



Bridging Political Divides

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A nationwide study of local governments uncovers an effective way to reduce political polarization and promote mutual understanding.

Political polarization is the leading social rift of our time. Perhaps the clearest example is the U.S. federal government. Exhibit 1 on the following page demonstrates this point by tracking cross-party collaboration in the U.S. Congress from 1895 to 2017.¹ Currently, it is at an all-time low.

Political conflict is not limited to federal government officials. It also affects the general public. As one group of social scientists put it, “the most significant fault line in the second decade of the twenty-first century [in America] is not race, religion, or economic status but political party affiliation.”¹ This political conflict has expressed itself in civic activities, such as a steep decline in split-ticket voting^{2,3} as well as personal choices. For instance, political affiliation is becoming an important factor in choosing marriage partners—more important than education or religion.⁴

Given the pervasive impacts of political polarization, local governments are likely to be impacted as well, even if elections are nonpartisan.⁵

Heightened political conflict has been accompanied by declining trust. For example, when people in 1964 were asked whether the government was run on behalf of “a few big interests” or “the benefit of all,” 64% of Americans believed that government was run for the benefit of all, while only 29%

believed that government represented a few big interests. By 2018, when the U.S. was more polarized, those percentages had completely reversed. Only 21% of Americans surveyed in 2018 said they believed that the government benefited all, and 75% now endorse that government represented big interests.⁶ This decline in trust is not limited to the political system, but it has seemed to pervade American life. In the early 1960s, nearly two-thirds of Americans expressed a fundamental trust in other people, but by the 2020s, only about one-third did.⁷

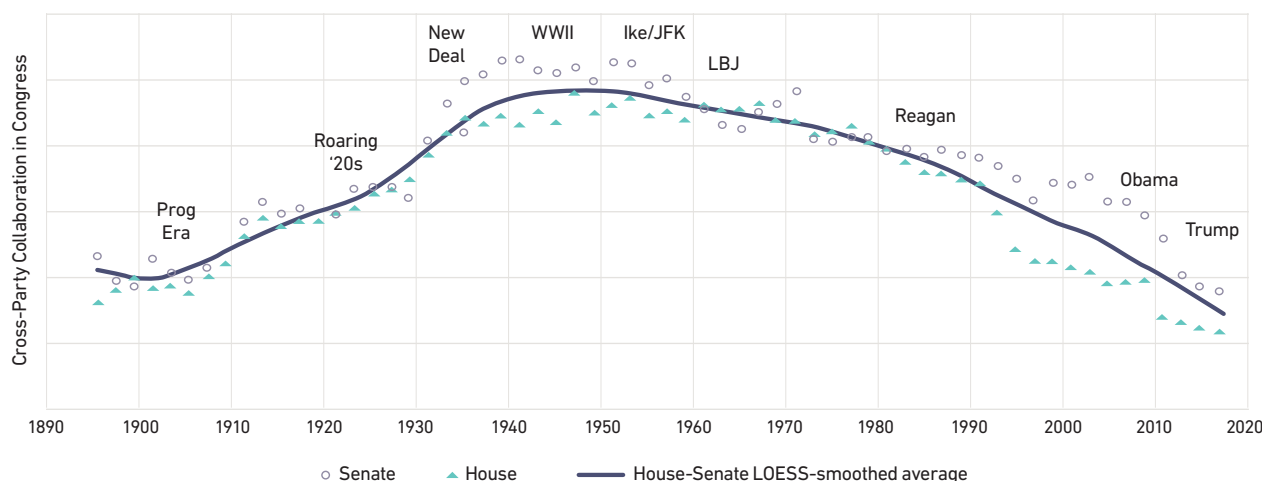
These problems of political polarization and declining trust cause difficulties in local government.⁸ Consider the issue of COVID-19. An individual’s perspective on COVID-19 can largely be predicted by their political beliefs.^{9,10} The consequences are observable in schools. Public battles over masking policies and vaccine mandates have taken center stage in national media. There are subtler impacts as well. For instance, one GFOA member reported that their job of organizing training has become political, as partisan responses to COVID-19 have led to many uncomfortable conversations about in-person versus remote training. This is but one example of the pervasive impact of polarization, such that matters that might not otherwise be “political” become political.

RETHINKING BUDGETING

ABOUT GFOA’S RETHINKING BUDGETING INITIATIVE

Local governments have long relied on incremental line-item budgeting, in which last year’s budget becomes next year’s with changes around the margins. In a world defined by uncertainty, this form of budgeting puts local governments at a disadvantage, hampering their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. As we all know so well, the ability to adapt has become essential over the last two years—and will certainly remain so for some time. The premise of the Rethinking Budgeting initiative is that the public finance profession has an opportunity to update local government budgeting practices with new ways of thinking and new technologies to help communities better meet changing needs and circumstances. The Rethinking Budgeting initiative seeks out and shares unconventional but promising methods for local governments to improve how they budget, and how they embrace the defining issues of our time.

¹ This chart is a synthesis of widely accepted, if imperfect, measures of polarization in the U.S. Congress. For more information, see Putnam & Garrett (2020).

EXHIBIT 1 | CROSS-PARTY COLLABORATION IN THE U.S. CONGRESS FROM 1895 TO 2017¹¹


The problems of polarization are not necessarily limited to issues of liberals versus conservatives. According to one GFOA member, their city—which is predominantly of one political affiliation—is experiencing declining quality of public discourse and waning trust. For example, a local construction project pitted committed environmentalists against political moderates. The environmentalists wanted to halt the project. The moderates believed the city government should not be involved because the concerns of the environmentalists were state and federal government responsibilities. The conflict became extremely polarizing, fraught with misinformation and people trying to win at any cost. The city manager was a victim of the misinformation campaign, where it was suggested that she was in the pocket of developers. She was then abruptly dismissed by the council. While city managers losing their jobs to local politics is nothing new, this seemed egregious given the city manager's years of exemplary service, long tenure, and reputation in the region (including a recent service award from a community group).

Polarization also manifests itself in the most important of all local government policymaking: the budget process. Because it involves “who gets what,” budgeting is inherently political. As politics become increasingly dysfunctional, the budget process follows suit. Trust plays a critical role in the budgeting process, as outlined by GFOA's Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities (gfoa.org/fff). A healthy budget process requires that the participants look to the greater interest of the community rather than seeking to get the most for themselves. To advance the group's well-being, each individual should be willing to avoid the temptation to hoard resources and trust that the process will address everyone's concerns. Without this trust, the result will be a zero-sum competition, where for one group to win, the other must lose. When everyone fights for their piece of the pie (or the whole pie), there will never be enough to satisfy everyone. This situation can lead to financial distress and alienation.¹¹

What can be done? GFOA's Rethinking Budgeting initiative urges local governments to confront complex problems by understanding root causes.

In this article, we will:

- ➔ Describe the psychology of polarization and what the science of “Moral Foundations Theory” can teach us about polarization.
- ➔ Review the practical application of Moral Foundations Theory.
- ➔ Examine the results of a study of Moral Foundations Theory and the application to local government.

Psychology of Political Polarization

Political polarization is rooted in many factors, both systemic and psychological.^{12,13,14} One comprehensive, solution-focused approach to understanding ideological and political divides comes from Moral Foundations Theory.¹⁵ Moral Foundations Theory not only explains differences in political, cultural, and ideological views, but it offers solutions for bridging these divides. It provides a framework for understanding our views and the views of others as well as a common language to discuss differences. A person's moral foundations are linked to personality,^{16,17} emotional processing and sensitivity,^{18,19} and the physical structure of our brains.²⁰ All of this suggests that moral foundations are deeply embedded within our psychology.

¹¹ This is the premise of GFOA's Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities Research. See: Shayne C. Kavanagh and Vincent Reitano. *Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities*. Government Finance Officers Association. 2019. <https://gfoa.org/financial-foundations>.

Moral Foundations: The Six “Taste Buds” of Morality

Moral Foundations Theory offers a unique solution to reducing political polarization. The theory states that there are six basic foundations to people's worldviews. These foundations are similar to taste buds. All people have basic types of taste buds on their tongues (salty, sweet, sour, bitter, and savory). While everyone has different taste preferences (some prefer salty snacks, whereas others have a sweet tooth), we all use all of our taste buds.

Like people's taste buds and taste preferences, different cultures and people within these cultures have the same “taste buds” for morality; however, they often have different preferences. People all use the same six moral foundations: care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. However, they draw on them in different ways and to different degrees to form specific moral worldviews. The way in which we rely on these foundations shapes our core values and worldview.

How do we develop our moral preferences from these foundations? Our moral foundations are thought to come from our evolutionary heritage, which has supported our survival. For example, the sanctity foundation (concerned with keeping certain things pure and sacred) has been thought to protect against pathogens and disease.^{21,22,23} On the other hand, the care foundation corresponds to protecting and caring for one's offspring.^{24,25} However, culture, upbringing, and life experiences can also influence our worldview.

The Six Moral Foundations

Below is an in-depth overview of the moral foundations.



CARE

The care foundation serves as the basis for caring for others and trying to prevent harm. This underlies the values of kindness and compassion. A person who relies heavily on the care foundation would probably prioritize being gentle and kind. They would also probably value this in other people. A person who doesn't rely on this foundation much is more likely to value being tough and independent.

Example in local government:

The latest census shows that much of the local population consists of senior citizens. The city's recreation department has proposed new recreation activities for seniors that would be free. To pay for these activities, the city would need to raise general taxes. Those who value care would be more likely to support offering free services for seniors and increasing taxes.



FAIRNESS

We all want to be treated fairly. We dislike when people cheat, even when we're not the ones who are affected by the cheater's actions. The fairness foundation underlies the values of justice, equality, and reciprocity. It is connected to the values of honesty and integrity. Research suggests that those on the political right and left tend to interpret

fairness differently.²⁶ On the political right, people tend to think about fairness in terms of proportionality. This means people should benefit in proportion to which they contributed. Those on the political left tend to think about fairness in terms of equity. This means people should have equal outcomes. For information on fairness and how it can be defined by different people, check out GFOA's What's Fair? series at gfoa.org/fairness.

Example in local government:

A county is reviewing its fee structure for court appearances. Previously, it had a system where everyone paid the same amount for their court fee. A new system has been proposed where people of low income would have their fees waived. This example illustrates that the foundations don't exist in isolation. Someone who weighs fairness and care heavily would be more likely to support waiving the fees. Someone who does not value both heavily might subscribe to a definition of fairness where everyone should pay their share, so they would be less likely to support the policy.



LIBERTY

The liberty foundation underlies our desire for autonomy—the freedom to make our own decisions. This serves as the basis for the ideal of individual freedom as well as the desire to eliminate oppression. Those on the political left and political right tend to care a great deal about the liberty foundation; however, they tend to apply it differently. Those on the political left



People all use the same six moral foundations. However, they draw on them in different ways and to different degrees to form specific moral worldviews.

tend to rely on the liberty foundation to advocate for people in groups who they believe are oppressed. Those on the political right tend to express the liberty foundation as a desire for freedom from government regulations.

Example in local government:

Some people in a community may want to place numerous regulations and restrictions on residential developers to reduce impacts on the environment, improve safety, and regulate growth, which would arguably contribute to an overall improvement in quality of life. Others are concerned that these types of restrictions overly constrict a developer or homeowner's right to freely develop their property in a manner suitable to them without governmental interference. Someone who values liberty heavily is more likely to be opposed to these regulations and restrictions.



LOYALTY

The loyalty foundation involves the desire to be loyal to groups we belong to. This can often include our family, company, neighborhood, religious community, sports team, political constituency, etc. The loyalty foundation is visible in values like patriotism, being a team player, and self-sacrifice for the sake of the group.

Example in local government:

A county government is trying to balance the budget in the midst of a big deficit. One of the balancing mechanisms is applying unpaid furlough days for all employees. One of the department directors has the opportunity to influence the furlough decisions to keep their staff at work. If that department director highly values loyalty, they may feel loyal to their employees and want to keep them at work.



AUTHORITY

The authority foundation involves respecting traditions, laws, leaders, elders, and other forms of authority. If you believe that all children should show respect to adults, this may stem from the authority foundation. Another example shows up in the workplace: Those who are more likely to defer to their boss might emphasize the authority foundation more.

Example in local government:

A city is experiencing an increase in crime. Two proposals have been put forward to address this. One proposal is to expand the number of police officers to more vigorously enforce the law. The other proposal is to expand social services that seek to prevent people from turning to crime. Someone who heavily values the authority foundation would be likely to support more policing as it more closely aligns with respecting rule of law.

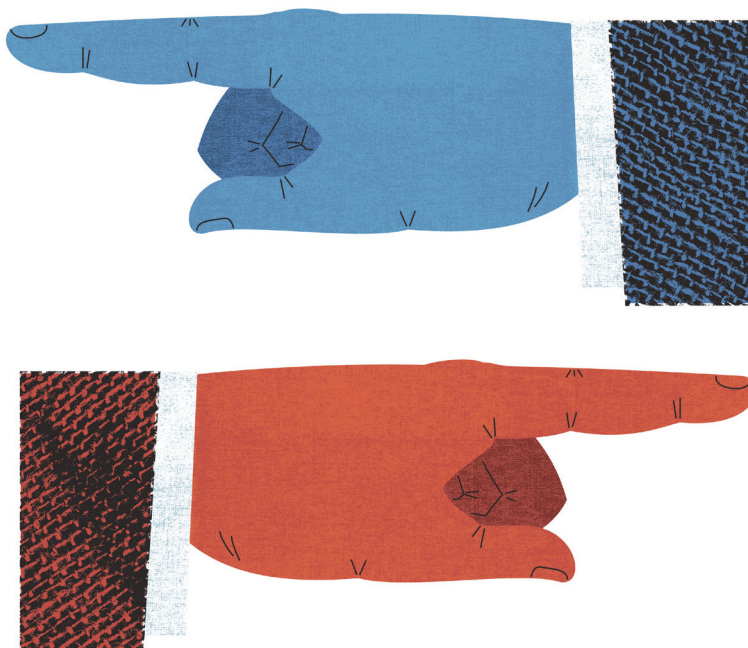


SANCTITY

The sanctity foundation underlies the notion that certain things are pure or sacred and should be protected or treated with reverence. This can manifest in treating objects and beliefs as sacred. It can also affect the notion of treating the human body like a temple that must not be desecrated. The sanctity foundation underlies ideas related to religion or the protection of symbols that people view as sacred (e.g., flags and monuments). It can also play a role in the desire to protect the environment.

Example in local government:

Some people in a school district want to prohibit employees from wearing religious or political symbols in the workplace. They believe this will create a more inclusive culture. Someone who values sanctity would feel more strongly that they should be able to wear religious or political symbols, as they view these as sacred. Hence, they'd be less likely to support such a policy.



Moral Foundations and Political Divides

The moral foundations reveal a pattern that can help us understand our political divides. Research shows that people on the political left and right tend to rely on different moral foundations.²⁷ This pattern has been found across hundreds of thousands of people, and it can be seen across countries all over the world.²⁸

As Exhibit 2 illustrates:

- ➔ People on the political left tend to rely mostly on the care, fairness, and liberty foundations.
- ➔ People on the political right also rely on the care and fairness foundations but to a lesser extent. But they rely heavily on liberty as well as loyalty, authority, and sanctity.

There are a few important things to keep in mind about the research findings in Exhibit 2.

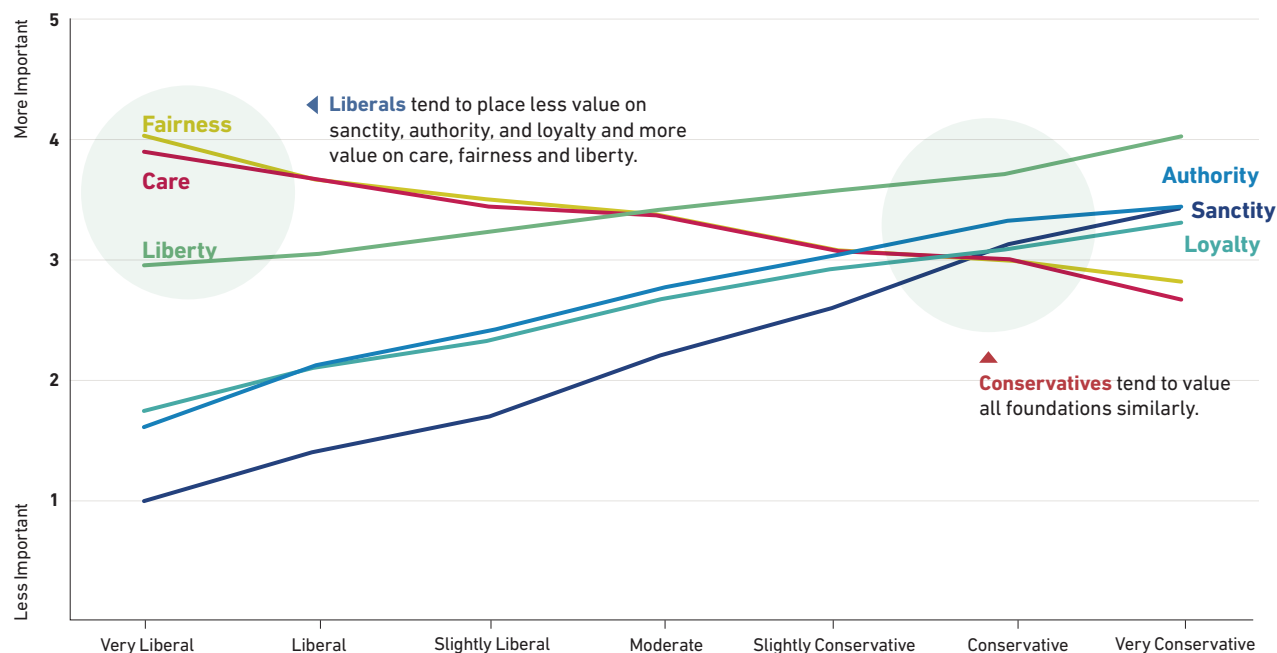
First, these are general patterns that are seen across a large amount of data, and some individuals do not fit this pattern. We cannot jump to conclusions about another person's moral worldview based on their political orientation. Knowing how liberals and conservatives tend to apply moral foundations can point to why someone might have a different view. But these patterns can't pinpoint the exact viewpoint of individuals.

Second, these findings do not mean that any of the moral foundations are exclusive to certain political identities. Rather, we all draw upon all six moral foundations, regardless of our political orientation. We tend to apply the foundations in different ways and to different degrees, depending on the issue at hand. Everyone makes use of all six foundations at some point or another.

Note that Moral Foundations Theory does not imply that all beliefs and worldviews are equally valid. A view that all beliefs are equally valid is known as "moral relativism." This outlook can be used to argue for worldviews that might promote or excuse violence, hatred, and suffering. Instead, Moral Foundations Theory argues for moral pluralism: There isn't only one true morality for all people, in all times, and in all places. There are many acceptable views, but not every view is acceptable. Moral pluralism allows for two people to be able to disagree about an issue while both having morally defensible positions. It allows people to have different visions and take different actions that may be of equal merit and virtue but are nevertheless conflicting.

In addition, because we all share the same moral "taste buds," we

EXHIBIT 2 | DIFFERENCES IN THE SIX MORAL FOUNDATIONS ACROSS THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM



US SAMPLE = 3,905. SOURCE: YOURMORALS.ORG

have the capacity to understand the perspectives of others. However, our minds trick us into seeing only one point of view—our personal weightings on the moral foundations create potential blind spots to seeing how others might feel about that same issue. Fortunately, this is a solvable problem, as moral foundations can be a useful tool for bridging divides. For example, imagine someone was facing any of the moral dilemmas we used to illustrate the six moral foundations earlier in this paper. Without knowledge of Moral Foundations Theory, they might be more prone to believe that their side of the argument was the only valid side. With knowledge of Moral Foundations Theory, they might be better able to recognize that the other positions are rooted in valid moral concerns, even if they don't put the same weight on those concerns.

Understanding Moral Foundations Can Help Bridge Political Divides

Since our viewpoints stem from the same moral foundations, these foundations can help us understand the views of others. By understanding how different views come from a common framework, it is easier to view those with opposing views as well-intentioned and sincere rather than unintelligent or immoral.

Moral Foundations Theory provides people with new abilities to find common ground and work toward solutions with those who have opposing views. When we understand someone else's moral "taste preferences," we can frame policy options more persuasively.²⁹ For example, conservatives are more likely to support pro-environmental policies when the policies are framed from the perspective of sanctity/degradation [e.g., "The

environment has become contaminated, and we must keep the Earth pure and clean"] rather than care/harm [e.g., "People are causing destruction to the world, and we need to care about and protect the environment"].³⁰ On the other hand, liberals are more likely to support military spending when presented with arguments focused on fairness [i.e., emphasizing the military's role in helping overcome income inequality and racial discrimination] rather than authority and loyalty [i.e., emphasizing American patriotism and superpower status].³¹

Recognizing that people who have different views than us may genuinely be doing what they believe is right enables us to collaborate with them. Let's review two strategies where an understanding of moral foundations helps us collaborate. The first is to separate the goals from the strategies. In making policy decisions, it is easy to conflate the goals and strategies. For example, two individuals could want to decrease homelessness in their city—they share the same goal—but could have different ideas for how to get to this goal. One person might believe the solution is more affordable housing. This might be rooted in the care foundation: a belief that all people have a right to housing. Another person might advocate for more accessible mental health and substance abuse counseling, as mental disorders and substance abuse are seen as key risk factors for homelessness.³² This might be rooted in a more conservative view, such as a belief that substance abuse is a serious problem [the body is sacred], and people should be free to make their own way in the world [liberty], and barriers to their doing so successfully, like drug abuse and mental health problems, should be addressed. In this situation, gridlock can

happen when we debate which strategy is the "right" one. Separating goals from the strategies allows us to remember that we are all working toward the same goal. So rather than getting fixated on whose preferred strategy is "best," we remember the shared goal and then think about how to get there by taking what works from all the available strategies.

A more sophisticated way of collaborating is to use integrative thinking, which enables the creation of new answers to our toughest problems. Integrating can be contrasted with optimizing, which is trading off to find the point between choices A and B that you can live with. Integrating is taking the best of choices A and B and reconfiguring them to create new value. In integrative thinking, we use the tension of opposing ideas to help create new answers, which more effectively solves your problem than your initial alternatives do. This is the best of collaboration.

To illustrate an example of integrative thinking, consider the topic of marijuana legalization. Although more and more people support the legalization of marijuana, a major concern of opponents is the health concerns associated with combustion. Indeed, the combustion or burning of marijuana creates an increased risk for chronic bronchitis and lung cancer for both users and bystanders.³³ Although the real-world issue of marijuana legalization is more complex, there is a solution that can appease both sides in this example. By using integrative thinking, one solution would be to relax constraints on the sale of edible and vaporized marijuana, which does not carry the risks of combustible marijuana. This would allow greater legalization of marijuana but avoid the risks associated with combustion.ⁱⁱⁱ



OpenMind's mission is to equip the next generation with the habits of heart and mind to bridge divides. OpenMind seeks to help people recognize our shared humanity, embrace our differences as strengths, and work together to solve our collective challenges. [Learn more at openmindplatform.org](https://openmindplatform.org).

Moral Foundations Theory for Everyone

The science and strategies that we discussed are core components of an educational and skill-building tool called “OpenMind.” In eight 30-minute online modules, learners identify their own moral foundations and learn concrete strategies for engaging constructively across differences. The program is rooted in psychology and tailored to the individual.

The Rethinking Budgeting initiative partnered with OpenMind to pilot the program with public officials in many different local governments. The pilot used a “randomized control trial” to evaluate the program. This method is considered one of the most reliable forms of scientific research.³⁴ Two-hundred and eighty-four GFOA members volunteered to participate in the study. About half of the participants received the OpenMind program and were given “before” and “after” questionnaires to see how well they did on skills useful for navigating

political polarization. The other half of participants did not receive the OpenMind program but took the same questionnaires at the same time. That way, we could see if the people who took the OpenMind program improved compared to those who did not take OpenMind.^{iv}

As shown in Exhibit 3, those who completed OpenMind showed significant improvements in the skills needed to navigate political polarization. Our graphics in Exhibit 3 show how three important skills improved from before the OpenMind program versus after and for the people who received the training versus those who did not. These skills are:

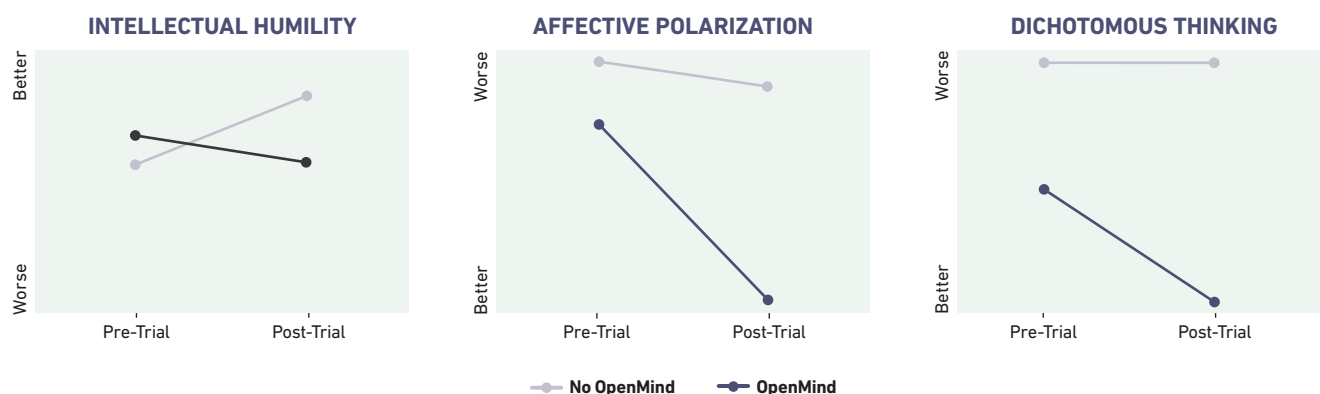
- ➔ **Intellectual humility** is the extent to which people are willing to consider that their viewpoint might not represent the complete truth or that they could be wrong.
- ➔ **Affective polarization** describes how people view those with different political beliefs. Someone with high affective polarization would see those with different political beliefs as an “enemy,” etc.

- ➔ **Dichotomous thinking** is the extent to which people see political questions as “black-or-white.” When political questions are viewed as black-or-white, there is not much room for mutual understanding, much less finding mutually agreeable solutions.

Overall, a person who is well-equipped to bridge political and moral divides is someone who is high in intellectual humility but low in affective polarization and dichotomous thinking. We can see that the people who received the OpenMind program improved dramatically in all three outcomes and outperformed those who did not receive the training. Additionally, those who received the training enjoyed it. On average, participants rated their satisfaction with the program as a 9 out of 10.

The benefits of the program were not just measured on tests. Participants noticed the difference in their lives. According to one participant: “In reality, we all have the same moral foundations..., and our experiences and our value systems will determine which one we’re using. And when you

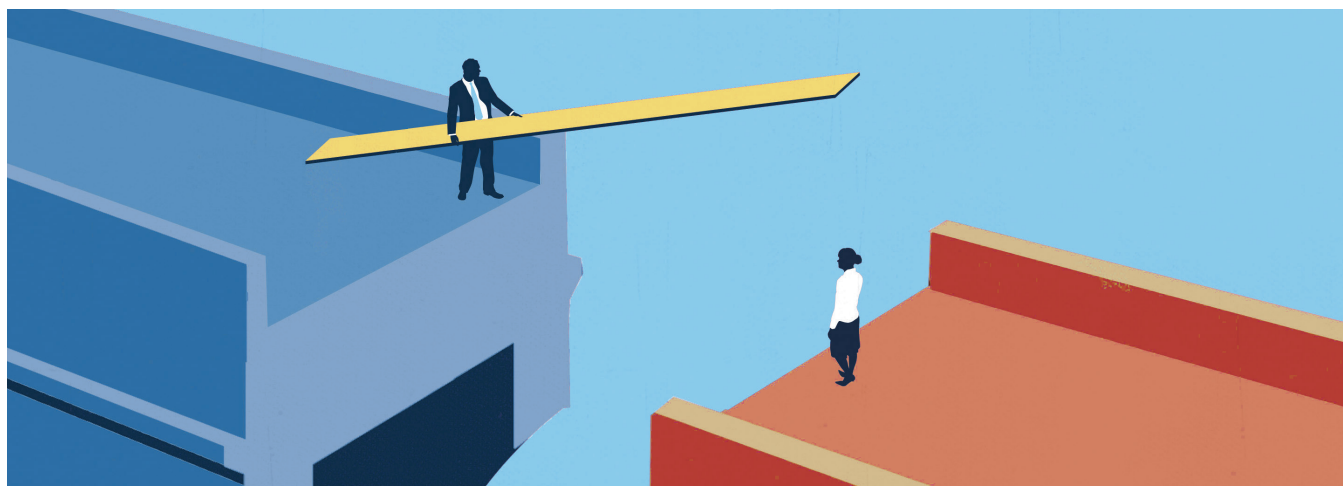
EXHIBIT 3 | GFOA'S RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL SHOWED SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN SKILLS^v



^{iv}Integrative thinking is conceptually similar to “polarity management”—a conflict resolution strategy featured in a GFOA report on justice and fairness: “What’s Fair? Negotiation and Persuasion” (gfoa.org/materials/whats-fair-5). Although integrative thinking is one solution to reducing conflict, it is important to note that not every situation may have an integrative solution.

^vThe group receiving OpenMind (Average Age = 49.57, 67% Women, 73% White) and the comparison group (Average Age = 49.88, 74% Women, 71% White) were similar in demographics.

^vAlthough those in the “No OpenMind” condition appear to shift slightly in their results, our data analyses found that these changes were likely mostly due to random variation in the pre and post test results.



think about it that way, and you realize that everybody is coming from the same area, just in a different way... it kind of puts everybody on the same playing field. It's like, 'oh wait, this person I vehemently disagree with is not a monster. They are just applying a moral foundation that I'm not tapping into, or they're applying the same one but in a different way.' And I think that that's a really powerful tool of connection. And I've definitely used that in my life when I'm talking to people."

Conclusion

It would not be an exaggeration to call political polarization an existential threat to our democratic system of government. The results of this research show that not only are the tools available to combat political polarization, these tools can be applied to local governments. The idea that local governments have an important role to play in pushing back against polarization is not unrealistic or naive. In fact, though the polarization we are experiencing today is unprecedented in the last 70 years, it is not entirely unprecedented in American history. The esteemed sociologist Robert Putnam points out that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, America was in a position not so different from today in terms of polarization (among other social ills). The "Progressive Era" of the early 1900s that extended

through the 1920s saw several changes in American society that helped reverse these maladies. One of those changes was the reform of local government to the institutions we have now. Today's local governments could contribute to a similar reversal of today's social ills by taking the lead on a different approach to our political differences—one rooted in mutual understanding and finding practical solutions to helping our communities thrive for everyone.

So, what can local officials do to start a modern reversal of political polarization? Our research suggests that participating in the OpenMind training program can be a powerful investment. The training provides skills and strategies for bridging divides like we describes in this paper plus many more. The training requires about 4 hours and is completed 100% online in self-paced lessons. We typically recommend doing 30 minutes each week over an 8 week period, but it is possible to go faster. We organize the course in cohorts, so that groups of people are going through the course together at the same time. This gives you the option to be matched with another person who is also taking the course and discuss what you've learned. About 40% of the participants in our pilot participated in this peer-to-peer discussion and many got a great deal out of it. However, you are also free to opt-out of the peer-to-peer portion, if you like. At the end of the 8 week period, we hold an hour-long capstone event where you can discuss what you learned with

an expert in Moral Foundations Theory and other people who have taken the course. It is also possible to organize a cohort exclusive to your local government, if you'd like many people from your organization to take the course. For more detail on the course and to sign up visit gfoa.org/openmind.

Participating in the training is an investment of time and resources. What can you do that is low or no cost and start now? We suggest the following:

➔ **Know your own moral foundations.**


"Know thyself" is ancient wisdom from across many different cultures. Consider taking the Moral Foundations test at yourmorals.org to see which Moral Foundations you emphasize and how that compares to everyone else. This is a first step toward recognizing blind spots and bridging divides.

➔ **Recognize the moral foundations in policy conflicts.** Look for which foundations are operative in political arguments you encounter. Exhibit 2 provides a guide on which foundations to look for in liberal and conservative arguments. Remember, also, that foundations don't always work in isolation. Arguments about fairness, for example, often draw on multiple foundations. It will be easier to practice this with policy conflicts you are not a direct participant in. This will help prepare you to apply the techniques below when you are directly involved.

- ➔ **Apply “moral reframing” to conflicts.** Look for opportunities to show someone how their preferred moral taste can be accommodated within policy arguments. Earlier we discussed how care for the natural environment (typically a position associated with liberals) could be reframed as conservation of an important (sacred) community asset for future generations in order to appeal to conservatives. In another example, spending on police is often favored by conservatives (authority), but could be made more appealing to liberals by showing that people who live in low-income communities may want additional policing (care).
- ➔ **Separate goals from strategies.** Liberals and conservatives often share the same underlying goals of

making their communities better places to live. They, however, often disagree about the best way of getting there. So, identify the shared goal and keep that separate from the strategy to achieve it. Then discuss strategies, looking to use the best ideas from both sides. Earlier, we gave the example of reducing homelessness as a shared goal but where there are different strategies. Our next bullet can help with finding mutually agreeable strategies.

- ➔ **Use integrative thinking. Bring together the best of both liberal and conservative perspectives to create new ideas.** For example, one part of the community might wish to invest in protection for police officers from frivolous

charges (respect for authority), and another might want to invest in measures to prevent officers from acting inappropriately (care). Body cameras could be an example that accomplishes both. This is a simple example. A more sophisticated method is Polarity Mapping, which is featured in the GFOA report: “What’s Fair? Negotiation and Persuasion” at gfoa.org/materials/whats-fair-5. 

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