

THE NEW CENTER

Policy Paper



Think Centered

Public Libraries for Bipartisanship

NEIGHBORS ENGAGING NEIGHBORS

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ABOUT THE NEW CENTER

American politics is broken, with the far left and far right making it increasingly impossible to govern. This will not change until a viable center emerges that can create an agenda that appeals to the vast majority of the American people. This is the mission of The New Center, which aims to establish the intellectual basis for a viable political center in today's America.

The New Center

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Executive Summary

NEW CENTER SOLUTION:

Public Libraries for Bipartisanship

As political polarization hammers away at families, workplaces, and government, policymakers must think quickly and critically about ways to bring Americans back together. One solution lies with an oft-overlooked, time-honored American resource: U.S. public libraries. In this paper, we explore how the venerable community library could encourage Americans of both parties to engage with their neighbors, to find common ground, and to pull the poison from our politics.



The Problem

Extreme Partisanship



Some Democrats and Republicans think that America would be better off if people from the other party were dead. This troubling fact emerged from a 2019 nationally representative survey, out of a study titled “Lethal Mass Partisanship” by researchers from the University of Maryland and Louisiana State University. In it, they discovered that 20% of Democrats and 15% of Republicans answered “yes” to the question, “Do you ever think: we’d be better off as a country if large numbers of [Opposing party] in the public today just died?”¹

The U.S. faces a crisis in political polarization that sweeps far beyond Capitol Hill to every town, city, and suburb across the nation. According to the Pew Research Center, Democrats and Republicans hewed more consistently to their ideological cores in 2014 than at any point in the previous two decades.² Three years later, 97% of Republicans fell ideologically right of the median Democrat while 95% of Democrats fell left of the median Republican—upticks of 5% and 1% from 2014.³

NARROWING LABELS



In 1976, over 60% of delegates at the Republican national convention in Kansas City were pro-choice.

According to polling, Republican voters were on average more pro-choice than Democrats at the time, reflecting the ideological diversity among the parties across an array of issues.⁴ Those days are gone. Today, there are 198 Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives. Every single one identifies as pro-life. There are 235 Democrats, and all but three identify as pro-choice.⁵ Today, pro-life Democrats and pro-choice Republicans belong to a dying breed: Americans who don’t tick every box on their parties’ ideological checklists.

On top of ideological narrowing, partisans increasingly despise each other.⁶ In 2016, approximately half of all Republicans and half of all Democrats reported feelings of fear, anger, or frustration toward the other party.⁷ That same year, and for the first time in over twenty years of Pew surveys, majorities on both sides said they held not just unfavorable views, but highly unfavorable views of the opposite camp.⁸

DEFINING POLITICAL POLARIZATION

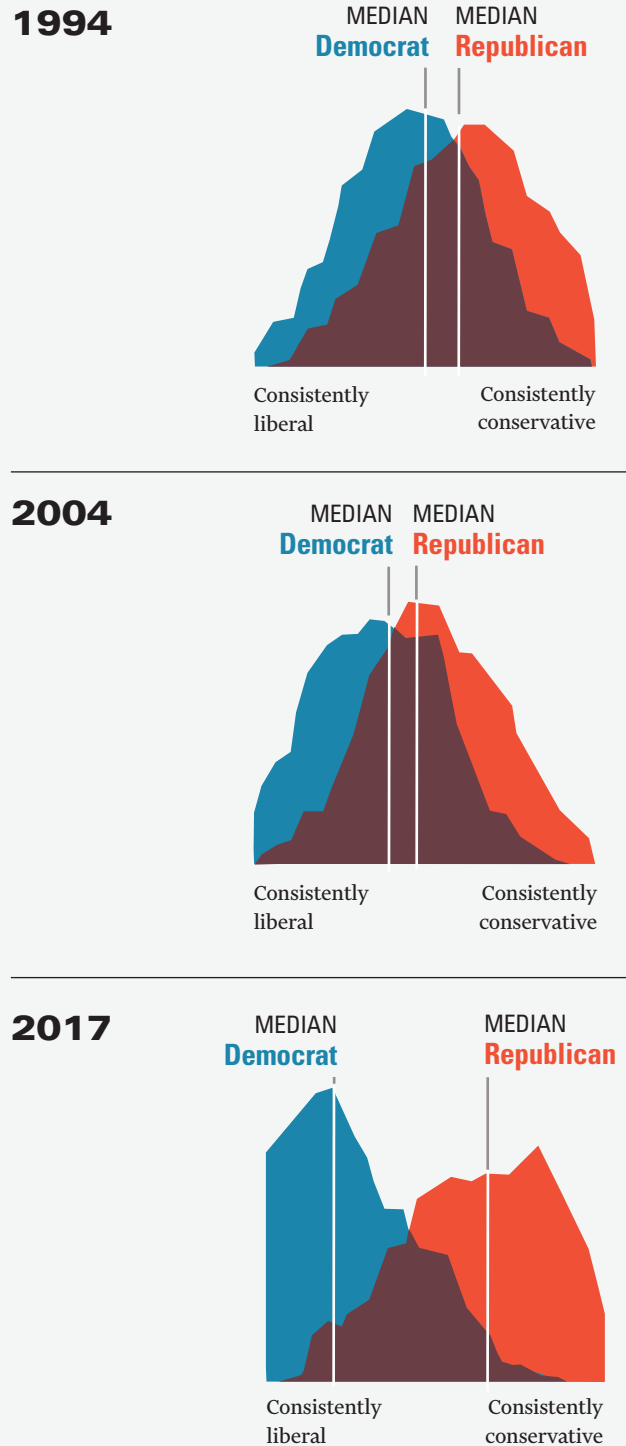
While the term “political polarization” can carry a variety of meanings, here we define it as members of both parties consistently hewing to a specific set of party beliefs and expressing animosity toward the other side (a phenomenon known as “negative partisanship”).¹⁰

Although elected officials increasingly represent the extremes over the median voter, the self-reported moderate bloc stayed steady from 2009 to 2017 per a Gallup poll.¹¹

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see methodology). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats and the Democratic-leaning independents; the red-orange area of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple.

Democrats and Republicans more ideologically divided than in the past

Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values



Source: Pew Research Center ⁹

Facets of Political Polarization



A seemingly intractable problem, political polarization feeds off a number of complex conditions, many of which have yet to be properly understood. Despite the intricacy of the causal web, there's one consistent thread: what people read, hear, and watch influences what they believe.

But people select what they read, hear, and watch—with a preference for sources friendly to their own pre-existing beliefs.¹² The feedback loop that results allows Americans to dodge challenges to their ideas. And the less that they surround themselves with contrasting people and information, the less they experience a phenomenon called intergroup contact: a society's natural buffer against prejudice.¹³

Social circles sort by party in both the physical world and the digital one, increasingly with neither side seriously listening to the other. Here, we focus on two of the numerous facets of political polarization in America: selective exposure to peers and information in both the physical and digital realms.

1. Partisans in the Physical World

Survey research strongly suggests that Republicans and Democrats pick social spheres that match to their convictions. In 2016, 77% of both Republicans and Democrats had a spouse or partner of the same political party.¹⁴ In 2012, just four years before America's charged presidential election of 2016, two-thirds of partisans said that most of their family belonged to the same political party.¹⁵ This is no accident. American partisans increasingly say they prefer like-minded family. In the late 1950s, a Gallup poll found that just over a quarter of Americans wanted their daughters to marry someone of kindred political spirit. A week before the 2016 election, over half did.¹⁶

Despite a mounting preference for co-partisan kin, surrounding yourself with your own party is inevitable in many districts, where most residents share the same political bent. In the 2016 election, more than 27% of voters lived in a precinct that swung three-quarters or more toward the same presidential candidate.¹⁷ In the 2020 elections for Congress, The Cook Political Report predicts that only 21 of 435 districts could swing either way.¹⁸

Past a certain level, population density correlates strongly with political affiliation, with Democratic voters tending toward densely populated urban areas while Republicans settle in less populous rural ones.¹⁹ An analysis by *Medium* pinned the tipping point at 800 people per square mile; Americans in counties below this density voted disproportionately for Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential election, while Americans in counties above it voted decisively for Barack Obama.²⁰



WHY THE DENSITY-BASED SPLIT?

Research suggests that Republicans and Democrats seek out different demographic features in their environments. In a 2012 study on millions of migrating partisans across seven states, subjects relocated based on both the income and racial diversity of their destinations—in addition to preferring places rich in co-partisans.²¹ Ethnic composition correlates highly with population density in the U.S., with populous urban counties skewing multi-ethnic while rural ones skew white. The populations of urban and rural counties were 44% white and 79% white, respectively, around 2016.²²

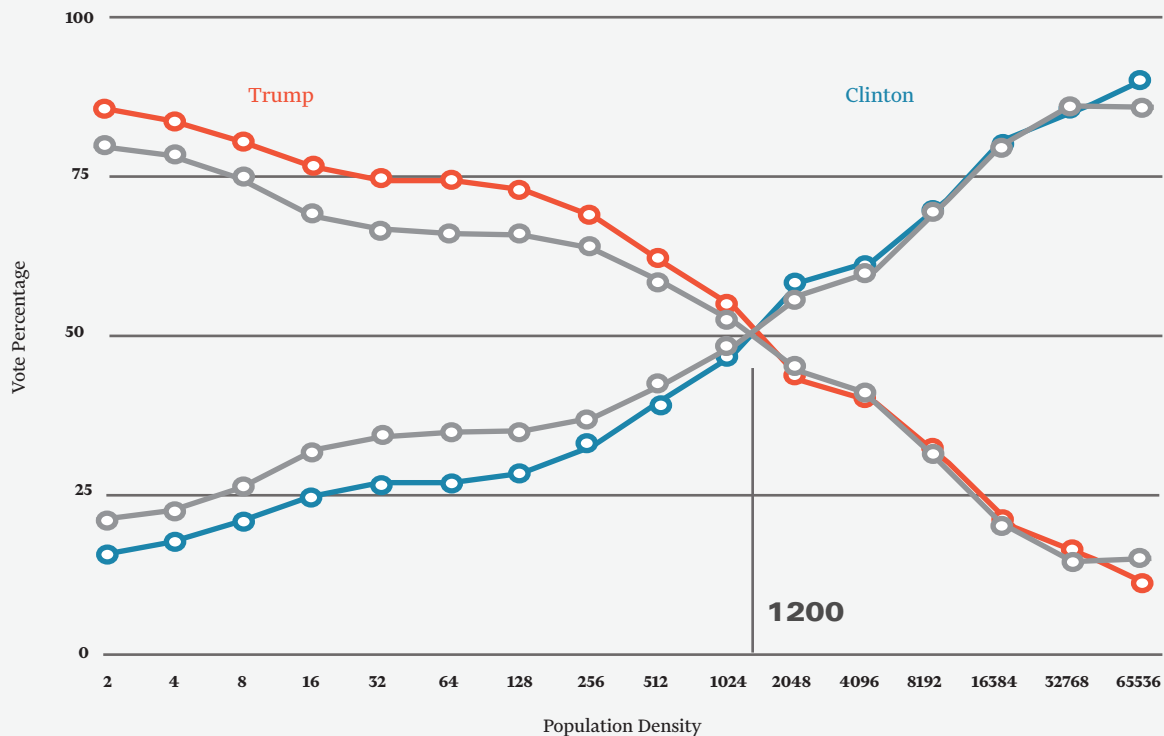
Unearthing the deeper reasons behind the density split begs a dive into political psychology. In other words, how do partisans think? Ever-expanding, the field has excavated promising new lines of research, like the idea that the brain might precede the partisan. In a 2013 study funded by UCSD, Democratic and Republican brains responded in dramatically

different fashion to performing a risky task. While liberal brains lit up in one region, conservative ones activated in another—suggesting a keener sensitivity in conservatives toward risk.²³

The study aligns with other research that suggests that conservatives tend to prefer certainty over ambiguity and to think in structured, methodical ways. Liberals, on the other hand, tend to think flexibly, experience “aha” moments, and better tolerate open-endedness.²⁴ The distinction translates well into a 2014 survey by Pew, in which conservatives described themselves as “religious” and valued duty and honor while liberals described themselves as “trusting” and valued compassion and helping others.²⁵ Other research suggests that conservatives are intrinsically less novelty-seeking, which could explain their preference to shirk urban chaos.²⁶

2016 U.S. Presidential Election Results (Compared to 2012)

3,110 U.S. Counties, results grouped and averaged by log2 population density



2.

Partisans in the Digital World

While some overestimate the power of the social media echo chamber, research does suggest that political online discourse tends to segregate by ideology. In a 2015 study of 3.8 million Twitter users, researchers found that users tend to exchange political information with those who hold like-minded political preferences.²⁸ Research on Facebook users found that users relied on their own confirmation bias, or the tendency to interpret new data as evidence for pre-existing beliefs, to decide whether to spread information.²⁹

In a separate study of 10.1 million active Facebook users with self-identified political bents, liberals had a median of 80% liberal networks while conservatives had 82% conservative ones. Not only did co-partisans dominate partisans' networks, but partisans were disproportionately more likely to click on content from their own side. While conservatives were just 17% as likely to click on liberal stories, liberals were only 6% as likely to click on conservative articles over their own.³⁰

SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION: A CAUSAL LINK?

Research does not currently suggest that social media use causes, per se, political polarization. In fact, some studies suggest that social media might reduce it, owing to the elevated diversity of information choices as contrasted with those in print or cable news.³¹ Even so, social media interactions still reflect and transmit some of the polarization in real life, as online spaces extend physical ones.

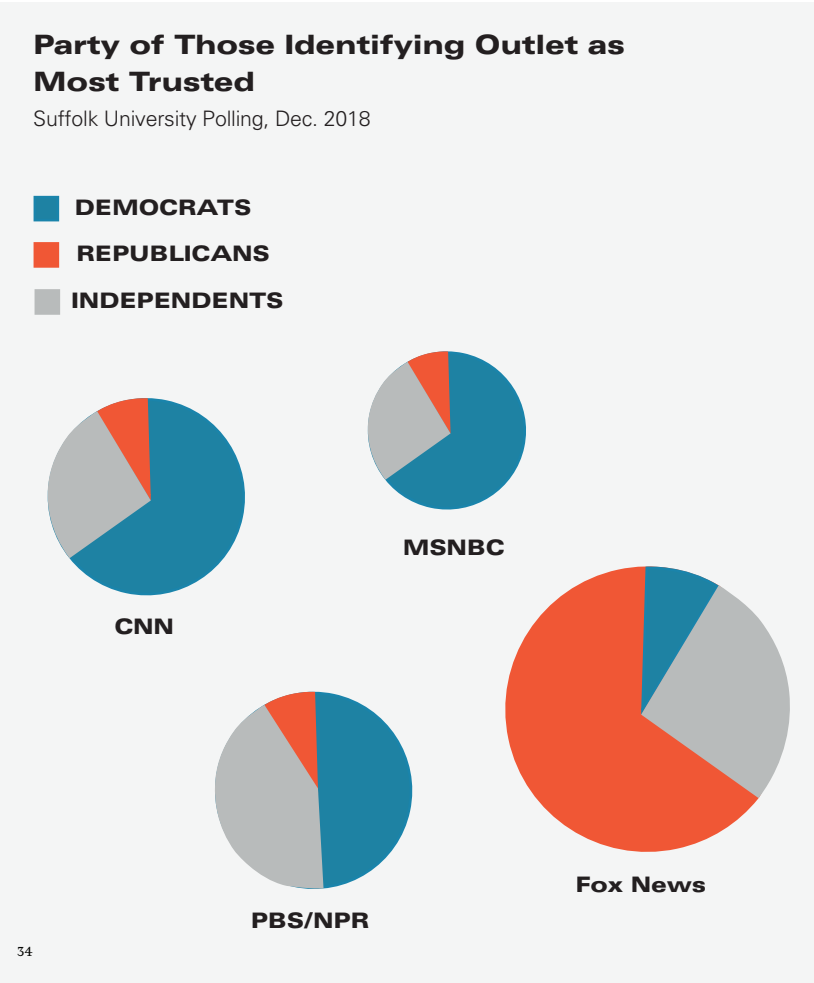


Americans also struggle to defend themselves against political influence online: advertisers, lobbyists, and misinformation-spreaders who seek to sway public thought. The issue doesn't just affect older generations, to whom online skills are more akin to a second language—but rather it's the very people who grew up with the internet who botch basic online reasoning tests.

In a 2016 study by the Stanford History Education Group that tested 7,000 middle school, high school, and university students, researchers found that 80% of middle school students were duped by native advertising, or ads disguised as articles; 40% of high school students failed to question the validity of a doctored, sourceless photo; and less than a third of university students correctly identified the political agenda behind a sample tweet.³² In politically charged digital spaces, these skills (or lack thereof)

make a difference. A user might roll their eyes and exit out of a window on their screen—or in the extreme, do what a North Carolina man did in December 2016: drive to D.C. with an assault rifle to rescue children that online rumors suggested, falsely, were being held hostage at a pizza joint.³³

With segregated social circles in both the physical and digital worlds, it's no wonder it's so easy to stereotype political opposites; they simply aren't present to keep biases in check. In a 2016 survey by Pew, 46% of Republicans stereotyped Democrats as lazy while 70% of Democrats stereotyped Republicans as close-minded.³⁸ Over 40% of both Democrats and Republicans stereotyped the other party as dishonest. And while it's unclear which causes which, whether a person had cross-party friendships linked to how coldly they felt toward the opposite camp.³⁹



TV VS. WEB NEWS



Social media has transformed news consumption, providing source diversity unlike any cable network ever could. Although ideological segregation can still happen, social media can critically allow social endorsements to override a user's party-based content bias.³⁵ Offline, Americans still heavily select TV channels by party link, with Democrats flocking to a few left-leaning sources while Republicans watch Fox News.

Despite the promises, pitfalls, and concerns surrounding social-media-based news, not many Americans actually use it. Only 20% of U.S. adults say they often get their news from social media. TV continues to dominate American news consumption, with 49% of U.S. adults saying they often get their news from TV while 33% get it from news websites.³⁶ According to Pew, only 22% of U.S. adults said they ever used Twitter.³⁷

Effects of Political Polarization

As polarization has intensified, so have its effects in Washington. The erosion of respect between partisans has subverted our democratic process, with Senate leaders increasingly limiting the number of votes on amendments to legislation, House speakers closing off discussion, filibusters surging, and congressional committees meeting less frequently to consider legislation than ever before.⁴⁰

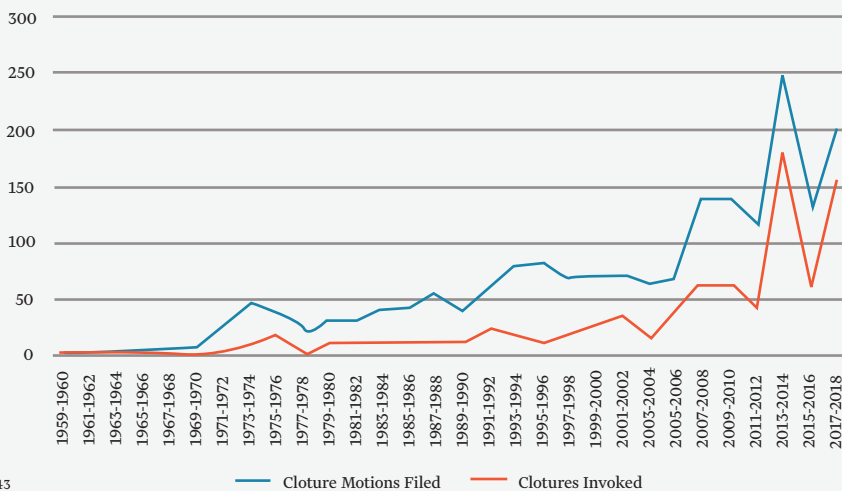
One of the starkest changes in Congress involves how the House treats legislative amendments. In the past, the House Rules Committee, controlled by the majority, has allowed a healthy portion of bills to be considered under “open-rules”: a designation that allows rank-and-file members of both parties to propose amendments, vote on them, and tune the bill toward the center. Over the past few decades, the number of these bills has plummeted. Open-ruled bills made up more than half of all bills in the mid-1980s but less than 5% in 2018.⁴¹ In May of 2018, the House Rules Committee broke a record for the highest number of

closed rules ever reported in a single Congress.⁴² Most significantly, this procedural tool allows the majority party to shutter the minority almost entirely out of lawmaking, ramming bills through Capitol Hill with neither adjustment nor debate.

But polarization has also become bitterly personal, stirring up serious challenges to families, communities, and social networks across the nation. According to a Reuters/Ipsos poll from January 2017, 17% of Americans had blocked a family member or close friend on social media as a direct result of the 2016 election alone. 16% had stopped talking to a family member or close friend, and 13% had permanently shuttered one of these relationships.⁴⁵

Even if political scientists could cross-check every historic clash, the answer would still hinge entirely on the metric. Looking at cloture motions, the answer would be yes; there are more cloture motions now than ever before. But looking at the number of substantive laws passed by Congress, we’d see a different story.

U.S. Senate Cloture Motions Filed & Clotures Invoked



When senators launch filibusters, a tactic for delaying legislative votes, they can speak on the Senate floor for however long they like. Other senators can only stop them with a successful vote for “cloture,” the lone tool in their arsenal for snuffing these obstructive speeches. Cloture data, then, can roughly estimate the frequency of filibusters over time.⁴⁴ Successful and unsuccessful, cloture motions have skyrocketed over the past ten years.

IS THIS POLITICAL POLARIZATION “UNPRECEDENTED”?

As news publications, pundits, and policy wonks increasingly hype the polarization in our politics, skeptics have to ask whether the characterization rings true. Is this elevated level of polarization truly “unprecedented” in our history?

While it’s tempting to say yes, the answer is not quite. The U.S. has experienced wrenching political tension many times before: The Vietnam War, McCarthyism, the Civil Rights Movement, and the near-impeachment of President Nixon have all exacted political turmoil on the nation. Not to mention, of course, the American Civil War—our deadliest and most destructive disagreement of all. According to demographic historian David Hacker, 750,000 died in the war pitting Americans against ourselves, or 2.3% of the population at the time.⁴⁶

Although the Pew Research Center’s analysis doesn’t extend back beyond 1989, the group found that our most recent Congress actually passed more substantive laws than did the one of thirty years ago.⁴⁷

But Americans are beginning to awake to the imperative of national cooperation. As partisan clashes exploded across the U.S. in the 2016 presidential election’s seismic political aftermath, one American called a colleague with a question: what could bring Americans back together? Amid the partisan-feuding tumult, David Blankenhorn and David Lapp launched a bipartisan nonprofit called Better Angels, coined after a line in President Lincoln’s first inaugural address. One of a handful of players in the unsung depolarization movement, Better Angels aims to bridge the U.S.’s deepening political chasms through workshops in bipartisan discussion training, community debates, and red/blue listening.⁴⁸ Grassroots by nature, it depended on a dedicated fleet of volunteers to fuel its operations across the nation. What began as a single meeting between a smattering of Trump and Clinton supporters evolved into a nationwide program, and today, the group hosts events in over 100 U.S. cities.⁴⁹

The nonprofit’s strategy speaks to contact theory, the idea that intergroup contact—often in the form of carefully moderated discussion workshops—can banish the prejudice from its participants. In the geopolitical realm, leaders have used contact theory to establish initiatives like the Democratic Dialogue Project, which brings consensus-building to 22 conflict-ridden Latin American countries.⁵⁰ In academia, researchers have often experimented with students—and in 1999, found that dialogue among racially diverse young adults not only heightened their sense of commonality, but also strengthened their view that group differences were compatible with democracy.⁵¹ Although some of this research could benefit from more robust experimental designs, a 2006 meta-analysis of 515 different studies concluded that intergroup contact can, indeed, fight prejudice.⁵²

Contact theory bodes well for a nation split bitterly by party. What if even more Americans could meet to discuss each other’s ideas? What if the dialogue workshops promoted by Better Angels



reached not only American cities, but suburbs and rural towns? What if there weren't just 100 avenues for thoughtful bipartisan discussion, but 1,000 of them?

What if intergroup dialogue could be scaled nationwide? With funding from the federal government, inter-party dialogue could spread far, and quickly. Workshops providing tools for bipartisanship could flourish on a wider, more impactful scale. And by leveraging a powerful public resource, the federal government could empower communities across the country with both digital discretion and bipartisan dialogue.



“A library in the middle of a community is a cross between an emergency exit, a life-raft, and a festival. They are cathedrals of the mind; hospitals of the soul; theme parks of the imagination. On a cold rainy island, they are the only sheltered public spaces where you are not a consumer, but a citizen instead.”

CAITLIN MORAN

*Author and journalist*⁵³



“Free libraries maintained by the people are cradles of democracy, and their spread can never fail to extend and strengthen the democratic idea, the equality of the citizen and the royalty of man. They are emphatically fruits of the true American ideal.”

ANDREW CARNEGIE

*At the 1903 dedication of the Carnegie Library in Washington, D.C.*⁵⁴



To bridge the partisan chasm, the federal government should fund thoughtfully designed, carefully moderated bipartisan workshops through local public libraries: perhaps the most highly integrated public resource in American life. Commanding linchpin roles, and serving users who cut across demographic groups, public libraries are uniquely positioned to host workshops that cultivate bipartisan dialogue.

Implementing this program both requires and benefits from an understanding of how the American public library system works, why it's important, and how it can accommodate new programs.



The Context

Public Libraries in the U.S.

In the U.S., a government agency called the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) awards grants to public libraries and reports on their operations. According to the IMLS, there were 9,068 public libraries in the U.S. in 2015.⁵⁵ These libraries provided 17,000 public library outlets, 16,560 of which were buildings as opposed to bookmobiles.

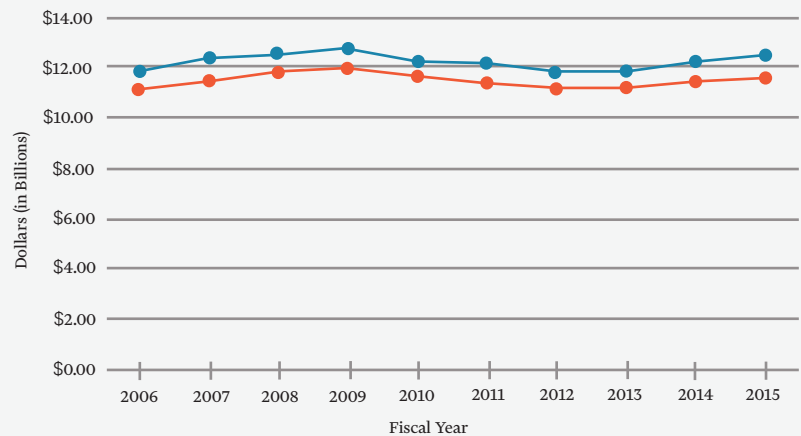
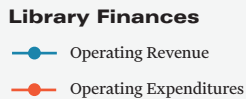
DEFINING LIBRARIES



The IMLS defines a library outlet as a central library, branch library, or bookmobile. Since the IMLS includes information on several libraries located in American territories, we use “U.S.” to denote the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and select outlying territories.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES: FUNDING AND FINANCES

Total Operating Revenue and Expenditures, FY 2006-2015 (in Constant 2015 Dollars)



Source: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2006-2015.⁵⁹

Despite the Great Recession, a smattering of library closures, staffing cuts, and radical shifts in the information environment, public libraries have endured with relative financial stability in the 21st century. Diminished post-recession funding mostly affected state library administrative agencies (SLAAs), which play greater roles than regular libraries by developing library services statewide. Public libraries overall experienced only a dip in revenues and expenditures between 2009 and 2013—and since then, have been slowly recovering.⁵⁶ According to a study by the Library Journal, public libraries’ operating budgets increased by 3.4% in 2016 and 2.8% in 2018.⁵⁷

SLAAS



There are 51 state library administrative agencies (SLAAs) in the U.S.—one for each state and the District of Columbia. SLAAs help to improve library services across their states by offering a variety of different resources. The State Library of Ohio, for example, offers training for library staff, coordinates the delivery of books and other resources between libraries in Ohio, and helps Ohio libraries to develop programs.⁵⁸

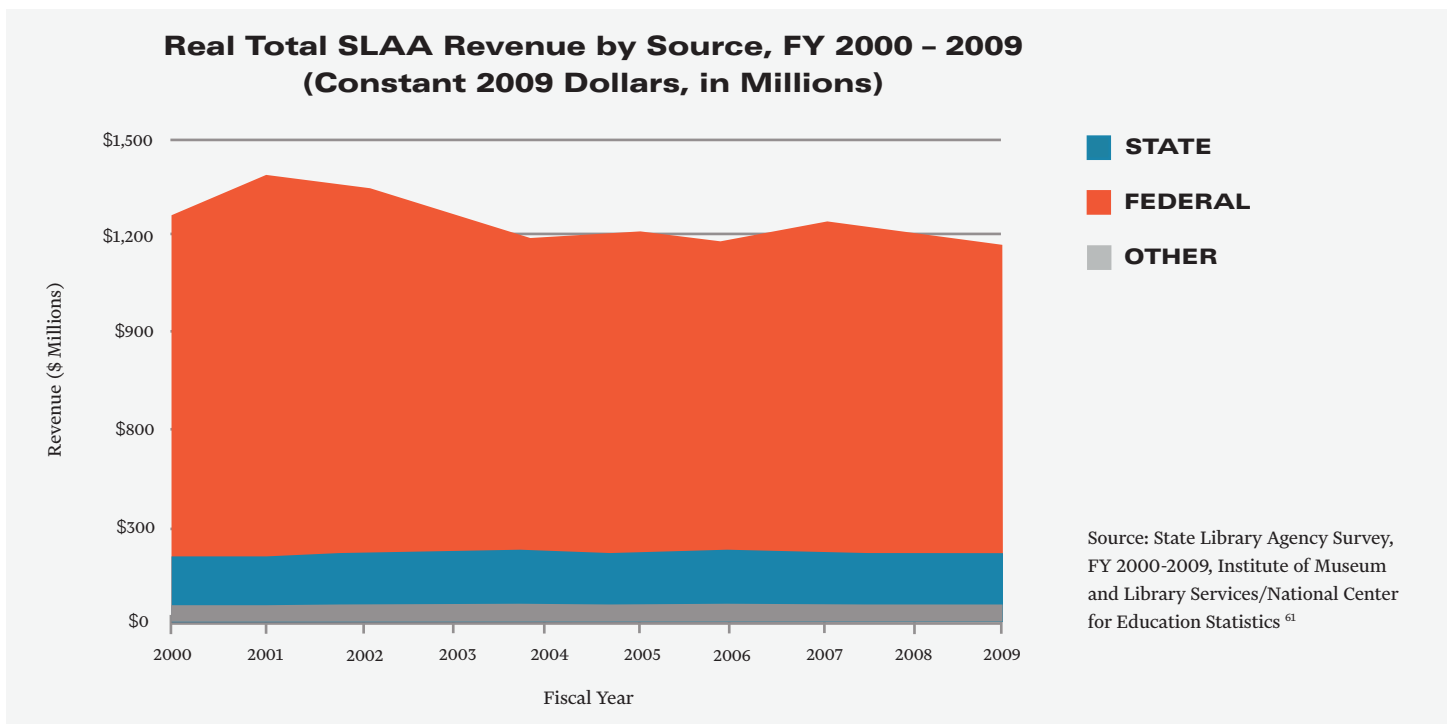
HOW PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE FUNDED

Although some public library revenue stems from donations, patron fines, and local, state, and federal government money, state and local governments play the greatest role in filling public libraries' coffers. In 2009, state funding provided more than 80% of SLAAs' total revenues across the U.S.⁶⁰

The degree of state versus local funding for non-SLAA public libraries varies state by state. In California, more than 95% of public library funds come from local governments.⁶² In Iowa, public libraries receive revenue mostly through city general funds, which are supplied through property taxes.⁶³ And in Ohio, funding

comes primarily from the state in the form of a small, designated percent of Ohio's total general tax revenue.⁶⁴

While the federal government plays a lesser role in the funding of regular public libraries, it contributes sizably to SLAAs through the programs like the Grants to States Program. The largest grant program run by the IMLS, it allocates \$150 million to SLAAs every year.⁶⁵ SLAAs also receive funding through the Library Services Technology Act (LSTA), which allots funding by population size while also providing grant money to regular public libraries.⁶⁶

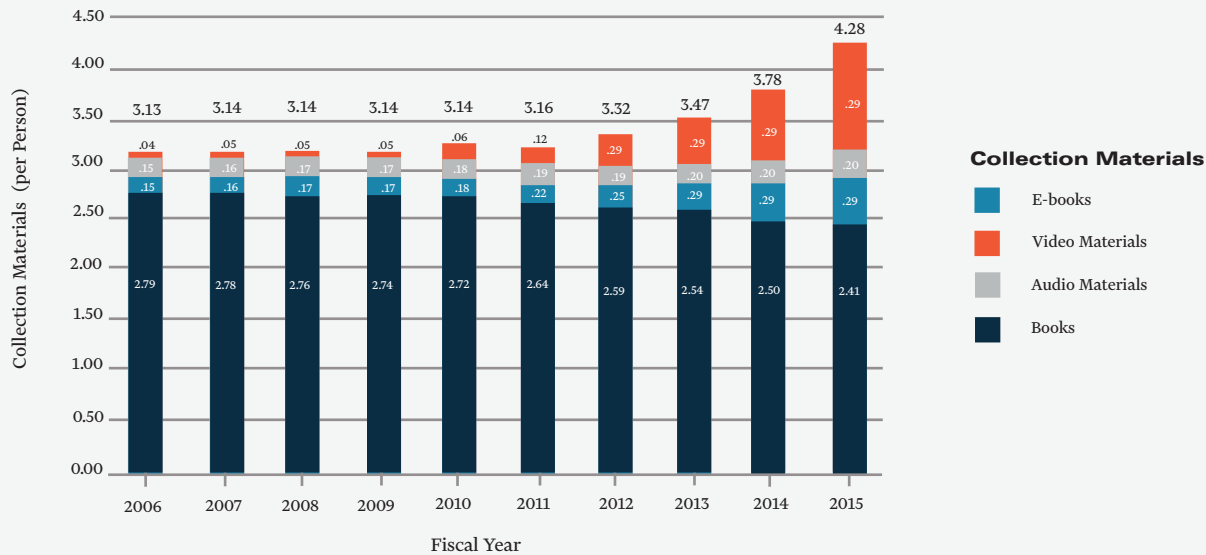


DO AMERICANS ACTUALLY USE PUBLIC LIBRARIES?

The percentage of Americans who physically visit public libraries is waning. In 2012, Pew reported that 53% of American adults had physically visited a public library or bookmobile in the past 12 months. In 2016, the fraction was only 48%—a 5-point drop.⁶⁸ Since public library visits climbed in lockstep with population growth from 2000 to 2015, a smaller group of library users could be compensating for fewer overall visitors with more visits per person.⁶⁹

As physical visitors decline, use of library materials overall has spiked, with collection materials per person jumping from a flat level of 3.14 in 2010 to 4.38 just five years later. The exploding popularity of e-books and audio materials more than compensated for the public's dwindling interest in physical books, with per person collection of digital books exploding by a factor of almost 17 while collection of physical books dropped 11% from 2010 to 2015.⁷⁰

Collection Materials per Person by Material Type, FY 2006-2015



Source: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2006-2015⁶⁷

HOW DO AMERICANS USE PUBLIC LIBRARIES?

In Pew’s 2016 survey, 64% of library-users age 16 and older visited public libraries to borrow print books. Just under half used them to sit, study, read, or watch a video. 27% attended classes, lectures, or programs, and 18% used them to attend meetings of a group they belonged to. A fraction of library-users leveraged library resources to search for jobs online or use high-tech devices like 3D printers.⁷¹

more likely to have visited a public library in the past year than the average American (at 48%). Women came in second, with 57% of them reporting a library visit within the past year, while Americans with incomes of \$30,000 or less came in at 50%.⁷⁵

WHO USES PUBLIC LIBRARIES?

According to Pew, individuals most likely to have visited a public library in the past year vary considerably across demographic indicators, an eclectic mix that varies by age, gender, race, income, and education level. In 2016, the most likely visitors were millennials, parents, women, black Americans, Americans with college degrees, and Americans with incomes of \$30,000 or less. Of all these groups, Americans with college degrees were the most likely to visit public libraries; at 59%, they were 11 points

WHAT DO AMERICANS THINK ABOUT THEIR PUBLIC LIBRARIES?

In a 2016 Pew survey, 77% of Americans over 16 said that public libraries provided them with the resources they needed, while two-thirds said that the closure of their local public library would have a major impact on their community.⁷⁶

LIBRARIES, INNOVATION, AND INFORMATION

In the U.S., public libraries offer myriad programs that cater to the populations they serve. Many of these programs cover child literacy, computer-based skills for older adults, and employment readiness—but public libraries’ decentralized nature allows them to branch out, innovate, and explore from place to place. In the San Francisco Bay Area, library-a-go-go kiosks operate like vending machines in busy transit centers, automating the check-out process and reminding people to take advantage of library resources.⁷⁷ Libraries like the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library in Washington, D.C. have invested in makerspaces, or labs in which patrons can use 3D printers, laser-cutting tech, and a slew of sundry tools to whip up projects.⁷⁸

TECH IN LIBRARIES



29%

of library-using Americans age 16 and older said they’d visited public libraries to use computers, the internet, or a public wi-fi network.

*Pew Research Center, 2015*⁷²

In the CLII’s 2008 survey, rural libraries reported the fewest average number of computers.

7.6 computers in *Rural Libraries*

12.7 computers in *Suburban Libraries*

18.7 computers in *Urban Libraries*⁷³

more than 71%

of public libraries reported that they were the only provider of free public computer and internet access in their communities.⁷⁴



The Solution

Public Libraries for Bipartisanship: Neighbors Engaging Neighbors



The IMLS currently lists 17 grant programs on its website, each designed to fund uniquely-themed initiatives for museums and libraries across the country. The Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program, for example, funds the professional development of library and archives workers.⁸⁰

Tapping public libraries in the fight against polarization, Washington could add a bipartisan-focused grant program to the list. Titled Public Libraries for Bipartisanship, this novel program could enable local libraries to implement projects designed to engage their neighborhoods in bipartisanship. America's public libraries could apply for these grants with community-specific projects in mind, fitted to the people they serve. The common thread between each grant? Bipartisan innovation.

While open to other ideas, the grant program could focus on funding projects that involve thoughtful, targeted bipartisan workshops conducted by skilled moderators. The workshops could provide forums for neighbors to engage in spirited public debate, to gain exposure to a wide array of political opinions, and to acquire the tools for navigating the increasingly complex digital information landscape. But first and foremost, the workshops

would work locally—molded both for and by local populations, to help locals connect to locals. This way, they could grow and evolve to meet community-based needs.

Even if Congress can't agree to create and fund this new program, public libraries can still take action. One of the IMLS's grants is the Community Catalyst Initiative, which encourages museums and libraries to partner with other groups to effect positive social change in their communities. In 2018, for example, the IMLS awarded the Portland Art Museum \$107,800 to train museum staff and community partners in methods to better engage with Portland residents—a community that has suffered rapid demographic changes like gentrification, homelessness, and a housing crisis.⁸¹ Public libraries could partner with bipartisan nonprofits to apply for funding to depolarize their neighborhoods.

Whether through Public Libraries for Bipartisanship or the Community Catalyst Initiative, bipartisan activities could take the form of a variety of different activities, exercises, and workshops. These might include:

On the Bipartisan Discussion Side



1. GETTING TO KNOW THE NEIGHBORS

Hewing closely to guidelines from the Public Conversations Project, event moderators could create a welcoming space in which liberals and conservatives could air their thoughts, concerns, and questions surrounding ideas from the opposite camp.⁸²



2. “DEBATES” SURROUNDING POLITICAL ISSUES

Also along the lines of Better Angels workshops, the moderator could divide the group into two camps based on self-identified political leanings, and subgroups could defend the opposite political viewpoint.



3. CLASSIFYING POLITICAL SENTENCES INTO FACTS VERSUS OPINIONS

In a 2018 Pew survey, researchers presented U.S. adults with five factual statements and five opinion statements and asked them to classify which was which. Only 35% of respondents correctly classified all five opinion statements and only 26% correctly classified all five factual statements.⁸³ It’s no wonder that polarization has become so acute; Americans could be falling prey to opinions disguised as facts. The moderator of this activity could organize the group into bipartisan pairs, instruct them to work together to evaluate a printed list of facts and opinions, and reveal the answers at the end.

PEW SURVEY: FACTUAL VS. OPINION STATEMENTS



Pew defined “factual” as “able to be proved or disproved by objective evidence.”

The factual statements:

1. Health care costs per person in the U.S. are the highest in the developed world.
2. President Barack Obama was born in the United States.
3. Immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally have some rights under the Constitution.
4. ISIS lost a significant portion of its territory in Iraq and Syria in 2017.
5. Spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid make up the largest portion of the U.S. federal budget.

The opinion statements:

1. Democracy is the greatest form of government.
2. Increasing the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour is essential for the health of the U.S. economy.
3. Abortion should be legal in most cases.
4. Immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally are a very big problem for the country today.
5. Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient.



4. EVALUATING BIAS IN ARTICLES FROM LEFT-LEANING AND RIGHT-LEANING NEWS SOURCES

The program moderator could print out two articles surrounding the same subject: an article from the left-leaning CNN and an article from the right-leaning Fox News. The moderator could instruct participants to work in bipartisan pairs to comb through each of the articles, noting opinion versus factual statements, and then bring the group together to compare and contrast the sources' presentations.

On the Digital Literacy Side



1. IDENTIFYING FAKE NEWS

The moderator could separate the group into bipartisan pairs and present them with a series of short articles—some satirical, some specious, others legitimate. The workshop could challenge the participants to pay close attention to the validity of the hyperlink, providing a crash course on how to decode the validity of information from a “.org” versus a “.edu.” Today, some libraries already offer fake news detection training, with the International Federation of Library Associations publishing an infographic that distills the skill into a compact, accessible visual.⁸⁴

HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

 <p>CONSIDER THE SOURCE Click away from the story to investigate the site, its mission and its contact info.</p>	 <p>READ BEYOND Headlines can be outrageous in an effort to get clicks. What's the whole story?</p>	 <p>CHECK THE AUTHOR Do a quick search on the author. Are they credible? Are they real?</p>
 <p>SUPPORTING SOURCES? Click on those links. Determine if the info given actually supports the story.</p>	 <p>CHECK THE DATE Reposting old news stories doesn't mean they're relevant to current events.</p>	 <p>IS IT A JOKE? If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure.</p>
 <p>CHECK YOUR BIASES Consider if your own beliefs could affect your judgment.</p>	 <p>ASK THE EXPERTS Ask a librarian or consult a fact-checking site.</p>	

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2. SPOTTING NATIVE ADVERTISING

The moderator could define native advertising, present participants with sample articles, and ask them to sort the articles into two groups while explaining their reasoning.



3. DETECTING THE POLITICAL AGENDAS BEHIND INFORMATION PRESENTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The moderator could print tweets, Instagram posts, and Facebook posts from a variety of political influencers and organizations. The exercise would challenge participants to weigh the validity of the information presented against the agenda of the presenter.

Concerted workshops in these skill sets could transform the way Americans interpret their news, evaluate their politicians, and judge their political opposites. By hosting them, local public libraries could ease the political polarization that increasingly dominates American life—one town at a time.

MEASURING SUCCESS



The funneling of precious federal funds into any program demands accountability. To this end, the IMLS should begin on a smaller scale by funding the program in a select few libraries. Then, to evaluate its success, it could commission surveys to canvass participant satisfaction. These polls could evaluate whether participants feel they learned something; whether they feel the program was interesting or useful to them; whether they'd recommend it to friends; how they think it can be improved; whether they feel it helped them engage with the opposite camp; and whether they feel it helped them engage with bipartisanship. The IMLS could then evaluate the results to determine whether (and in what way) to grow the program nationwide.

LIMITATIONS



The program would need to overcome a variety of logistic and structural challenges. First, program designers would need to plan an advertising campaign such that residents actually knew about it. At the same time, they would need to make the program attractive to potential participants, popularizing it across a variety of different demographics wherever the program takes place. Volunteer bias could make it more difficult to effect change, as the people who choose to participate could already be bipartisan-minded while the truly partisan-minded keep away. Program administrators would also need to overcome the issue of geographic sorting. Ironically, the very reason the U.S. needs this program is what would make its implementation so difficult: partisans tend toward like-minded districts, making it harder to arrange balanced groups.

Another challenge involves group moderators. Sparking a productive bipartisan discussion will depend heavily on the skill level of whoever leads the group, guides the discussion, and sets the atmosphere. Local teachers and counselors might make the best moderators, but it could be difficult to both select and evaluate them. Lastly, success in the first few libraries won't guarantee success in others. Replicating results is challenging, and program administrators would need to adapt to changing feedback.

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