive views and values. This categorization of Americans into seven group is based on their core beliefs and their orientation to their society, rather than conventional demographic measures such as age, gender, level of education, or ethnic background. The result is a unique portrait of the American public that provides distinctive insights not available from traditional approaches relying on demographic categories. The tribes consist of the following seven groups:

- Progressive Activists: Progressive Activists have strong ideological views, high levels of engagement with political issues, and the highest levels of education and socioeconomic status. They have an outsized role in political discourse, even though they comprise a small portion of the total population. They are highly sensitive to issues of fairness and equity in society, particularly with regards to race, gender and other minority group identities.
- Traditional Liberals: Traditional Liberals are idealistic about the potential for social justice in America. They are less ideological than Progressive Activists, and more proud of their country. They are also less critical of conservatives, and more likely than most to believe in the importance of compromise with those with whom you disagree. They have strong humanitarian values, and around half say that religion is important to them. They are inclined to place more faith in American institutions.

- Passive Liberals: Passive Liberals are weakly engaged in social and political issues, but when pushed, they have a modern outlook and tend to have liberal views on social issues. They tend to feel isolated from their communities and the system at large, and have low trust in other people and institutions. They are among the most fatalistic, believing that circumstances are largely outside their control. They do not follow the news closely, and generally avoid political debates.
- Politically Disengaged: The Political Disengaged most resemble Passive Liberals in having lower levels of income and education, and low trust in institutions and other Americans. They are more anxious about external threats and less open in their attitudes towards difference. They are practically invisible in local politics and community life. They are the most pessimistic about the possibility of reconciling differences and are hard to reach because of their low engagement with media, institutions and local community.
- Moderates: Moderates reflect the middle of the road of public opinion in America. They tend to be engaged in their communities, often volunteer, and are interested in current affairs. They tend to be socially conservative and religion plays an important role in their lives. They dislike activism and what they see as extremism of both progressives and conservatives. They are worried about the state of America, and feel that American identity is slipping away.
- Traditional Conservatives: Traditional Conservatives value patriotism and America's religious foundations. They feel those foundations are under threat from a liberal political culture. They mostly have a strong sense of identity as American, Christian and conservative, but they are not as strident in their beliefs as Devoted Conservatives. They are more likely than any other group to feel that their voice is represented in American politics.
- Devoted Conservatives: Devoted Conservatives are the counterpart to the Progressive Activists. They are highly engaged in social and political life. They value patriotism and loyalty to the flag. They believe that American values are being eroded rapidly and they see themselves as defenders of those issues. They are one of the highest income-earning groups, and feel happier and more secure than most Americans.

Fig. C The Hidden Tribes of America





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