

Nationhood Lab

THE PELL CENTER • SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

The Story of America:

*A rebooted civic national narrative
for the United States*

The Story of America: A rebooted civic national narrative for the United States

This research report is part of a Nationhood Lab initiative to develop and disseminate a revitalized narrative about the purpose, origins, and identity of the United States built on the liberal democratic values in our opening statement as a people, the Declaration of Independence. Nationhood Lab is a project of the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University.

Our research on the story of America is intended as a public good available to all interested parties. This particular report on its findings was written for Americans who want to talk about the United States in ways that help unify its people in a period of profound division. We expect it will be especially of interest to people who consciously think about communications, messaging, and persuasion, especially those who do so in their professional capacities, such as scholars, journalists, thought leaders, public figures, organizers, celebrities, institutional leaders, and engaged citizens, among others.

What's a national narrative and why should I care about the U.S. having one?

Nations are, at a fundamental level, imaginary.¹ They have tangible components, of course, like capitol buildings, courthouses, or military installations, but the greater entities to which those things belong exist because we collectively believe they do.

Every nation is defined and shaped by the stories its members have come to accept about where it came from, what its purpose is, who belongs to it, and who does not. These stories of national self-definition – *national narratives* – further not just the objectives of elite state builders, but also the basic cognitive and psychological needs for a shared social identity passed down to each and every one of us by the forces of evolutionary biology. We humans *need* to feel we belong to social groups at various scales, and over the past 400 years, national identities have become one of the most powerful, top-level social identities in human experience.² People need national stories and, as Harvard scholar Jill Lepore has put it, “they can get it from scholars or they can get it from demagogues, but get it they will.” A society without a credible story, historian William McNeill warned forty-three years ago, “soon finds itself in deep trouble, for in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain.”³

What's been at stake in America's narrative?

National stories are especially critical for federated states like Canada, Belgium, the United Kingdom or the United States – or the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia – because such countries typically can't fall back on shared ethnic or religious identities as a crutch. The United States needs an effective national story or it will fall apart.⁴

Twenty-first century Americans have increasingly been asking what still holds us together as a nation and are wondering if we no longer have a commitment to shared values and ideals. After the Cold War, American leaders stopped talking about our national purpose and allowed demagogues to fill the resulting vacuum with a narrative based on authoritarian values and ethnonationalist definitions of belonging. In a diverse federation such as ours, this is a recipe for disaster.

Fortunately, the United States has the building blocks for a powerful, credible, inspirational and aspirational national narrative based on the best version of ourselves: that we are a people defined by our pursuit of a set of ideals about creating a society where we all can be meaningfully and sustainably free.



1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso, 1983.

2. E.O Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, New York: Liveright, 2011, pp. 31, 42-47, 226-227, 243; Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*, London: Vintage, 2018, pp. 385-424; Pascal Boyer and Pierre Liénard, “Ingredients of ‘rituals’ and their cognitive underpinnings.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 375 (2020); David Samson, *Our Tribal Future: How to Channel our Foundational Human Instincts Into a Force for Good*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2023, pp. x-xii, 4-5.

3. William H. McNeill, “The Care and Repair of the Public Myth,” *Foreign Affairs*, 61:1 (Fall 1982), p. 1; Jill Lepore, *This America: The Case for the Nation*, New York: Liveright (2019), pp. 3-4.

4. Colin Woodard, *Union: The Struggle to Forge the Story of United States Nationhood*, New York: Viking, 2020.

Where do Americans currently stand?

Throughout U.S. history, Americans have fought over whether to define themselves via those civic ideals in the Declaration of Independence or authoritarian ethnonationalist assertions holding that the country rightly belongs to a subset of its people whose will, interests, and cultural practices should prevail. The latter narrative was dominant, federation-wide, from the 1890s through the 1950s; the civic story from the 1960s until now.⁵

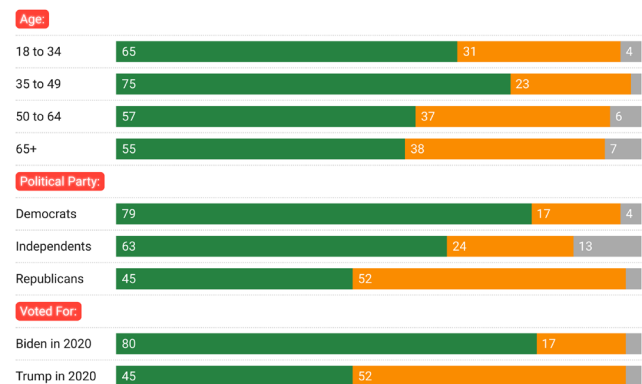
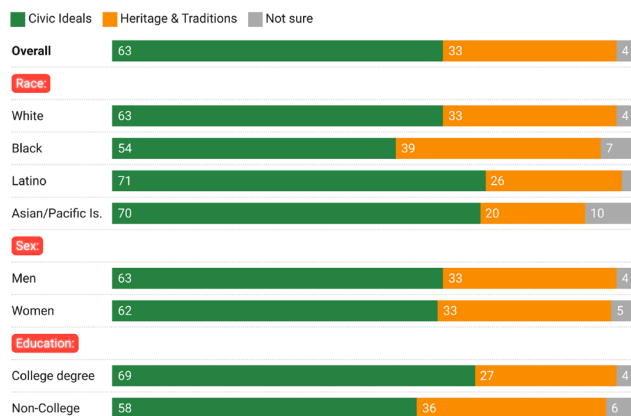
In April 2024, Nationhood Lab and our pollster, Embold Research, conducted a nationwide survey of 1,567 Americans asking if they preferred to define their country by its commitment to civic ideals or by shared ancestry, history, traditions or culture.⁶ We found ideals-based definitions of the country were preferred by nearly every demographic category including men, women, whites, Blacks, Latinos, people with and without college

educations, and across all generations and regional cultures. The major exceptions were Republicans and people who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 election, overlapping categories that each constitute about 28 percent of eligible American voters.

Sixty-three percent of Americans preferred the statement that we are united “not by a shared religion or ancestry or history, but by our shared commitment to a set of American founding ideals: that we all have inherent and equal rights to live, to not be tyrannized, and to pursue happiness as we each understand it” over one embraced by 33 percent of respondents that said we are united “by shared history, traditions, and values and by our fortitude and character as Americans, a people who value hard work, individual responsibility, and national loyalty.” Forty-five percent of Republicans and Trump 2020 voters preferred the civic version, joining 63% of independents and 79% of self-identified Democrats.

Defining U.S. Nationhood: Civic vs Heritage, Traditions & Character

Are we united by commitment to the founding ideals in the Declaration or by history, traditions, values and character?



Credit: John Liberty/Motiv for Nationhood Lab

Source: Nationhood Lab poll of 1,570 registered voters fielded by Embold Research, Mar/April 2024 • Created with Datawrapper

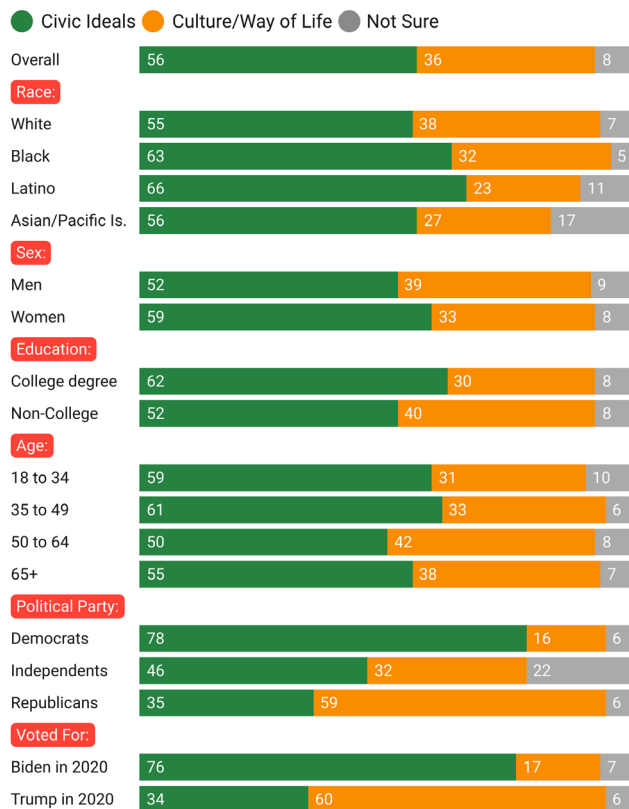
5. *Ibid.*

6. Additional details and links to topline and methodology statements can be found on the Nationhood Lab website: <https://www.nationhoodlab.org/most-americans-define-the-u-s-by-adherence-to-ideals-rather-than-heritage-ancestry-or-traditions-a-new-pell-center-nationhood-lab-poll-finds/>

Fifty-six percent of respondents said they agreed more with a statement that Americans “are duty-bound to defend one another’s inherent rights” and have a shared commitment “to building a more free, just, and equal nation” over one that said we “are duty-bound to defend our culture, interests, and way of life” and are committed “to building a more free, prosperous, and secure nation,” which was preferred by 36 percent of the survey participants.

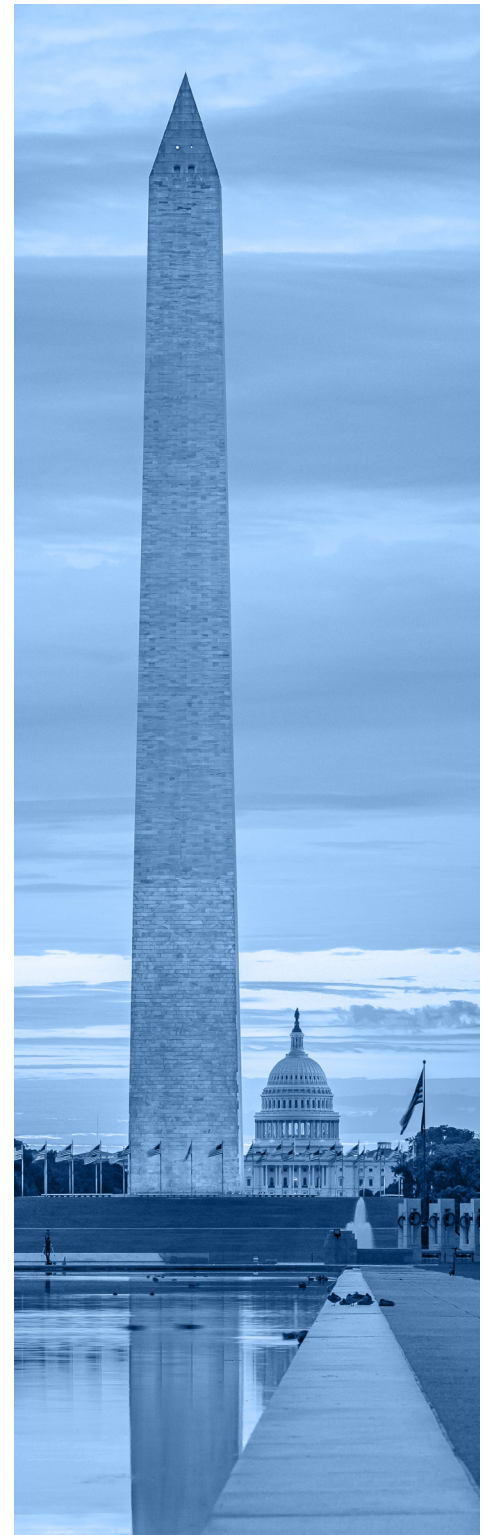
The American Experiment: upholding the Declaration's values or defending our interests?

Americans' ultimate duty: to defend one another's rights or our culture, interests and way of life?



Credit: John Liberty/Motiv for Nationhood Lab

Source: Nationhood Lab poll of 1570 registered voters fielded by Embold Research, Mar/April 2024 • Created with Datawrapper



In June 2024, Nationhood Lab and Embold conducted a battery of in-depth qualitative interviews with representative respondents to better understand their feelings about the country's purpose and various aspects of the Declaration's ideals. In open-ended warm-up questions about America's purpose, interviewees from a wide range of socioeconomic, demographic and regional backgrounds began quoting or paraphrasing the language in the opening of the Declaration unprompted. There was near universal support for the Declaration's ideals, though many respondents felt the U.S. has not been realizing them in practice.

These, along with the results of two additional national surveys conducted in August 2024, showed the Declaration's ideals are already hardwired into many Americans' minds. We believe these latent civic national inclinations can be roused to revitalize Americans' commitment to the United States' liberal democratic experiment.⁷

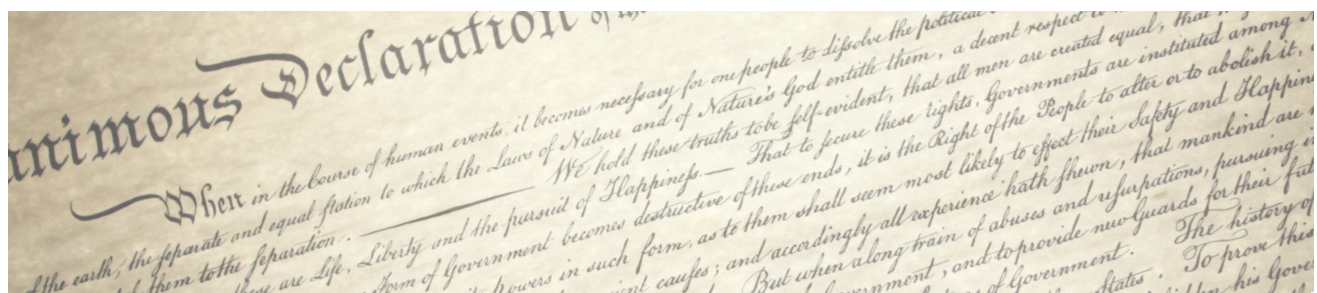
Mutual Protection of Inherent Rights

● Strongly agree ● Somewhat agree ● Not sure ● Somewhat disagree ● Strongly disagree



Q: The Declaration of Independence tells us that the government exists to protect the rights of people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Do you agree or disagree that as Americans, it's our job to protect one another's rights to these things?

Source: Nationhood Lab/Embold Research poll of 2,734 registered voters, August 2024.



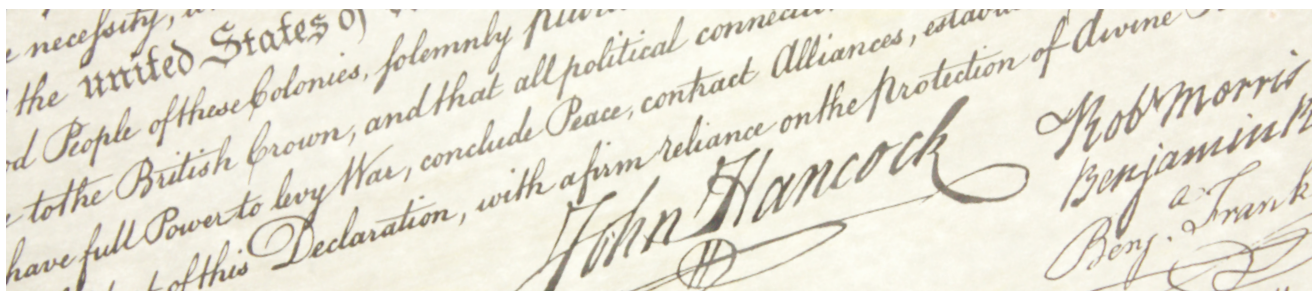
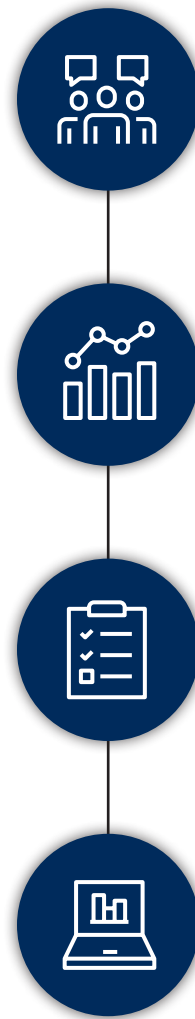
7. Additional details can be found at <https://www.nationhoodlab.org/survey-results-americans-overwhelmingly-oppose-election-subversion-aggressive-book-bans-but-split-on-partisan-lines-over-voter-suppression-and-presidents-being-above-law/>

Methodology

To develop and test a “rebooted” civic national narrative, Nationhood Lab took information learned from 25 in-depth qualitative interviews to develop rival messaging options for the various components of a Declaration-derived script of what the United States is supposed to be. We partnered again with Embold to conduct a larger national poll (n=2,734) to determine what language was most effective and with which segments of the adult population. Separately, we partnered with More in Common and their pollsters, YouGov, to test the same material with 1,000 individuals from their Hidden Tribes model, which segments respondents based not on income, education, or race, but on their core underlying beliefs based on decades of academic work by moral and political psychologists.⁸

We also drew on findings relating to certain words, phrases, and approaches relating to democracy and civics produced by other organizations. These included the cross-partisan political reform group Issue One’s extensive 2022 surveys on messaging to support democratic electoral reforms (A New Narrative for American Democracy); the reports of the non-partisan Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement’s 2022 Civic Language Perceptions Project; and More in Common’s 2022 American Identity Research Project. Narrative language around “pride and reckoning” comes from the work of New America’s Theodore R. Johnson, while our analysis of the Declaration’s ideals drew deeply from Harvard University scholar Danielle Allen’s line-by-line study, *Our Declaration*.⁹

Throughout our research we sought to determine if custom narratives would better resonate in particular segments of the American population. We found, with one partial exception, that the answer was “no.”



8. Our research on the creation of a new national narrative can be found at: <https://www.nationhoodlab.org/a-new-national-narrative/>

9. Issue One, “A New Narrative for American Democracy,” research report, September 2022; Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, “America + Civic Language,” research report, October 2022; Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, “Civic Language Guidance: Wisdom from the Field,” research report, December 2022; More in Common, “Defusing the History Wars: Finding Common Ground in Teaching America’s National Story,” research report, December 2022; Theodore R. Johnson, “A son kneels for the anthem. A father raises the flag. Both are patriots,” *Washington Post*, 8 March 2023; Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration*, New York: Liveright, 2014.



Results: the core narrative frame

Our research produced the following core narrative for a U.S. civic national narrative. This narrative frame isn't intended for rote repetition, but rather as a guide for both long-form talking points and also as a source from which to break out shorter components for use in, say, a social media post or a television soundbite.

We're a nation defined not by shared bloodlines, religion, or history, but by a commitment to a set of ideals, the world-changing propositions about inherent rights of humans set forth in our opening statement as a people, the Declaration of Independence. That every one of us has a set of intrinsic rights given to them by the universe or God or, as the Declaration puts it, Nature's God:

- *to survive;*
- *to live safe in their own person, free from domination;*
- *to live the life they choose for themselves;*
- *and to take part in determining who represents us and in holding them accountable.*

And that we are, as Americans, in a covenant to defend one another's natural rights to these things. That's the American Promise, our mutual pledge to uphold these inalienable rights. And the American Experiment is the effort – despite the despotic track record of human history – to build a nation, a society, a world where that is possible. We're a people united by our commitment to uphold and defend this experiment, lest it perish from the Earth.

These are the ideals Frederick Douglass fought for in every speech he gave. This is Lincoln at Gettysburg and Martin Luther King Jr. on the Mall. They're ideals we've spent 250 years struggling to achieve, ideals contested from the outset by those who would make our country something far less, just another nation-state built on blood – tribal kinship, inherited rule, inherited slavery or inherited servitude – where rights are things granted by superiors when they are granted at all. Americans fought a Civil War over them at home and a World War for them abroad and advanced them at Seneca Falls, Selma and Stonewall. They're ideals each generation must fight for and that we fight for today. We reckon with our shortcomings, take pride in our advances, and pledge ourselves to make our Union more perfect.

Results: a variant for conservative audiences

We found the core narrative to be very effective across demographic, regional, and ideological segments. For general or mixed audiences, it's the ideal "go to" script. When speaking to uniformly conservative audiences, however, our research showed this modified script to be more effective.

We're a nation defined not by shared bloodlines, religion, or history, but by a commitment to a set of ideals, the world-changing propositions about inherent rights of humans set forth in our opening statement as a people, the Declaration of Independence. That every one of us has a set of intrinsic rights given to them by the universe or God:

- to survive;
- **to not be tyrannized**
- to live the life they choose for themselves;
- and to take part in determining who represents us and in holding them accountable.

Republicans and evangelicals both strongly preferred this alternative construction.

*And that we are, as Americans, in a covenant to defend one another's natural rights to these things. That's the American Promise, our mutual pledge to uphold these inalienable rights. And the American Experiment **is a project to protect one another's rights by governing ourselves.** We're a people united by our commitment to uphold and defend this experiment, lest it perish from the Earth.*

This construction was preferred by Republicans (+24), Men (+14), white people (+9), those over the age of fifty (+18) and sixty-five (+10)

*These are the ideals Frederick Douglass fought for in every speech he gave. This is Lincoln at Gettysburg and Martin Luther King Jr. on the Mall. They're ideals we've spent 250 years struggling to achieve, ideals contested from the outset by those who would make our country something far less, just another nation-state built on blood – tribal kinship, inherited rule, inherited slavery or inherited servitude – where rights are things granted by superiors when they are granted at all. **Americans fought for these ideals at Valley Forge and Yorktown, in the trenches of France and on the beaches of Normandy.** They're ideals each generation must fight for and that we fight for today. We reckon with our shortcomings, take pride in our advances, and pledge ourselves to make our Union more perfect.*

This construction, which replaces references to domestic struggles for freedom and equality, was overwhelmingly preferred by Republicans (+32), but not by Democrats (-27), Black people (-28) or people under 35 (-20).

A note on language

The scripts above can and should be used, adapted and altered by users so as to fit their own speaking, writing, or conversational needs, preferences, and styles. The language in the Declaration and other founding documents and essays were written in the late 18th century, and can sound lofty and archaic, so as we were developing these narrative scripts, we tested alternative phrasing using simpler, everyday language. In some cases, people found the “demystified” language significantly more compelling, but often they did not. We surmised this is because specific phrases in some of our founding documents have acquired “sacred” authority and impact, similar to the rhetorical power – even in secular contexts – of many passages of the English translation of the Bible ordered by King James I in 1604. Most Americans feel comfortable mixing these elements into everyday speech so long as the meaning of the older language is clear.

Rebuttals

In our polling and in-depth qualitative interviews, we found most Americans want America to be defined by civic ideals according to those set forth in the Declaration. However, many are skeptical of the country’s track record in implementing or upholding these ideals. They will initially share they are upset with American democracy or the lofty words in the Declaration precisely because of their deep commitment to the Declaration’s ideals. They’re upset because they feel these ideals have been ignored or betrayed, not because they don’t support them.

Self-described conservatives and progressives often speak in similar language about the country’s purpose, but see the threats to the Declaration’s ideals differently. Progressives frequently reference the country’s historic betrayals – especially slavery and the southern racial caste system – while conservatives often cite perceived interference in social and economic affairs arising from the creation and expansion of the modern administrative state. In our in-depth interviews with respondents, we found both sets of concerns flowed from a concern that the Declaration’s ideals were not being upheld. The propositions in the Declaration thus provide a common set of values that can serve as a shared foundation upon which more constructive debate can take place.

For both groups – and especially progressive critics – we found that a clear and upfront acknowledgment that the Declaration’s ideals remained aspirational fostered confidence and support for statements of national purpose tied to those ideals.

Conclusions

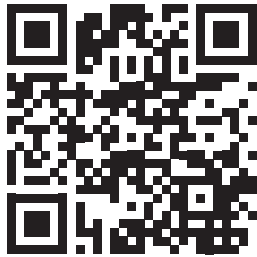
The ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence, our opening statement as a people, provide Americans a powerful and effective story of common purpose. Our polling and qualitative research found these ideals are very broadly shared and endorsed across gender, generational, racial, income, educational, regional, and partisan grounds. These ideals, which enshrine, justify, and guide the American Experiment in building a society where individuals can be maximally and sustainably free, have near “sacred” status in our culture. This guide provides research-driven insights on how to express these ideals to 21st century audiences in a coherent and effective fashion.

Credits/Acknowledgments

This report was written by Colin Woodard, director of Nationhood Lab. Nationhood Lab's polls were conducted by Embold Research and YouGov, and Embold conducted our in-depth, qualitative interviews. The graphics appearing on pages four and five were created by John Liberty of Motivf, the geospatial consultancy with which we partner. The graphic on page six was created by Embold Research. The page designs for this report were created by Avery Rose-Craver at Salve Regina University's Marketing and Communications department.

Nationhood Lab is a privately funded initiative of the Pell Center at Salve Regina University to study, understand, and communicate the story of America. Its research, data journalism, and publications are available online—where you may also support the lab's work:

www.nationhoodlab.org





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