

Finding the Middle

Finding the Middle

A Comprehensive Non-Partisan
Guide to American Politics Today

Carl Hungerford

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*for
Laura*

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
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Part I THE PREDICAMENT

1 The Challenge of Political Community: Where We Stand Now	7
2 The Shape of the Middle: American Political Opinion Today	27
3 The American Dream, Reconsidered: What Are We Aiming For and Why?	53

Part II THE ISSUES

4 The Paradox of Wealth: The Economy, Government & Taxation	83
5 Your Tired, Your Poor: Immigration	121
6 Two Pillars of Prosperity: Healthcare & Social Security	153
7 Moving Down, Moving Up: Crime & Education	187

x	<i>Contents</i>	
8	Saving the Planet and Ourselves: The Environment	225
9	Imminent Dangers & Entangling Alliances: Foreign Policy	263

Part III
THE RESOLUTION?

10	Toward a New Social Contract: Is Reconciliation Possible?	313
11	Closing Thoughts: A Way Forward	353

APPENDICES & GLOSSARY

	Appendix A: Candidate Background & Position Summary	379
	Appendix B: Issue Snapshot: What the Public Thinks	391
	Appendix C: U.S. Political Parties & Elections: Trends & Outcomes	409
	Glossary	427
	Acknowledgments	449
	<i>Notes</i>	453
	<i>Index</i>	457

Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T NORMALLY READ about politics. *Finding the Middle* assumes that learning about political issues should not only be easy—but can even be fun. Whether we realize it or not, I think most of us already *do* care about politics—both because our opinions say something about who we are, and because political issues affect the things we all care about, from our national security to our healthcare to our global environment. The problem with learning about politics isn't society, or the media, or that friend who usually votes for candidates we don't happen to like. The problem is that we've gotten used to political communication that is either impenetrable, self-consciously one-sided, or both.

Most books about politics fall into one of two broad categories: they offer either a highly partisan take on a wide range of issues (often demonizing the opposition in the process), or a less partisan, in-depth look at a specific issue, like immigration or foreign policy. *Finding the Middle* fills a gap by offering a comprehensive and self-consciously *non*-partisan guide to American politics and culture as a whole. As noted on the back cover, this is a book for people “who have some knowledge about impor-

2 Introduction

tant political, economic, and social topics, but who would like to learn more.”

That said, *Finding the Middle* isn't for wimps. My tone is conversational, but the issues covered here are undeniably complex. Moreover, while my writing assumes the form of a “guide” it nonetheless has a point of view. My thesis, stated in Chapter 1, is that “there is a way of conducting debate that draws together seemingly diverse (even hostile) points of view, *and* there is a particular content to the policies that will best serve the American people—not some fraction of the American people, but as many Americans as possible.” My goal *isn't* to treat all political viewpoints as equally valid, but rather, to survey a range of liberal and conservative positions. I survey these topics with an eye to finding common ground, and highlight sometimes neglected solutions that (I feel) combine the best of liberal and conservative thought.

To make this material more accessible, *Finding the Middle* has a somewhat unusual format. At the *beginning* of each chapter a “bullet point summary” reviews that chapter's key facts and ideas. This “summary” is a list of roughly 10 to 12 numbered bullet points, followed by the page number in parentheses where that point can be found. For instance, the third bullet point in Chapter 1's bullet point summary reads: “3 • The costs of education and healthcare have increased, even as wages have stagnated. Typical in-state schools now cost more than \$12,000 per year and health insurance premiums have risen more than 80 percent since 2000 alone. (*Page 14*)” If you're interested in learning more about that sub-topic, you can turn to page 14 to begin reading about it. Rather than wade through the text line-by-line, you can also therefore “sum up” a chapter *before* you read it by scanning a chapter's entire bullet-point

summary. I hope this makes otherwise dense (or even intimidating) material more approachable.

At the heart of this book, as you will see, lies a paradox. While Americans claim to support—and frequently *do* favor—elected officials who adopt moderate social, political and economic positions, American politics has become more polarized, and indeed more bitter, over the past thirty years. Despite the centrist views of most voters, American politics—both substantively and rhetorically—has become more embattled and more extreme. One of the questions this book asks is simply this: why has this occurred, and what (if anything) should we do about it?

To answer these questions (and more), *Finding the Middle* investigates *both* “big picture” social trends, and specific policy questions. In short, this book explores major themes that have shaped and are currently shaping political and cultural debate in this country—from partisanship, to political correctness, to the “culture wars”—and it lays out a number of specific, creative solutions proposed by innovative thinkers on subjects that range from taxation to crime to Social Security, that often defy traditional labels of “liberal” and “conservative.”

Without sacrificing accuracy or sophistication, my goal is to argue that there *is* a “middle ground” in America today that neither party has catered to successfully. This middle ground is as much a way of approaching politics, and confronting differences of opinion, as it is a set of specific viewpoints. At the same time, *Finding the Middle* argues that our fractured politics and culture has had very real consequences for the wellbeing of many Americans, and for the health of our democracy.

Whoever wins the 2008 Presidential election, it’s fascinating—and revealing—that both John McCain and Barack Obama

4 *Introduction*

know that voters want a different kind of politics. Both men, in his own way, substantively and stylistically embody different attempts to “find the middle” in American politics. The issues covered here will certainly outlast the current election. But there’s rarely been a more exciting time to address these themes and concerns. I hope *Finding the Middle* will help you make sense of the fascinating—and important—questions we’ll all face in the years to come.

Part I
THE PREDICAMENT

1

The Challenge of Political Community: Where We Stand

The numbered bullet points below provide a summary of this chapter's key facts and ideas. The page number in parentheses indicates where each bullet point can be found in the chapter text.

Bullet Point Summary

- 1 • Although most Americans say they reject extreme political positions, U.S. politics and culture have become more polarized over the last forty years. *(Page 9)*
- 2 • Despite unprecedented national wealth (U.S. GDP is over \$13 trillion), Americans today are less likely to vote in elections, engage in public acts, or view each other as honest and trustworthy than they were a generation ago. *(Page 12)*
- 3 • The costs of education and healthcare have increased, even as wages have stagnated. Typical in-state schools now cost more than \$12,000 per year and health insurance pre-

8 FINDING THE MIDDLE

miums have risen more than 80 percent since 2000 alone. *(Page 14)*

4 • On a more positive note, volunteering has risen since the 1970s (the teenage volunteer rate has roughly doubled since the 1980s) and turnout in elections has recently increased. Minorities have also secured rights they once lacked. *(Page 15)*

5 • Just as the social changes of the 1960s began to occur, American social and political “capital” began to decline. These divisions have cropped up both within and between diverse social groups. *(Page 17)*

6 • There are many explanations for these adverse trends—including urban sprawl, pressures at work, and the media. But these seem to be “symptoms” rather than a cause of American social and political breakdown. *(Page 19)*

7 • Despite some promising recent signs of reversal, beginning in the late 1960s a defensively individualistic system of action and belief that denies the possibility of finding solutions to common social problems, and often the desirability of pursuing such solutions, has been ascendant in America. *(Page 21)*

8 • Historically, we have overcome our divisions to create a social and political community. Although there is great hope to change course, today we nonetheless sometimes lack the confidence to make that change. (About two-thirds of Americans now say their children will *not* have a better future than they did). *(Page 22)*

9 • We will cover some of the “big picture” trends in American life in Part I of this book, and then examine specific policy recommendations in Part II. Part III will present some general conclusions. *(Page 24)*

1 • WHY ARE WE LOSING THE MIDDLE GROUND IN AMERICA today, and how can we get it back? Why, over the past several decades, have we increasingly lost the ability to find solutions to shared problems that, whoever we may be, we all think about and care about? This isn't how most of us act in our daily lives. Most of the time we manage to be civil toward one another and to manage our differences. But in America, politics and the questions that surround it—social, economic and moral alike—constitute a new dividing line.

Even if we do not follow the news closely ourselves, most of us realize that politics matters. Politics affects our national security, the education that we or our children receive, and the healthcare we can afford, to name only a few topics. Most of us, even if we do not realize it (or admit it), already hold opinions about these and other questions—despite often wishing we were better informed about them. But even when we do feel sure of ourselves we frequently raise issues of public interest with reluctance (if at all), wary of offending a friend, a relative, or someone we hardly even know. How did we get here?

This isn't a recent development. It is a trend in American life that has probably been happening for decades. Nonetheless, this state of affairs has become more noticeable in recent years, as a number of divisive issues—from long standing “culture war” divisions over controversial topics like abortion and gay marriage, to the all-consuming war in Iraq—have hardened, especially among politicians, in new and challenging ways. As a society we are angrier than we were in the past, and we hunger for a change in the tone of our social and political debate. But we are also uncertain about how to achieve that transformation. Talk of “change” seems to be in the air, but the question surely is, “change to what?”

This doesn't mean we should avoid debate or disagreement. As writer Eric Hoffer once put it, "the beginning of thought is in disagreement, not only with others but also with ourselves." Debate has many virtues; most of all, it can help us to clarify what we believe in and why. But this isn't the *kind* of debate we've seen in recent elections—and for years in American society at large. While politics has *never* been devoid of personal attacks and nonsense "issues," the quality of our public "discourse" has declined—even as we face social, political, and indeed moral questions that demand our attention and intelligence as never before.

What set of policies do I advocate, then? *Finding the Middle* is a cryptic title, so whose middle ground do I have in mind? A Green Party supporter's idea of the "middle ground" is, well, different from the "middle ground" of the Ku Klux Klan. Nonetheless, a middle ground in America *does* exist. The thesis of this book is that there is both a way of conducting debate that draws together seemingly diverse (even hostile) points of view, *and* that there is a particular content to the policies that will best serve the American people—not some fraction of the public, but as many Americans as possible. One of our goals, then, will be to understand how social and cultural conditions affect the outcomes of political debates, and vice versa.

The good news is this: we can improve our course. This is not the first time we have lost the ability to conduct politics effectively and failed to forge a broad social contract. These two trends are related. This country has been most successful at finding solutions to common problems when the opportunity to obtain wealth, and the ability to live comfortably from the work that we perform, has been assured for the broadest possible range of Americans.

Importantly, this isn't a task we should leave to "political elites" alone. As we will see, in fact, the behavior of these elites can be problematic. But I do acknowledge that some readers are intimidated by political subjects. Especially when these questions involve policy analysis, it can be tempting to leave it to those who "know better" to figure things out. (It's certainly *easier*, at any rate). And in some ways, this is a valid concern. The issues we face today *are* complex, and advanced training and experience can be assets for understanding them.

But it's equally true that marshalling diverse opinions—including, importantly, "non-expert" opinion—is also vital to forming solutions. Someone with a PhD in economics may discern the budgetary consequences of this or that spending decision, but may miss the moral significance of, say, cutting taxes for those who already make millions of dollars a year—or of supporting a welfare program that breeds dependency among those it aims to help. Our democracy is predicated on the notion that not just some of us, but *all* of us, can make decisions in the public square—including you.

In fact, this book isn't designed to be "for experts." Like many Americans, I enjoy reading, thinking and talking about politics, but I have not held senior positions in government or political campaigns. If you're looking for an "official" take on political policy, or an "insider's" account of American government, this isn't it. But if you'd like to learn more (in a broad sense) about social, political, and economic issues, then this book can be of help. In fact, my goal is to present to you, the reader, an approachable, readable and in that sense, a decidedly *non-expert* guide to these subjects today.

This is a task for "ordinary" Americans who can (and should) take responsibility for understanding the issues we face

in America. Past generations of Americans who confronted breakdowns in politics met that challenge and repaired the promise of American life. It is time for us to do it again.

PROSPERITY, RECONSIDERED

This may seem an odd argument. Economically, at any rate, America is a very rich country. Total national wealth in the United States, to take the simplest of indicators, has grown enormously over the past forty years. Many Americans have some idea this is true, although they may not realize the scope of the change. Consider that in 1960, the gross domestic product (in 2005 dollars) of the United States was about 530 billion dollars. Today U.S. gross domestic product stands at over 13 *trillion* dollars. A simple average tells us that the total value of the goods and services now generated in the United States for every man, woman and child exceeds \$43,000 *each year*. A comparison with other nations is even more astounding. The United States, with about 5 percent of the world's population, generates over *one quarter* of the planet's economic output. (Pause and think about that for just a moment). It is not hyperbole to claim that America, in aggregate terms, is the richest and most powerful nation in human history—not by a small margin, but by a wide one. While other nations, particularly China and India, are growing fast and gaining ground, that gap remains large—at least for now.

2 • But over the past few decades something funny has happened. Even as America's total national wealth has increased dramatically, some of the most sacred tenants of American life have eroded. Despite some promising recent improvements, Americans today are less likely to vote in elections, belong to a

civic organization, or perceive each other as honest and trustworthy than they were a generation ago. This decline isn't confined to any one demographic group. Rich or poor, black or white, male or female, Americans are more isolated from each other, and less willing to participate in "public acts" of all kinds than they were in the past.

This decline isn't just noticeable in social and political ways. It is paralleled by real, and sometimes dramatic, changes in economic opportunity. Most strikingly, despite the enormous increase in total national wealth, some Americans' earnings have actually *declined* since the 1970s in real (that is, inflation-adjusted) terms, especially for those individuals without a high school diploma. (During that time, the returns to education and skills, and in particular the so-called "college premium," increased dramatically). While this pattern was temporarily reversed during the hot economy of the mid- and late-1990s, wage stagnation and decline has returned since the bursting of the internet "bubble" in 2000 for an even broader group of families and individuals.

Americans may already realize these facts, or at least may be aware of their outline. We're used to images of seemingly abandoned rust-belt cities and we probably know that anyone working for \$7.50 an hour at Wal-Mart isn't having an easy time paying the bills (let alone providing middle class comforts for his or her family). And to be honest, if you're not a minimum wage worker, or one of those Americans whose wages haven't fallen over the past several years, then that isn't *your* life, right?

Well, maybe. Or maybe not. Even if you're one of the roughly one quarter of Americans who hold a bachelors degree or higher, the other odd thing about the past forty years is that middle class and even some upper middle class Americans aren't

doing as well as you might think. 3 • Even as wages for many Americans have risen, the costs of many essential goods and services—in particular for education and healthcare (not to mention more recently prices for gas and food)—have skyrocketed. Maybe you’ve noticed?

Here are some rough numbers. From 1980 to 2000, the percentage of income families spent on college tuition increased for all American families, except for those in the top 20 percent of the income bracket, and there is every indication that the trend continues today. While a federal Pell grant (which many students rely on to fund their higher education) covered 98 percent of the cost of tuition at a four-year public college as recently as 1986, today it covers less than half. And after years of more than double-digit increases over the rate of inflation, for the first time in 2006 the average annual cost of a four-year private college broke the \$30,000 mark, a source of anxiety for all but the wealthiest families. Average tuition plus room and board even at state schools for in-state residents now exceeds \$12,000 per year. Ignorance may be more expensive than education, but education, apparently, still isn’t cheap.

Increases in the cost of healthcare have been similarly dramatic, although the story here is better in important ways than the one for education. Americans can expect to live nearly 6 years longer today than they could forty years ago. Moreover, for the 85 percent or so of Americans who have health insurance, the benefits of myriad medical advances, from stents for heart problems to dramatically higher success rates in treating cancer, are widely available.

Nonetheless, today the average cost of healthcare for an American family of four is over \$11,000 per year. Since most Americans still receive their healthcare through their employers

these costs are hidden to some extent. But since 2000 alone employment-based health insurance premiums have increased over 85 percent, compared to cumulative inflation of roughly 20 percent during that time. Workers are now paying over \$1,000 more in premiums annually for family coverage than they did in 2000. No matter how you look at it, then, healthcare costs have increased dramatically, and are set to increase even further.

The skyrocketing costs of education and healthcare are in fact just two examples of the rising costs of essential “middle class” goods and services in America today. Without going into further detail—we’ll explore these issues much more in Part II of the book—we should therefore put the increase in total wealth, even for those Americans whose wages *have* risen in real terms, however modestly, into perspective. While it’s nice that everything from stereos to kitchen utensils are more affordable to more Americans than ever before, the cost of many goods and services haven’t fallen at all.

APPRAISING PROGRESS

I don’t mean to be alarmist here. Most Americans most of the time do alright, indeed well, overall. There are also some important social bright-spots. 4 • For instance volunteering, after declining during the 1970s and 1980s, has since rebounded and is at a thirty-year high. Over a quarter of American adults volunteer on a regular basis, and nearly 30 percent of American teenagers do so. And while turnout in elections today is lower among all groups than it was forty years ago, it has nonetheless increased in the last two Presidential elections, in the most recent Congressional elections, and, at least on the Democratic side, in the Presidential primaries, especially among younger

Americans. While it's difficult to know how sustainable that trend will be, Americans seem to be rediscovering politics. That's promising.

There's an even more fundamental reason that we shouldn't take our pessimism too far. Whatever the stresses in our lives, most of us nonetheless possess jobs we can count on to earn us an income, manage to spend time with our family and friends, and find ways (even if it sometimes means scrambling) to set something aside for our future. Most of us, in short, *already* "have it good."

Especially in comparison to other parts of the world, we take a lot for granted: roads and schools, plenty of food, and a system of government, whatever its faults, that assures the peaceful transfer of power year after year. These comforts, trivial though they may seem, are not enjoyed by most people on the planet. Those war-ravaged corners of the globe that show up so often in the news seem foreign to us not simply because they are far away, but because we have almost no capacity to understand that kind of suffering. The things we expect—and receive—every day are things that people in most societies can only dream about.

Whatever challenges we face today, there are also ways in which American society itself has improved dramatically over the past several decades, especially by expanding basic social and political rights. America no longer tolerates the state-sanctioned racism of Jim Crow laws intended to make black Americans second-class citizens. Women have the opportunity to pursue careers, and in so doing, have moved beyond rigid gender norms. Religious minorities—Jews, Muslims, Hindus, even Catholics—are far more secure in both the private and public practice of their faiths than they once were. Poll after poll—not

to mention our experience—indicates that Americans, from all walks of life and of nearly all political persuasions, view these changes as positive. We may sometimes become starry-eyed about the past, but most of us don't want to bring these prejudices back.

THE NEW AMERICAN WAY?

5 • Herein lies the paradox. It was precisely as these changes began to occur—and in particular during the 1970s (which is when the social upheavals of the 1960s really began to play themselves out)—that many of America's contemporary ills and present-day disparities first emerged. In short, it was during this time that our politics—and even our society—started to become generally nastier.

Importantly, as Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam has noted, this decline in trust and social interaction has cropped up not simply between members of different groups, but within members of the same group too. As he puts it, “we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities.” In other words, it is not simply the case that black Protestant women, say, became more distrustful of white, Catholic men, but that members of these individual groups—and countless others—became more distrustful and less willing to interact with *each other*. No matter which groups you examine, then, Americans generally proclaim themselves to be and in fact *are* generally less socially and politically cooperative than they were several decades ago.

Besides a long-run decline in social trust, in 2008 Americans are also less likely to vote in elections, keep up on the news, or attend a church or synagogue than they were in the 1960s. At

the same time, Americans today are *more* likely to say they don't have enough money to live the life they want, to live alone, and even to commit suicide than they were forty years ago. As you'll see, we have ways to address those challenges. But we should wonder: what's been going on?

A PUZZLE OF PROSPERITY

These trends are especially odd given the enormous increase in educational attainment in the United States over the past forty years. Education is normally thought to encourage all sorts of positive social changes—and all else being equal, *does* normally aid the educated in comparison to the less-educated. Consider that in 1960, only about 10 percent of Americans had a bachelor's degree or higher and about 65 percent eventually graduated high school. Today, as we have seen, about 25 percent of Americans have a bachelor's degree or higher—and about 85 percent eventually finish high school. The “average” contemporary American is in many ways better educated than members of the upper class were only a few generations ago.

But while this revolution in education “should” have spawned an *improvement* in all sorts of social and political conditions, this hasn't happened. The overall decline in American social and political engagement has been reflected almost as strongly among highly educated Americans as among the less educated.

Interpreting trends like these is complex, and if the news isn't good it can be disheartening too. But examining trends can clear away the clutter. In fact, that is precisely the point. A quick run through the information tells us we will *have* to look for something else, something beyond easy reach of the num-

bers, if we want to explain the general deterioration of American political and civic life over the past forty years. Where, then, should we look?

6 • There are numerous candidates. Maybe the problem has been urban sprawl, or increased pressures from work, or that classic culprit of social decay—"the media," and in particular, violent film and television. Alternatively, maybe the problem lies (if we care to be less politically correct) in the mass entrance of women into the workforce, or the breakdown of the American family, or the rise of the welfare state. Some of these explanations are more popular with the political left, some with the political right. All of us, in our efforts as armchair theorists to understand the world, have probably sympathized with any number of them.

At first glance they're decent explanations. For example, there is evidence that suburban sprawl encourages a host of social ills: everything from lower voting rates to more divorce and social problems for children. (According to some estimates every ten minutes of commuting alone reduce all forms of social "capital"—from volunteering to community health—by 10 percent). In a more conservative vein, there is evidence that welfare not only fails to help the poor, but may even worsen their plight by creating the wrong incentives to find work (even low-paying work), which has a number of positive, non-financial benefits like improved psychological health and higher educational attainment for the children of working low-income parents. Explanations like these for social changes can be valuable, and some excellent work has been done to test their validity. But on closer examination they seem to fall short.

First, as you may have noticed, they overlap and therefore suffer from redundancy. Consider the case of the family, the

bedrock of any society and a frequent focus of political concern. It may be true that the breakdown of the American family has led to numerous social—and in the long run therefore, political—ills. But the breakdown of the family can take many forms, and may itself have multiple causes. A social conservative might blame feminism and gay rights for weakening traditional notions of family duty and for making divorce more acceptable. A liberal, however, might highlight the increased power of corporate America, which has demanded more time at work from employees and so denied them a chance to build strong ties with family members and with their communities.

When we talk about a concept like “the family” to account for social and political problems, which of these explanations do we imply? The first; the latter; maybe both? Which trends do we identify as causes, which do we identify as effects, and how do we separate the two? These dilemmas are central to understanding not only broad concerns, but also specific policy questions. Indeed, they are central to social science, and arise when we examine almost *any* social or political question.

That said, we should also always remember that we are dealing with real people with real (and often very messy) problems. As theologian Reinhold Niebur reminds us, “man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” Practicing democracy is rewarding precisely because it is so challenging. Surely we have an obligation, at once analytical and moral, to never lose sight of the fact that, in all we do—in the opinions we express, in the beliefs we hold, in the policies we advocate—we are helping to create the very society in which we live. When we talk about family life, or the economy, or healthcare, or even foreign policy, we are talking about the very substance of people’s hopes

and dreams—about the kind of people we are and the kind of country we hope to become.

The good news is this: whatever our protests, most of us do care about government. The people who run the country are not inert. Elected leaders set tax rates, alter the delivery of healthcare, and decide who can enter the country, to name a few prominent functions. No wonder we get upset when those who claim to represent our interests fail at their jobs. Beyond these practical endeavors, our elected leaders also help set the tone for what might be called our national life: the honesty (or dishonesty) with which public figures conduct themselves, the values they express, and even the very language they use to advance their claims. Our hope—and our challenge—is that government matters.

THE NEW INDIVIDUALISM

It is here I should return briefly to some of the social problems—and the various causes of these problems—already outlined. In some ways these problems and causes seem diverse. But they also possess a unity of thought and feeling—even if we cannot supply an “explanation” for them per se. What, if anything, is the underlying trend?

7 • At the heart of the erosion of American political and social life, and at the heart of the increase in economic insecurity for many Americans, lies a common thread that we must explore throughout this book. Above all, the ascendant outlook in this country over the past forty years has been a failed, defensively individualistic system of action and belief, at once political, cultural, and economic, that tends to deny the possibility of finding solutions to common problems, and moreover, the desi-

rability of pursuing such solutions anyway. The dominant sentiment over the past several decades (which may or may not be changing), in short, has been: “you’re on your own, and that’s how things should be.” Paradoxically, it is in many ways most prevalent among leaders and elites—the very people who “should” be guiding and directing the nation—and is relatively *less* common among “ordinary” Americans.

Importantly, this individualism which we’ll explore—sometimes directly and often indirectly in the chapters to come—does *not* seem to be of the “principled” variety. It is not a coherent political philosophy that critiques the wisdom and abilities of government in a systematic way. Rather, it is a kind of “lazy” individualism—an uncritical and often contradictory pessimism toward not simply the abilities of government, but more fundamentally, a pessimism toward and desire to withdraw from civil society itself.

This book will not “prove” the existence of that sentiment *per se* or even explore its precise philosophical contours. The subject matter here is broader and more “hands on” than that. But as we explore these various subjects we’ll nonetheless encounter that outlook again and again. (Whether we’re seeing the end of that sentiment in public life, or simply witnessing an attempted respite from it, is surely one of the more important political questions of our time).

THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

8 • I do not mean to suggest that America has always had a unified sense of itself, or that consensus has been the norm throughout American history. On the contrary, many historians believe the disputes that divide us today pale in compari-

son to conflicts of the past. The debate over slavery, most famously, led to accusations and recriminations that were couched in truly fatalistic language—and which, of course, ultimately resulted in the nation's civil war. The Revolutionary War, the Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression and the Cold War—among many other experiences—created deep fissures among Americans as well. The United States has always been a dynamic place—a country with a relatively short history, as nations go, but almost from the moment of its birth an incredibly creative and industrious land as well. Perhaps one of the prices we pay for that dynamism is a *lack* of consensus, at least in political terms.

While this assertion is true in certain respects, taken on its own it is nonetheless simplistic and overlooks an important fact. The genius of America, historically speaking, is that we have usually overcome our divisions to become something larger than ourselves. However flawed our behavior, however diverse our experience, we have somehow, over time, pulled ourselves together and passed on hope and renewed national traditions to future generations.

What worries me (and I imagine other Americans) about the current divisions we face is not that they exist per se, but rather, that we lack the will to overcome what divides us to create something better than what we started with—which *is* an historically unique, and troubling, form of apathy. Polls today suggest that now more than ever most Americans (about two thirds, in fact) believe that their children *won't* have a better future than they did. No matter what happens we'll go on, of course, but the modern world has bequeathed to America—or perhaps America has bequeathed to the modern world—a strange pessimism that is, in fact, peculiarly *un-American*.

Moreover, the sheer size and complexity of the contemporary United States makes the challenges we face today especially pressing—precisely when we need a new consensus. Americans today come from more corners of the globe, have more disparate upbringings, and live in more heterogeneous ways than ever before. (As we’ll see in Chapter 5, which addresses immigration, that trend is increasing, not decreasing). One of our aims will be to understand this diversity in its myriad forms, both as it interacts with our past and as it re-shapes the possibilities for our future institutions and values.

Will we reach some conclusions? Yes. As the saying goes, “in all thy getting, get thy understanding.” This introductory chapter has already presented themes that will run through our exploration of diverse issues and problems. What’s more, there are thankfully almost never just two sides to any debate, and most Americans are sympathetic to ideologically diverse points of view. The basis of this book, in fact, is that despite our confusion and uncertainty, by drawing upon readily available sources and by laying bare the sentiments that inform them, we can arrive at useful conclusions—and maybe even improve our society.

THE PLAN

9 • What then, specifically, does this book cover? We’ve started by reviewing some of the “big picture” issues and trends in American life, which we’ll continue to explore in Part I. Next, we’ll examine specific policy options, presented in Part II. Part III’s two chapters will draw together these themes and will present conclusions about both the direction we are currently taking and the course we might chart in the future.

As indicated in the Introduction, each chapter begins with a “Bullet Point Summary” that reviews the major concepts, facts and themes explored in that chapter. Each numbered bullet point references a page number or numbers that corresponds to the place in the chapter where that issue is discussed. This list is not intended to replace a closer reading of each chapter, but rather, to encapsulate the most important “take away” ideas mentioned. At the same time, if you find yourself more interested in say, taxation than in healthcare, you might read Chapter 4 in full and read only the “Bullet Point Summary” of Chapter 6. The book, in short, is designed so that a reader can jump around. While purists may dislike this format, I feel it’s better to make this information as accessible as possible. If one of our goals is simply to educate ourselves (and others) on these important topics, then making reading about politics, policies and the values that underlie them convenient, readable—and even fun—is a virtue, not a vice.

Our task, then, is at once to investigate these trends and to propose some solutions. If we hope to understand the American “middle”—what it is and what motivates it—we will need to understand exactly what Americans say they believe about their society, and the reasons they give for their beliefs. It may sound simple, or even simplistic, but this is one of the principle failings of much contemporary political debate. Egged on by ideologues, and encouraged by various “structural” features of American democracy that fund and enable these groups, politicians of all kinds forget that Americans *agree* on a wide range of topics.

This is a paradox we need to understand. As the political classes march off to battle, most Americans have historically, and still are, at least *claiming* to support policies and values that

are broadly similar those of other Americans. And while differences do exist, they are often not nearly as large as we imagine. To ensure that the acrimony within the political class doesn't spill over into American society at large, we would do well to understand these beliefs. They are our best hope for forging a "working consensus" on the questions we'll confront, and for mending some of the disputes that have bedeviled American society over the past several decades. Let's get started.