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Meet the Americans Trying to Lower the Temperature in Politics

Groups bring red and blue partisans together, one conversation at a time; ‘We just need it to happen on the scale of millions.’

By *Aaron Zitner* [Follow](#)

Dec. 25, 2023 5:00 am ET

At the height of his anger at Democrats, Adam Wilkinson started a sloganeering T-shirt company called Failed Understanding—the initials were the point—and promoted it on his blog, where he often complained in crass language about the “socialist government,” former President Barack Obama and, later, the stay-at-home mandates intended to tame Covid-19.

This year, the logistics supervisor from rural Minnesota found himself onstage in front of hundreds of people, changed in his debating style but not his political views. Next to him was Dr. Francis Collins, the former National Institutes of Health director and an architect of federal Covid policies that had divided the nation.

Both men had come to believe that political animosity was a grave danger to the country—and that they, themselves, were part of the problem. The scientist and the blue-collar worker, who said he had “spent more time in bars in my adult life than in a classroom,” were trying to learn from each other about their political blind spots.

One conversation at a time, groups such as Braver Angels, which sponsored the discussion at its annual meeting this year, are aiming to lower the temperature in politics by encouraging Americans to leave their partisan corners and listen closely to those with differing views. They are part of a growing bridge-building movement that has drawn in tens of thousands of Americans as participants, many of whom see themselves as part of an “exhausted majority” worried that the coarseness in politics is tearing the fabric of civic life.



Adam 'Wilk' Wilkinson, left, and Francis Collins in conversation for an event with the group Braver Angels this summer. PHOTO: BRAVER ANGELS

These groups have won increased support from the donor community, including one alliance of right-of-center and liberal foundations that says it has raised about \$40 million in less than three years toward a \$100 million goal. They are also drawing from the work of social-science researchers at Stanford, Northwestern and many other universities who are testing which messages in ads and in-person conversations show the most promise in guiding Americans toward more productive forms of debate.

“We’re not trying to change peoples’ minds about issues. We’re trying to change their minds about each other,” said Bill Doherty, a Minnesota family and marriage therapist who created the first protocols for how Braver Angels brings “red” and “blue” voters together in conversation.

Massive divide

Their biggest challenge: Incivility is a relentless force. Partisan news outlets and social media promote stories that fuel outrage within one party or the other. Former President Donald Trump is incendiary in insulting his opponents, vowing to investigate and punish his critics if he wins in 2024. President Biden has said “MAGA Republicans” threaten democracy, which has made some in the GOP feel their beliefs are under threat.

Social scientists say that the brew of political messages signals to Americans that they are under assault from their political opponents, which cements them into their partisan viewpoints and prompts them to demonize the opposing party even further. The result: More than 60% in each party feel those in the other party are immoral, dishonest and close-minded, the Pew Research Center found last year. About 80% in each party believe the other party’s agenda would “destroy America as we know it,” a fall 2022 NBC News survey found.

Many of the bridging groups are puzzling over how to scale up their efforts to match the size of the problem. “The one-on-one stuff is what we need to happen. We just need it to happen on the scale of

millions,” said Stephen Hawkins, research director for the group More in Common.

Another hurdle is persuading the most partisan voters to participate, particularly Republicans. As a group they are more resistant, said Lilliana Mason, a political scientist at Johns Hopkins University who studies the role of group identity in politics. “The challenge is not once they’re at the table—it’s getting them to the table,” she said. “Democrats love this stuff: ‘Let’s have a dialogue.’ Of course a few Republicans are willing, but they’re going to be the low-hanging fruit.”

Kevin Roberts, the president of the conservative Heritage Foundation, offered a mix of openness and resistance to the efforts to reduce partisan tensions. He praised groups in the movement but said they couldn’t succeed until “leftist totalitarians” had given up control of civic institutions.

“What I foresee is a short period of conservatives needing to punch, and being innovative and forceful at the federal level, so we can put the left back in the teeny box that they deserve to live in,” Roberts said. “And then those efforts on revitalizing civil society will bear fruit.”

Thousands of other Americans, by contrast, say they are eager today to work with groups such as Braver Angels, Wilkinson and Collins among them.



Passionate opponents and supporters of former President Donald Trump clashed earlier this year at a Democratic Party of Orange County event in California. PHOTO: PAUL BERSEBACH/ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/GETTY IMAGES

Breaking down stereotypes

Just after the 2016 election, David Lapp, who lives in a Cincinnati-area county that backed Trump, was on the phone with a former work colleague in Manhattan, David Blankenhorn. They were troubled by the divisions—and the outright hatred they heard—touched off by Trump’s surprise victory. “On the Upper West Side, everyone was walking around devastated,” Lapp recalled. “And here, people were talking about hope and change.”

As an experiment, they persuaded 11 Hillary Clinton voters and 10 Trump voters to meet in an Ohio community center for a weekend of conversation. Doherty created the agenda, drawing from marriage counseling: Each party would meet separately at the start and come up with a list of the most common false stereotypes of their group—what they think the other party believes incorrectly about them.

Then, they would ask what was true of themselves, instead. Finally, they would ask themselves to acknowledge any kernel of truth to the stereotype. Only then would the two parties meet and discuss how each side sees the other.

A central goal was to reduce “false polarization”—the misperception that the people in the other party are more extreme in their views than is true.

The protocol has remained the model of Braver Angels workshops, which are rigorous in pairing “red” and “blue” participants in equal numbers. Commonly, Doherty says, Republicans in their private meeting will complain that they are viewed as anti-immigrant but then acknowledge that some of their political leaders amplify the stereotype by using anti-immigrant rhetoric. Democrats often complain that they are viewed as “tax-and-spend” liberals but then might allow that they have a tendency to favor a federal program when there might be other alternatives.

Other bridging groups were forming at about the same time. In Britain, More in Common came together after the politically motivated murder in 2016 of Jo Cox, a member of Parliament and prominent advocate against Britain leaving the European Union and in favor of accepting Syrian refugees. The group has 45 employees and teams in five countries, Hawkins said. It sponsors research and outreach programs, including one intended to provide information intended to raise confidence in the U.S. voting system.

One bridging network, the Listen First Coalition, now claims 500 civic, academic and religious groups as members, as well as businesses. Braver Angels says more than 33,000 people have participated in its programs.

Donor interest in the movement was also increasing. Stand Together Trust is a philanthropy founded by Charles Koch, the industrialist known for his libertarian-tinged conservative activism. It joined about two years ago with other philanthropies, including several known for liberal views, to form a group called the New Pluralists. It has set a \$100 million fundraising goal.

Rethinking the Covid pandemic

Wilkinson, the operations manager for a distribution company, had little interest in politics until the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which he remembers as a moment of national unity. When he started hearing people turn on President George W. Bush shortly afterward, he bristled.

“That’s how I started paying attention to politics, because—what’s happening here?” said Wilkinson, 48, who lives in Clearwater, Minn. “Why did we go from everyone standing together to fight this global war on terror to all these awful things being said about President Bush?”

He started listening to conservative talk radio, “and I’m becoming more and more angry with the people on the other side of the political divide,” he said. Then came the anti-corporate Occupy Wall Street movement, as well as Obama’s push for the Affordable Care Act and other Democratic proposals that Wilkinson derided for expanding government. He started taking his thoughts online and arguing there with people who challenged his views.

By the time he was approached by local Braver Angels leaders, Wilkinson had come to doubt that he was doing much good as a keyboard warrior. Now, he is a participant and coach with the group, joining in its red-blue debates and workshops while helping to lead a program that brings together working-class Americans. “They’re often spoken of but seldom spoken with,” he said.



Dr. Francis Collins was an architect of federal Covid-19 policies; Adam Wilkinson had little interest in politics until the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

STEFANI REYNOLDS/PRESS POOL; MONIKA WILKINSON PHOTOGRAPHY

Collins had just left his NIH post and was soon to be Biden’s acting science adviser when he set out to learn why federal policy aimed at saving lives during the pandemic had become so contentious. “I needed to understand how people who are not in my current bubble are seeing things about science and medicine in such a different way,” said Collins, speaking in his personal capacity.

Braver Angels paired him with Wilkinson, and they started talking.

They brought their continuing conversation to the Braver Angels annual meeting this summer. Wilkinson was still angry about the Covid mandates. “There’s kids that have been set back years in

their education,” he said. “There’s people that will never recover their business.” Shifting public health messages, he said, bred even more skepticism of the government.

Collins told the audience that public-health officials had placed “infinite value” on policies they thought would save lives and “zero value to whether this actually totally disrupts people’s lives.” The Covid vaccine wasn’t yet available, and officials felt a moral imperative to slow the alarming number of deaths.

“We weren’t really thinking about what that would mean to Wilk and his family in Minnesota, 1,000 miles away from where the virus was hitting so hard,” Collins said.

Collins has participated in several Braver Angels workshops and calls it a “noble enterprise.” But he isn’t ready to say depolarization efforts can work.

“I think it’s yet to be proven,” said Collins. He added: “It’s a steep hill to climb, but I think it’s worth every effort of creativity and determination.”

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Appeared in the December 27, 2023, print edition as ‘Groups Launch Efforts to Lower The Temperature in U.S. Politics’.