

Rebuilding Common Ground: An Agenda for 21st Century Democratic Health and Resilience

POLICY PAPER CONTRIBUTING TO THE CHALLENGE PAPER ON INEQUALITY AND EXCLUSION

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All over the world, countries at widely varying levels of development and with very different histories are grappling with a similar challenge: breakdown of common ground in politics.

The exact contours of the problem vary from one country to another, and variously include falling trust, declining citizen engagement in politics, shrinking civic space, rising autocratization, or increasing political polarization in public attitudes or political party positioning. Yet across these areas, there are underlying themes – above all, the emergence of concerns about whether citizens and leaders share a sense of the common good, or have the capacity to reach compromises on complex issues.

Summary

This paper seeks to take a comparative perspective to the issue, exploring not only how the problem manifests in different places around the world, but also – in particular – how leaders in both government and civil society are seeking to respond to it and rebuild common ground.

As we will see, at the heart of this complex and fast-moving agenda is one of the core underlying challenges in an age of rapid globalization: the tension between diversity and unity, or between what makes people different and what they have in common.

Regardless of their level of development, most countries are today grappling with stark divergences in opportunity, wealth, income, and influence between sections of the population. And in a more mobile and often more individualistic age, they also face the question of how to reconcile often marked differences in identity, culture, values, and worldview among their citizens.

In such conditions, it is not hard to see how such differences can become sources of deep tension and unease, especially among groups of citizens who perceive themselves to have been left behind or feel their values to be under threat.

Inevitably, the temptation for those who see such differences as threats is to seek to enforce unity – whether through more authoritarian forms of government, tighter controls on freedom of the press, attempting to reclaim sovereignty from supranational levels, or through policies that favor “in-groups” over “out-groups”.

Yet given that such approaches can easily trigger equally powerful counter-reactions from the other end of the political spectrum, there is a real risk that political and social cohesion can unravel as actors pull away from each other and from any sense of shared values, identities, or even interests.

This paper therefore aims to map out ways in which both political and civil society leaders and citizens alike can find their way back to common ground and the ability to make practical compromises on polarizing issues.

Part One of the paper explores a range of the factors that have been suggested as drivers of erosion of common ground, focusing primarily on four main areas:

- **Political trends** – including mistrust of elites and feelings of alienation from politics, perceptions of corruption, shifts in party affiliation, changes in media consumption, and trends in the digital space including the rise of social media
- **Economic trends** – including unemployment, wage stagnation, general economic insecurity, and inequality
- **Demographic and social trends** – including demographic change, immigration, sociological “sorting”, and clashes between different “values tribes”
- Underlying all of the first three areas, **psychological and behavioral dynamics** – including the perception of economic and security threats, social disconnection, or fears of change, of the future, or of loss outweighing gains

Part Two of the paper then explores ways in which leaders and citizens can find ways back to a shared sense of common ground, common identity, and common purpose – which in practice might involve three areas of endeavor.

- **“Untriggering” politics** by finding ways to reduce group-based threat perception
- **Addressing grievances** by finding ways to deal with underlying real world concerns about specific policy areas
- **Rebuilding common ground** by finding ways to develop a sense of empathy and common identity among citizens

The paper concludes by arguing that addressing these trends matters not only because of the risk that breakdown of common ground poses to democratic health, but also because rebuilding common ground is an essential prerequisite to tackling the defining global challenges of the 21st century and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Recommendations

- The paper recommends a multi-country Common Ground Index, gauging both sources of vulnerability (the kinds of issues explored in Part One of this paper) and of resilience (the areas covered in Part Two), drawing on both objective statistical indicators and subjective data from sources such as opinion polls or sample questionnaires to gauge perceptions and fears.

Untriggering politics

- Political leaders should take care to be seen to listen to, acknowledge, and address people's fears, including through political appointments or dedicated processes.
- Political leaders should use language carefully, avoiding dehumanizing terms, and civil society organizations should highlight instances in which leaders fail to do so.
- Political leaders should invest in values segmentation analysis to help them frame their messaging in ways that works to build rather than erode common ground, in particular to avoid activating contagious forms of threat perception.
- Political leaders should focus on ways of rebuilding trust, especially through political appointments and political apologies, as well as through responding to underlying grievances (see below).
- Political and civil society leaders should invest in mechanisms for building psychological resilience among publics in order to inoculate politics against contagious threat perception and enable citizens to choose how to react to events instead of acting from defensive instinct.

Addressing underlying grievances

- Political leaders should be willing to consider moderating the short term pace of change, for instance in economic opening, when public concerns are spiking.
- Political leaders should pay particular attention to social protection, including both objective coverage standards and subjective perceptions of it (e.g. adequacy of coverage, whether coverage is seen as better or worse than it used to be, conditionalities to qualify for assistance).
- Political leaders should consider major redistribution efforts as a potential remedy for grievances caused by income or wealth inequality and especially perceived relative deprivation, looking in particular at rents from unearned forms of wealth like land.
- Political leaders should develop clear visions for how to restore the relationship between citizens and states, in the first instance through taking a visibly zero tolerance approach to corruption.
- Political and civil society leaders should work together to improve transparency and citizen participation, and engagement, for instance through citizens' assemblies or through systematic consultation on major policies or reforms.
- Political and civil society leaders should look at ways of reforming multilateral institutions to make them more democratic and less open to the charge of being platforms for policy agendas perceived as benefiting elites more than publics.

Rebuilding common ground

- Political and civil society leaders should work together to develop shared national narratives, whether through political leadership, national dialogues, truth and reconciliation commissions, or other means.
- Political leaders should recognize that constitutional reforms are key moments at which citizens' confidence can be won or lost, and work to maximize participation at these moments even if this means processes take longer than they otherwise would.

- Political and civil society leaders should work together to look at reforms of political parties to make them less susceptible to capture, and in particular consider state funding of parties to reduce dependence on private donations or “dark money”.
- Civil society leaders should look at ways of creating processes to build social contact, empathy, and common ground between “values tribes”.

1. Why the center couldn't hold

Introduction

What makes democracies healthy and resilient? Until recently, this might have been seen as a question primarily for fragile or post-conflict states. Not any more. Across a wide range of countries, at all levels of development, recent years have seen the emergence of far-reaching concerns about the ability of both leaders and citizens to share an idea of the common good, or to reach compromises on complex issues.

- **Trust** has declined steadily in most countries since the financial crisis in 2008, not only in political leaders and governments, but also in other institutions like business, media, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The most recent Edelman Trust Barometer found that only 47 percent of people across 27 different countries said they trusted either government or the media.¹
- **Citizen engagement** in politics has been falling, too. Membership of political parties has declined in all regions over the period from 1994 to 2014, particularly in Latin America and Africa; voter turnout in elections has fallen globally from 75 percent in the 1980s to 65 percent now.²
- **Civic space** – the ability of citizens to organize, participate and communicate, all of which depends on states respecting their duties on citizens’ rights to associate, assemble, and express views – is shrinking.³ According to the most recent CIVICUS data, just 2 percent of the world’s people now live in countries classed as “open”, whereas 83 percent live in countries classified as “closed”, “repressed”, or “obstructed”.⁴
- **Democratic institutions** are under pressure. The last V-Dem Annual Democracy Report flagged that while the state of democracy is strong overall, “autocratization” is now manifesting in large countries in all regions, with factors that make elections meaningful – free media, freedom of expression, rule of law – all in decline.⁵
- Finally, concerns have emerged about **political polarization** in many countries, with political attitudes among citizens diverging to ideological or partisan extremes, erosion of a shared sense of common ground or common identity, and an associated loss of influence for centrist leaders and parties.

Although these trends are distinct from one another, they are also interlinked – with **breakdown of common ground and common values** right at the heart of them. Democracies depend on healthy political cultures as well as robust institutions, and on dense tapestries of identity, trust, reciprocity, and participation. When those tapestries start to fray, there is a risk of a vicious circle, as foresaw a century ago when Yeats wrote of what happens when “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”.⁶

While the overarching theme of breakdown of common ground plays out differently from one country to another, as we will see, it is also now very much a global trend, which is making itself seen in established democracies as well as fragile states.

Why are so many countries experiencing breakdown of common ground? A huge range of trends have been suggested as drivers: corruption, refugees, unemployment, immigration, wage stagnation, distrust of elites, political exclusion, austerity programs, racism, inequality, aging societies, youth bulges, declining political party alignment, changes in media consumption patterns, the rise of social media, and disrespect towards some groups of voters.

This part of the paper aims to make sense of this broad range of factors by exploring four areas that have been proposed as causes of breakdown of common ground:

- **Political trends** – including mistrust of elites and feelings of alienation from politics, perceptions of corruption, shifts in party affiliation, changes in media consumption, and trends in the digital space including the rise of social media
- **Economic trends** – including unemployment, wage stagnation, general economic insecurity, and inequality, with a particular emphasis on perceived relative deprivation
- **Cultural, demographic and social trends** – including demographic change, immigration, sociological “sorting”, and clashes between different “values tribes”
- **Psychological and behavioral dynamics** – including loneliness and social disconnection, anxiety, lack of self-worth, and fear – of change, for instance, or of the future, or of loss outweighing gain

Political trends

Starting with politics itself, where recent years have seen a range of seismic shifts both in how politics works, and in how its practitioners are perceived: a growing disconnect between rulers and the ruled; anger about political exclusion and lack of respect; perceptions that supranational organizations are too powerful and unaccountable; a growing crisis of trust; and the new phenomenon of social media helping people to extremes rather than towards common ground.

Perceptions of political elites and the political process

Corruption, first, has been a common factor in the breakdown of common ground in one country after another.

In Brazil, for instance, the shift in power in the recent election was facilitated by a wave of popular outrage about reported instances of corruption revealed through the “Lava Jato” (Car Wash) investigation.⁷ In the Philippines, President Duterte was elected on a platform of promising to dismiss anyone on “just a whiff” of corruption, and has won popularity by sacking officials suspected of corruption, as has President Magufuli of Tanzania.⁸

In the United States (US), Donald Trump has consistently and successfully played on the need to “drain the swamp” in Washington DC. And in Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad was elected on a populist platform in 2018, in large part on the back of popular revulsion at the “1MDB” corruption scandal involving former Prime Minister Najib Razak.⁹

Perceptions of elite corruption are in turn part of a larger story of **disconnect between the rulers and the ruled**. In both developed and emerging countries, politics has become increasingly dominated by highly educated, liberal elites, often linked through a range of formal and informal networks, and who share

common backgrounds and outlooks – which can often seem worlds apart from those of the average citizen, and in particular those of working class and less educated voters.¹⁰ In the United Kingdom (UK), for instance, only 3 percent of Members of Parliament have experience of manual labor; in the US, 93 percent of House members and 99 percent of Senators have university degrees, compared to a 32 percent national average.¹¹

As Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille put it, politicians are “almost always wealthier, more educated, and more likely to come from white collar jobs than the citizens who elect them.”¹² And given that elites have become so homogenous in their backgrounds and outlooks, they also become vulnerable to perceptions that they are unduly responsive to influence from other voices from the same background, whether pressure groups, lobbyists, or business.

Perceptions that elites have more in common with each other than with the citizens they represent can be especially toxic when they are combined with particular segments of voters perceiving themselves as suffering from **political exclusion**.

In many countries, such perceptions have converged with ethnic identity, as for instance with political tensions around independence or secessionist movements in countries from India to Indonesia, from Turkey to Thailand, or from Spain to Sri Lanka. In some cases, such tensions have had catastrophic results, as in Kenya’s post-election crisis in 2007-08 (when mass protests followed widespread allegations of electoral manipulation, leading to inter-ethnic violence that caused more than a thousand deaths), or – far more extreme – the Rwandan genocide of 1994 in which over half a million people died.¹³ More broadly, the 2011 World Development Report noted that political exclusion is associated with a higher risk of civil war.¹⁴

Perceptions of **class-based disrespect** have also become salient in many countries. Writing of the US and UK, for example, Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin note that “...those who vote for national populists are ridiculed and dismissed as ‘hillbillies’, ‘rednecks’, ‘chavs’, or ‘Little Englanders’. Hillary Clinton described half of Trump’s supporters as a ‘basket of deplorables’, people whose views were ‘racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, you name it’.”¹⁵

Similar dynamics often arise in developing countries, too, as for instance in Afghanistan or Thailand where supporters of the Taliban or of Thaksin Shinawatra have been derided as rural peasants; in Venezuela where Chavez supporters have been portrayed as uneducated workers; or in the Arab world, where grievances about “hogra” (a term from Algerian dialect conveying a sense of disdain and contempt by elites for the population) were a key factor in the 2011 Arab Spring.

Popular cynicism about politics has also often flourished when supranational institutions – such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), or even the United Nations (UN) – are perceived to enjoy too much power, to the detriment of national sovereignty. The IMF, for example, has long been a target of the left, with critics arguing that the organization is undemocratic, infringes on the sovereignty of low and middle income countries, and that its policies hurt the poor; more recently, the European Central Bank (ECB) became a focus for popular anger in Greece during the country’s bailouts.¹⁶

The UN, meanwhile, has attracted fury from the right on issues such as migration (with the recent UN Global Compact for Refugees proving particularly controversial), while promises to “take back control” from the European Union were central to the “Leave” campaign during the UK’s Brexit referendum.¹⁷

Trust and political engagement

All of these factors have contributed to a growing **crisis of trust** in many countries. Among 28 countries tracked by the Edelman Trust Barometer, the institutions of only four countries – China, Indonesia, India, and the UAE – enjoyed net positive trust “to do what is right” among their general populations in the 2019 report. Another four (Singapore, Mexico, the Netherlands, and Malaysia) were neutral – leaving 20 countries’ institutions with net trust scores below 50 percent, and 8 countries (Australia, France, Poland, the UK, Ireland, South Africa, Japan, and Russia) at 40 percent or lower.¹⁸

Falling trust in government does not necessarily equate with support for strongman authoritarianism, of course. Data from the Pew Research Center on 38 different countries at all income levels found that in 2017, 78 percent of people agreed with representative democracy as a “good” form of governance compared to 17 percent who thought it “bad”.¹⁹

Yet the same data also suggest that support for representative democracy may be relatively shallow: Pew’s Commitment to Representative Democracy Index found that only around a quarter of people across the 38 countries were “committed” democrats, while twice as many were “less committed”.²⁰

Meanwhile, as trust in political institutions and the political process has fallen, broader realignments and restructurings in politics have been unfolding. In country after country, **political engagement** has fallen. Global membership of political parties (as well as of churches and trade unions) declined dramatically from 1994 to 2014, with the decline especially pronounced in Latin America and Africa.²¹ Voter turnout has also declined markedly in many countries, falling from 75 percent in the 1980s to 65 percent today after a long period of stability from the 1940s to the 1980s.²²

Social media and news media

As parties have grappled with these trends, they have changed their campaigning and financing models. In particular, online campaigning tools such as micro-targeting of political advertisements on **social media** have become core elements of any campaign arsenal – leading to widespread concerns about the potential for voters to be manipulated by hidden puppeteers funded by “dark money”.²³

In Trinidad, for example, the data company SCL, an affiliate of Cambridge Analytica, is reported to have undertaken a successful covert campaign designed to suppress youth turnout among Trinidad’s black population, with the aim of swaying the election towards Trinidad’s ethnically Indian UNC party.²⁴ In Brazil, meanwhile, news reports suggested that in the run-up to the election in 2018, the country’s 120 million WhatsApp users were heavily targeted with fake news and conspiracy theories.²⁵

The journalist Ryan Broderick, who specializes in digital campaigning and covered numerous elections from 2014 to 2018, argues that social media waves like Brazil’s have often followed a similar playbook of helping people towards extremes rather than towards finding common ground. Having covered social media campaigns in numerous elections around the world over the last several years, he observes that:

- The process often begins with local internet trolls, for instance AK-trolls in Turkey or the “MAGAsphere” in the US, with activists often recruited from other online forums like 4Chan, Jeuxvideo.com in France, or “banter” Facebook pages in the UK.
- Extremist influencers start to push content out to these forums, often in ways that require considerable finance, supported by algorithms that identify which content commands most attention, often coupled with harassment campaigns and rallies.
- Clusters of trolls and influencers (again, often with significant financial support) create more sophisticated groups within larger movements, such as Movimento Brasil Livre or the Proud Boys in

the US, Canada, UK and Australia, or reinvigorate older movements like Pegida in Germany, the Football Lads Alliance in the UK, or the Nordic Resistance Movement in Scandinavia.

- Surge capacity is then deployed to create a fake news blitz online, for instance pushing out localized rumor misinformation in India and Brazil, or via more traditional fake news in markets like the US, UK, or Australia.
- Larger right-wing news channels or tabloid newspapers lift viral stories from Facebook and other platforms and repackage them for mainstream audiences.²⁶

As Broderick’s last point implies, the changing shape of the **news media** is crucial for understanding the breakdown of common ground. Newspapers in many countries have struggled with steep drops in circulation and slumping advertising revenue, forcing many to cut staff. Similar trends have occurred in mainstream television news channels as more people get their news on social media, or via cable or “narrowcast” channels.²⁷

While much traffic still goes to mainstream news sites, their share has declined as news producers have struggled to find viable business models, forcing many to retreat behind paywalls (leaving poorer voters, in particular, more reliant on lower quality news sources), or to prioritize impact and immediacy over accurate news coverage.²⁸

As these trends have unfolded, voters have lost trust in the media. Globally, nearly 7 in 10 people worry about fake news being used as a weapon; 63 percent agree that the average person does not know how to distinguish good journalism from rumor; and 59 percent say that it is becoming harder to tell if a piece of news was produced by a respected media organization.²⁹ Majorities now also agree that news organizations are more interested in attracting large audiences than reporting the story (66 percent). Nor does the shift to social media as a news platform imply greater trust of the news found there: 57 percent of social media news consumers say in polls that they expect news there to be “largely inaccurate”.³⁰

To sum up so far, then, a wide range of shifts in the political system can be linked to a breakdown of common ground, including loss of faith in political elites and of trust in the political process; growing sense of political alienation and cynicism among sizeable groups of voters; and far-reaching changes in the media landscape that amplify the political effect of these changes. As we will see in the next section, though, political shifts are just the first piece of the puzzle.

Economic trends

Lack of opportunities

Next, consider the role of economic shifts in driving breakdown of common ground, starting with the risks that arise when economic opportunities are absent.³¹

Perceptions – and in many cases realities – of **falling social mobility** are especially significant. In most developed countries, it now takes four or five generations for the offspring of low income families to reach average income, and people have become steadily more pessimistic about social mobility prospects over the last two decades.³² In emerging economies, it takes even longer for low income families to reach average income: seven generations in India and China, and nine in Brazil and South Africa (although social mobility is improving overall in East Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa).³³ Africa and South Asia, the two regions with most of the world’s poorest people, have on average the lowest social mobility of all regions.³⁴

In developing countries, **lower GDP per capita** is “robustly associated” with large-scale political conflict according to the 2011 World Development Report, with particular risks for countries with large youth bulges: youth unemployment is consistently cited in citizen perception surveys as a motive for joining rebel movements in developing countries.³⁵ And although millions of people have escaped poverty in the last decade, they often face real **risks of falling back into poverty** as a result of chronic vulnerability to shocks, lack of buffers to those shocks (such as savings or social protection safety nets), and ways in which households respond to insecurity (such as selling assets or taking children out of school).³⁶

Wage stagnation is a key issue in many developed countries, meanwhile, with advanced G20 members’ real wage growth declining from 0.9 percent to 0.4 percent in 2017 (emerging and developing G20 countries, by contrast, saw real wage growth fluctuate between 4.9 percent and 4.3 percent in the same year).³⁷ Against this backdrop, in-work poverty has emerged as a key concern in many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states: in France, for example, the *gilets jaunes* movement has been rooted among workers who protest that they are unable to afford the cost of living despite being employed.³⁸

Inequality and globalization

The political impact of these trends in both richer and poorer countries is accentuated by the global backdrop of steeply rising **wealth and income inequality** between the world’s rich and poor people.

Statistics such as the richest 1 percent of the world’s people now own 45 percent of global wealth have become major news stories, and the perceptions that such numbers create, together with the high visibility in the media of the lifestyles of the very rich, can easily become focuses for populist discontent.³⁹ They erode trust, too: there is clear evidence that in countries with higher inequality, citizens are less likely to believe that their political system is working, or that institutions can be trusted.⁴⁰

But it also appears that different kinds of inequality lead to different kinds of outcomes, with evidence to suggest that vertical inequality (inequality among individuals or households) is more likely to lead to increased crime, while horizontal inequality (among groups, for instance on ethnic or religious lines) is more associated with armed conflict.⁴¹

Inequality is also especially relevant where it is coupled with perceptions of unfair distribution of impacts of austerity programs. As already noted, critics of IMF structural adjustment policies in developing countries have long argued that such policies have disproportionately negative impacts on poor people. In the wake of the financial crisis, such arguments have become louder in many developed countries too – especially when coupled with criticism of bank bailouts, and perceptions that loose monetary policies such as quantitative easing have benefited banks rather than ordinary people.⁴²

Some commentators have used these factors to argue that **globalization and neoliberal policies** have helped political polarization and populism to flourish. Dani Rodrik, for example, argues that “economic history and economic theory both provide ample grounds for anticipating that advanced stages of economic globalisation would produce a political backlash” – although he notes that the form this backlash takes varies by region, tending towards left wing populism in Latin America and Southern Europe, and right wing populism in Northern Europe.⁴³

This difference, he suggests, is partly due to the forms in which globalization shocks make themselves felt in society. In Northern Europe, the most recent shock has centered on immigration and refugees, enabling populist politicians to mobilize citizens along ethno-national lines. In Latin America and Southern Europe, by contrast, recent shocks have mainly been about trade, finance, and foreign investment – pointing

towards mobilization instead along lines of income or social class. In the US, he argues, both kinds of shock have been salient recently, hence producing polarization on both the right and the left.⁴⁴

Perceived relative deprivation

Above all, it is important to recognize that the link between economic issues and breakdown of common ground is more subtle than the idea that the poorer people are, the more likely they are to shift to political extremes. (Objective indicators like unemployment, low incomes, or poverty are in fact relatively poor predictors of support for right wing populism, for example.⁴⁵)

Instead, the data suggest that **perceived relative deprivation** – when people feel that their prospects are worse than they used to be, or that they are doing less well than their fellow citizens, or both – is the most important link between economic trends and polarization. Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin argue that this sense unites growing numbers of citizens across many countries in “strong fears ... that both they and their group are losing out relative to others in society, that a world of rising prosperity and upward social mobility has come to an end for them, and with it not just hope but respect.”⁴⁶

Such fears, they continue, are by no means limited to the lowest income voters and extend to increasing numbers of people in full time work, in middle classes, or among young people. In developed countries, they argue, such fears can be especially pronounced among white male workers who have few qualifications, who have become “especially likely to feel as though their status in society has declined relative to others and they are no longer fully recognised and valued members of wider society.”⁴⁷

Perceptions of relative deprivation can have a powerful geographical dimension, too. **Urban/periphery tensions** are especially important: as urbanization has become a defining trend of the early 21st century, it has brought with it tensions between wealthier and more cosmopolitan urban centers on one hand, and on the other more socially conservative and/or “left behind” peripheries, from central Anatolia in Turkey to the *banlieue* in France, from the Rust Belt in the US to Brazil’s poor north-eastern states, and from areas like Saxony in the former East Germany to disadvantaged rural areas in northern Thailand.

Like shifts in the political landscape, then, economic trends – and especially perceptions of relative disadvantage compared to other people – are widely seen as strongly relevant to breakdown of common ground. But there is also a third key area to explore: the role of cultural, demographic, and social trends.

Cultural, demographic and social trends

Not all analysts are convinced by arguments positing economic trends as key drivers of breakdown of common ground: some argue that social and cultural trends matter more.

Race and immigration, in particular, is often seen as a central factor. In Europe, the 2015 refugee crisis saw over 1 million people fleeing to the EU, mainly from Syria and Libya (although numbers fell sharply from 2016 onwards).⁴⁸ In the US, meanwhile, 2013 was the first year in which the majority of infants under age 1 were non-white; on current trends immigration will, by 2030, overtake births as the main source of young people, with non-Hispanic whites no longer a majority after 2045.⁴⁹

Trends like these have given powerful tools to populist leaders and parties including Donald Trump in the US, UKIP in the UK, La Lega in Italy, the FN in France, and even parties in countries that have actually experienced low levels of immigration, such as Fidesz in Hungary or the Law and Justice Party in Poland.⁵⁰

By contrast, many developing countries have welcomed far higher levels of refugees per capita, yet without seeing the same kind of political tensions emerge as a result. All seven of the countries with the highest refugee populations in the world – Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Jordan

– are outside the OECD, and while some of these countries have witnessed trends of polarization, authoritarianism, or declining civic space, in none of them do refugee numbers appear to be a principal cause.⁵¹

On the other hand, Mahmood Mamdani observes that during Africa’s colonial period, ethnicity was a key concept in how federated colonial states were organized. After decolonization, he continues, ethnicity remained central to many African states, with rigid distinctions emerging between “settlers” and “natives”, which then inevitably created tensions with increased migration and mobility.⁵²

While many societies at all stages of development have made significant progress in recent years towards greater **equality on issues of race, gender, and sexuality**, these shifts have also been linked to rising polarization in some contexts, especially when championed by high-profile international “identity politics” movements, which have become increasingly important sources of affiliation for many in progressive politics – and battlegrounds in culture wars.⁵³

Moves to end discrimination against minorities or increase reproductive and sexual health rights have been strongly resisted by conservative political lobbies, for example, and many developing countries have seen backlashes against gender equality, with reproductive health rights and Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgendered (LGBT) rights a particular focus.⁵⁴ In developed countries, too, gender issues have become more topical as polarization has increased, most obviously in the US (for instance around Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation as a Supreme Court justice).⁵⁵

Attitudes of mutual incomprehension or hostility across political divides are further compounded by **sociological sorting**, whereby people increasingly learn with, work with, befriend, and marry others of similar educational attainment and income level. As Lee Drutman observes, partisan political identities have in many countries become much more closely aligned with other social identities (whether religious, cultural, or geographical), with the effect that people’s collective sense of cultural, regional, and ethnic status becomes more and more linked to who they vote for – making politics feel much more emotional, and like a contest between competing ways of life.⁵⁶

The political significance of sociological trends like these centers on the underlying **values and worldviews** playing out through them. Although one way of looking at these values and how they have become polarized is on the traditional spectrum of left versus right (or progressive/liberal versus conservative in the US), other analysts have argued that the left/right spectrum is less helpful for mapping political polarization than divergences between those who support openness (for instance to immigration, free trade, or diversity) and on the other hand those who perceive these forms of change as risk rather than opportunity.⁵⁷

David Goodhart, for instance, proposes two “tribes” he calls “Somewheres” and “Anywheres”.⁵⁸ Somewheres, he writes, are rooted in specific places, usually where they grew up; value security and familiarity, and are conservative on cultural and social issues; tend not to have gone to university, do less well economically, and often experience social change as loss. Anywheres, on the other hand, like openness and mobility; are mainly graduates, who have left where they grew up to live in metropolitan centers at home or abroad; are comfortable with social change, and internationalist in outlook; and much more individualistic, tending to curate their identities rather than having them ascribed.

Another key fault line centers on divergent attitudes to religion. The rifts in this space take many forms, from the tensions between Sunni and Shia Islam in the Middle East to those between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar or Thailand, Hindus and Muslims in India, or towards minority religions such as

Yazidis in Syria. Overall, three quarters of the world’s population now lives in countries with significant levels of religious social hostilities, according to Pew Global Research.⁵⁹

As Karl Sharro observes, religiously motivated atrocities have an almost unique capacity to undermine common ground. Writing of the Islamic State, he notes that

“It is not just the shock of the group’s ultraviolent tactics that will linger long after it has lost all of its territory. Even more so, it will be remembered for dealing a severe blow—possibly a fatal one—to the idea of pluralism in the region. Coexistence will be hard to recover, whether between ethnicities, religions, or other identities. The group’s atrocities have had severe consequences that will take years, if not decades, to rectify. What trust existed between communities has been shredded.”⁶⁰

More broadly, many countries have experienced growing divides between religious and secularist worldviews ever since the western Enlightenment period. Many analysts, such as the religious writer Karen Armstrong, argue that the very modern phenomenon of religious fundamentalism is best understood as a reaction to forms of modernity that are experienced as overwhelming and threatening rather than as emancipatory.⁶¹

Another approach to understanding values and their place in wider culture is proposed by Jonathan Haidt in his idea of “**moral foundations**” as the key building blocks of social values.⁶² Haidt argues that five “innate and universally available psychological systems are the foundations of ‘intuitive ethics’.”⁶³

- **Care/harm** – focused on the ability to empathize with and dislike the pain of others, and hence emphasizing virtues like kindness, gentleness, and nurturing.
- **Fairness/cheating** – which stresses values such as justice, rights, and proportionality.
- **Loyalty/betrayal** – which underlines virtues such as patriotism, self-sacrifice for the group, and “one for all, all for one”.
- **Authority/subversion** – focused on virtues such as leadership and followership, including respect for traditional and deference to legitimate authority.
- **Sanctity/degradation** – underlining religious notions of ritual purity as well as the idea that “the body is a temple” (not necessarily in a religious sense) which can be desecrated by contaminants.

Haidt compares the “righteous mind” (humans’ capacity for moral values) to a tongue that has different taste receptors (the five moral foundations). Significantly, he argues that “secular Western moralities” and politicians on the left are “like cuisines that try to activate just one or two of these receptors – either concerns about harm and suffering, or concerns about fairness and injustice”. More conservative or right-leaning politicians, by contrast, are able to speak to the full range of moral foundations and hence “have a built-in advantage when it comes to cooking meals that voters like”.⁶⁴

While Haidt writes primarily from an American perspective, his moral foundations can readily be applied to other country contexts around the world. In countries in the Middle East and North Africa that experienced the Arab Spring, for example, tensions between secularist (and often repressive) regimes on one hand, and Islamist or Salafist opposition movements on the other, can easily be mapped in terms of the moral foundations concerning authority and sanctity.⁶⁵ In a different way, the same two moral foundations can also be used to make sense of tensions in Turkey between the AK party’s political base on one hand and secular, cosmopolitan constituencies in metropolitan centers like Istanbul on the other.

Underlying all of these typologies is the point that humans' capacity for seeing the world in tribal, in-group versus out-group ways can easily turn diversity of values systems into a basis for disagreement, polarization, and conflict, especially given the trend mentioned earlier towards sociological "sorting". As Liliana Mason puts it, "the anger that is driven by intergroup conflict may be actively harming our ability to reasonably discuss the important issues at hand. The angrier the electorate, the less capable we are of finding common ground on policies, or even of treating our opponents like human beings."⁶⁶

This may be especially important in understanding voters who tend towards authoritarianism, which the political scientist Karen Stenner argues results from some voters perceiving differences in values as a "normative threat" to the integrity of the moral order.⁶⁷ When this sense of normative threat is activated, she writes, people who might normally be tolerant of diversity can instead tip towards a strong desire for order and control, which is seen as a way of protecting the in-group's values and way of life. She writes,

"[T]he increasing license allowed by ... evolving cultures generates the very conditions guaranteed to goad latent authoritarians to sudden and intense, perhaps violent, and almost certainly unexpected, expressions of violence ... The kind of intolerance that springs from aberrant individual psychology, rather than the disinterested absorption of pervasive cultural norms, is bound to be more passionate and irrational, less predictable, less amenable to persuasion, and more aggravated than educated by the cultural promotion of tolerance."⁶⁸

By extension, Jonathan Haidt argues, conservative discontent about immigration may be seen as racist when in fact the issue is less about immigrants' race than their perceived values. He writes,

"Legal immigration from morally different cultures is not problematic even with low levels of assimilation if the numbers are kept low; small ethnic enclaves are not a normative threat to any sizable body politic. Moderate levels of immigration by morally different ethnic groups are fine, too, as long as the immigrants are seen as successfully assimilating to the host culture. When immigrants seem eager to embrace the language, values, and customs of their new land, it affirms nationalists' sense of pride that their nation is good, valuable, and attractive to foreigners. But whenever a country has historically high levels of immigration, from countries with very different moralities, and without a strong and successful assimilationist program, it is virtually certain that there will be an authoritarian counter-reaction, and you can expect many status quo conservatives to support it."⁶⁹

This leads us to a fourth and final area to consider in understanding the drivers that can lead to a breakdown of common ground: the role of psychological and behavioral dynamics.

Psychological and behavioral dynamics

As we have just seen, threat perception – for instance in the context of perceived challenges to established social norms – is a crucial psychological dynamic in understanding how a breakdown in common ground can come about. There is ample data to show that perception of threat changes how people think, and how they see each other. In particular, people who are "triggered" into fight-or-flight responses tend to display symptoms including anxiety, irritability, hyper-arousal and – especially – "othering": projecting the blame for the perceived threat, or for social ills generally, onto some archetypal "Other" (whether immigrants, policy elites, or people at the other end of a polarized political spectrum).⁷⁰

Until recently, psychologists have considered threat perception almost exclusively at the level of individuals, for instance in treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or anxiety (both of which can be understood as forms of unresolved threat perception). But increasingly, psychologists are starting to recognize that threat perception can also be group-based – at which point it becomes especially important from a political perspective.⁷¹

At the same time, as we saw in the section above on economics, perceptions of unfairness – whether political, social, or economic – are also powerful psychological drivers of grievance, and this is similarly consistent with what psychology would lead us to expect. Research on psychological games conducted under laboratory conditions shows that across a wide variety of cultures – from wage laborers in Siberia to nomads in Tanzania and from sedentary fishermen in Colombia to urban workers in Ghana – people place a high premium on fairness, and are willing to punish others to sanction unfair behavior even if doing so comes at a material cost to themselves.⁷²

Another potential psychological stressor for breakdown of common ground is loneliness and social disconnection, which has risen markedly in recent decades as societies have become more individualistic, and as the world has become more mobile. In developed countries, the growing number of single person households has been a key factor; in developing countries, a prime driver has been rapid urbanization and how it has disconnected young people from their communities.⁷³ Both dynamics can produce freedom, but also social disconnection.

In addition to presenting a dire public health burden – research suggests that loneliness is as harmful to health as smoking and worse than being obese⁷⁴ – loneliness matters for politics. Nearly seventy years ago, Hannah Arendt observed that “loneliness is the common ground of terror”, and there is strong evidence today to connect loneliness in individuals with vulnerability to radicalization and political extremism.⁷⁵ More broadly, loneliness can not only amplify the kinds of threat perception just discussed, but also undermine individuals’ sense of empathy, with quantitative data suggesting the potential for a feedback loop in which loneliness increases self-centeredness, which then drives more loneliness.⁷⁶

Blurring the line between politics and psychology

As these three examples of threat perception, perceptions of unfairness, and loneliness show, the link between mental health and well-being on one hand and “real world” political issues on the other has the potential to blur the line between politics and psychology, raising a host of largely unexplored questions for policymakers and psychologists alike.

On one hand, there is growing evidence that depression may be driven less by imbalances in brain chemistry, and more by causes in the world – many of them ultimately political in nature – than many psychologists have until recently supposed. The writer Johann Hari observes that,

“We all know that every human being has basic physical needs: for food, for water, for shelter, for clean air. It turns out that, in the same way, all humans have certain basic psychological needs. We need to feel we belong. We need to feel valued. We need to feel we’re good at something. We need to feel we have a secure future. And there is growing evidence that our culture isn’t meeting those psychological needs for many – perhaps most – people.”⁷⁷

As earlier sections have explored, these kinds of themes – belonging, feeling valued, feeling self-worth, believing in a secure future – are exactly the kinds of drivers that many commentators have argued are

closely intertwined with breakdown of common ground, whether in the context of economic security, cultural trends and values, or the stories that are propagated through news or social media.

And if real world trends have the power to affect people’s mental states, it is becoming increasingly clear that the opposite dynamic holds true too. Actors like Cambridge Analytica or “troll farms” have become adept at using psychological profiling and the reach of social media platforms to trigger threat perception responses in numbers of voters, for example, or to prompt them to see the world in “them-and-us” terms – with tangible real world political consequences.

But it becomes much harder for them to do so if those voters are able to manage their emotional and mental states, feel empathy for their fellow citizens, and share a sense of common identity and purpose. As Jonathan Haidt observes, humans have an innate capacity to become highly social “hive creatures” in the right conditions, and “...a nation that is full of hives is not a very promising target for takeover by a demagogue offering people meaning in exchange for their souls.”⁷⁸

However, many societies have lost some of the tools that have in the past helped them to cohere. While religions have traditionally been key sources of collective identity and antidotes to sociological sorting, religious observance has declined steadily in most developed countries since the 1970s, particularly among younger people.⁷⁹ Trade unions have declined too, with membership in developed countries half today what it was in 1985.⁸⁰ As global migration has increased, meanwhile – to 258 million international migrants in 2017 – so many societies have become more diverse, without necessarily having shared stories, identities, or associations.⁸¹

Nor does the loss of old stories and sources of identity necessarily mean that new ones will emerge to take their place. To be sure, some societies – including those emerging from severe conflict, as we will see in the next part of the paper – have been able to curate processes that do yield new narratives and that are able to draw people together.

But if such processes are absent, there is a risk that demagogues and authoritarians will be able to take advantage of the “myth gap” where collective narratives used to reside, and propagate narratives that foster “them-and us” sentiments rather than a sense of “larger us” that is able to transcend differences in tribe, ethnicity, values, or worldview.⁸²

Fear of change and fears for the future

These risks are especially pronounced at present given the widespread trend of **fear of change and fears for the future**. It has become commonplace to observe that we live in a time of marked uncertainty, and this plays directly into a cognitive bias shared by most humans towards “loss aversion”.

First identified by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, loss aversion describes the bias that people tend to have to prefer avoiding losses to acquiring gains (i.e. the feeling that it is better not to lose \$100 than it is to gain \$100).⁸³

Perhaps in part because of this bias, global polling suggests that pessimism substantially outweighs optimism overall around the world. Ipsos Global Trends data found that 38 percent of adults across 23 developed and developing countries feel pessimistic about the state of the world in 2016, for example, compared to 28 percent who say they feel optimistic.⁸⁴

Interestingly, these data show developing country populations to be substantially more optimistic than those in developed countries: all of the eight most optimistic countries surveyed were outside the OECD, whilst all seven of the most pessimistic were within it. International polling by the Pew Center reaches similar findings: among developed countries, a median of 64 percent of people think their children will be worse off than their parents compared to 27 percent who think they will be better off. Whereas in emerging economies 51 percent think their children will be better off than they are compared to 26 percent worse off.⁸⁵

Taking a national or global perspective rather than a local one also leads people to become more pessimistic, perhaps accounting for why political polarization tends to be more marked at national level.

People tend to be more optimistic about their own economic situation than they are about their country's; to rate issues ranging from immigration and crime to teenage pregnancy and drug use as worse at national level than in their local neighborhoods; and across both developed and developing countries, to rate the environmental quality of their local community as substantially better than that of the nation or the world.⁸⁶

Conclusion

So, which of the possible causes of breakdown of common ground that this part of the paper has explored matters most – and how much of a risk does the trend pose?

Many analysts have tried to identify one single driver as the most significant. Political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, for example, argue that there are two theories to explain the rise of political polarization, which they term “economic insecurity” and “cultural backlash”, and conclude that the evidence favors the latter, at least in the US and Europe.⁸⁷ Others, like the author John Judis, argue the opposite.⁸⁸

Others again argue that such attempts to isolate single or pre-eminent causes of polarization are futile. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, for example, explore two “folk paradigms” of justice, which they term redistribution and recognition: the redistribution paradigm is about socio-economic justice, while the recognition paradigm is about devaluation of a cultural group's status and looks for cultural remedies. Fraser argues that in reality, disadvantaged groups suffer “both maldistribution and misrecognition in forms where neither of these injustices is an indirect effect of the other, but where both are primary and co-ordinals”.⁸⁹

In the real world, drivers of breakdown of common ground are rarely separable into neatly discrete categories. Large youth bulges in emerging economies clearly create the potential for dissatisfaction if the economic system fails to provide enough opportunities – and such youth bulges will often drive values shifts that may clash with the outlook of older, more traditionally minded generations. In developed economies, meanwhile, perceptions of relative deprivation among some voters will often sprawl across the academic boundaries between culture, economics, politics, and psychology.

Rather than attempting to isolate single causes for breakdown of common ground, then, it may make more sense to look for ways of understanding the trend that are both more integrated (in looking across issue silos) and more dynamic (in seeking to understand how these complex drivers can interact with each other).

In particular, all of the first three sets of polarization drivers explored in this part of the paper – political, economic, and social – have an underlying psychological level which leaders and analysts alike can easily overlook.

The real world trend of immigration is not easily separable from the psychological dynamics of threat perception or fear of change, for example. And perceptions of economic issues will inevitably be colored by the fact that for most people, fear of loss tends to loom larger than opportunities to make gains, or the tendency to want to punish unfair outcomes even if this comes with a cost.

One example of this kind of integrated approach can be found in conflict analysis, where analysts have learned to see conflict as an often repeating cycle that involves vulnerabilities, stressors, and catalytic shocks rather than as simple linear processes with a single cause.

As the 2011 World Development Report observes, “it is difficult to disentangle causes and effects of violence”, implying that 21st century conflict prevention will depend on understanding the links between variables as diverse as weak growth, youth unemployment, security, corruption, respect and status, social cohesion, political exclusion, inequalities across regional, religious and ethnic groups, and inequality between households.⁹⁰

All of these variables are also at play in the breakdown of common ground, even if the countries affected are very different from those traditionally seen as fragile. So just as conflict analysts see the issues they work on in terms of systems dynamics, risk management, and repetitive cycles, so analysts of the trends explored in this paper could usefully adopt some of the same tools.

What of the risk that a breakdown of common ground poses? Not all analysts agree that it is even a problem in the first place, and history offers many examples that seem to support the case that confrontation, polarization, and incivility can be necessary to unlock social change. American segregationists often denounced the tactics of the civil rights movement as “uncivil”, for example, while similar charges were made against female suffragists demanding voters for women half a century earlier.⁹¹

On the other hand, there is also evidence that repeated or habitual exposure to incivility can reduce trust in government, erode faith in institutional legitimacy and media credibility, and amplify polarization by lessening respect for opposing views.⁹² And there is also the risk that when incivility becomes prevalent on both sides, it becomes a self-reinforcing feedback loop – particularly given the fertile ground for “othering” provided by sociological sorting and social media echo chambers.⁹³

Ultimately, while polarization can play a valuable role in highlighting injustices or bringing grievances to light, it is only helpful if it prompts changes that can then lead society to a new settlement underpinned by a renewed sense of common ground and common purpose. So, what are the factors that can make that happen?

2. Rebuilding common ground

What would it look like if leaders – in both politics and civil society – decided to pursue an agenda explicitly oriented towards tending to breakdown of common ground, and focused on rebuilding it instead?

In practice, this part of the paper argues, leaders can seek to achieve this goal through pursuing actions across three broad areas:

- **“Untriggering” politics** by finding ways to reduce group-based threat perception
- **Addressing root causes** of polarization by finding ways to deal with underlying concerns on specific policy areas
- **Rebuilding common ground** by finding ways to develop a sense of empathy and common identity among citizens

Untriggering politics

As Part One of the paper explored, a key dimension of breakdown of common ground centers on how citizens’ perceptions of political issues – and of each other – can become filtered by anxiety, irritability, hate, or perceptions of in-group versus out-group tension. One immediate challenge for leaders, then, is to find ways of taking some of the heat off current politics.

Changing political communication to listen to people’s fears

A good starting point is for political leaders to change how they communicate, and in particular to **address people’s fears**. While this may take the form of tackling underlying grievances (the subject of the next section), a more immediate step they can take is to make a point of listening across political divides – for instance, through making speeches showing people that they are aware of and empathize with perceived threats.

The point can be illustrated through comparing how leaders in Lebanon and Jordan on one hand and the European Union on the other communicated with their citizens about the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 and afterwards. In the EU, those leaders who, like Angela Merkel, were willing to give shelter to large numbers of refugees often led with messages about the refugees’ plight and European countries’ responsibilities to them. In Lebanon, by contrast, leaders took a different approach, and often began by acknowledging how hard the issue was for Lebanon and for Lebanese people – thus helping to defuse fears by acknowledging them openly.⁹⁴

Similar examples can be found at the level of towns and cities. In Belgium, for instance, Bart Somers – the mayor of Mechelen, a city of over 130 nationalities where one of every two children born in the city has a foreign background – won the 2016 World Mayor Prize for his work on promoting integration and welcoming refugees. Crucially, his approach has emphasized responding to local residents’ fears of and reservations about the arrival of people from different cultures, rather than dismissing them as racist.⁹⁵

Politicians can also do much to **embed listening as a principle for institutions** – for instance by making appointments to positions in government or independent commissions of people who are seen to be credible and neutral in listening to all sides or, *in extremis*, setting up dedicated listening processes like truth and reconciliation commissions (an area we return to below).

Using language carefully

Similarly, it is important for political and civil society leaders to recognize that **language matters**. Leaders enjoy considerable power to set the tenor of political debate, and when they use depersonalizing, hateful, or triggered language, this can have powerful ripple effects. This is not a point that needs explaining to conflict analysts, who have long known the real world effects that language can have, for instance, in how the use of dehumanizing words like “cockroach” to describe minorities helped to create the conditions for genocide in Germany in the 1930s or Rwanda in the 1990s.⁹⁶

Unfortunately, the use of such language is on the rise again in many countries where a breakdown of common ground is taking place. And while populists are often highlighted for their use of such language, even centrist politicians can fall prey – for instance, in Hillary Clinton’s use of the term “deplorables”. As the impact of her remark shows, derogatory language has just as much power to drive polarization when the leaders using it are centrist, and by giving in to the temptation to play to their political base, the risk is that progressive leaders can end up fanning the flames of a fire that causes lasting harm to civic trust.

An alternative, more sophisticated strategy is to use techniques like **values segmentation** – based, for instance, on Jonathan Haidt’s moral foundations theory – to understand the “values tribes” that make up electorates, and then use that understanding to build larger coalitions instead of deepening political divides.

One such approach, employed by the World Values Survey, uses Abraham Maslow’s concept of the hierarchy of needs to distinguish between three “values modes” that can be used to understand and map populations:

- **Settlers** (or sustenance-driven people) are motivated by resources and by fear of perceived threats. They tend to be older, socially conservative, and security conscious. They are often pessimistic about the future, and are driven by immediate, local issues impacting on them and their family, like fear of crime.
- **Prospectors** (or outer-directed people) are driven by others’ esteem, and motivated by success, status, and recognition. They are especially common among younger groups, conscious of fashion or image, and tend to be swing voters. They can be either socially conservative or socially liberal.
- **Pioneers** (or inner-directed people) are motivated by self-realization. They are socially liberal, and their views are governed by ethics, universalism, and fairness. They may be ambitious, but seek internal fulfilment rather than the esteem of others. They appreciate creativity and seek genuine understanding.⁹⁷

As campaigns analyst Chris Rose observes, these categories come with clear communication implications. Settlers – who often tend to be skeptical of immigration and more likely to vote for authoritarian leaders – will respond well to messages and narratives that emphasize safety, security or belonging, while Prospectors will respond best to messages that emphasize social esteem, and Pioneers to messages about ideas, innovation, or ethics.⁹⁸

Rose’s approach to communicating with Settlers dovetails with Karen Stenner’s work on authoritarianism, which (as we saw in Part One) argues that when some voters’ predisposition towards authoritarian views

is activated through a sense of normative threat, then messages that emphasize the value of diversity and multiculturalism are actively counterproductive. As she and Jonathan Haidt observe,

“The things that multiculturalists believe will help people appreciate and thrive in democracy – appreciating difference, talking about difference, displaying and applauding difference – are the very conditions that encourage authoritarians not to heights of tolerance, but to their intolerant extremes.”⁹⁹

Recovering trust

Both the 2011 World Development Report and (more recently) Paul Collier in *The Future of Capitalism* point to the importance of clear **signals and commitments** – as opposed to mere rhetorical promises – as a way of rebuilding confidence and recovering trust.¹⁰⁰

Political appointments can be one such signal. After Mozambique’s peace process, for example, the former RENAMO supreme commander was appointed deputy chief of staff to the Mozambique Defense Force, and seven RENAMO members were appointed to the national electoral commission along with ten government representatives.¹⁰¹

Tunisia – often cited as the last remaining “Arab Spring” country on course to realize its citizens’ aspirations – is a more recent example of how clear political signaling can untrigger politics. In 2013, during the process of drafting a new constitution, protests took place all over the country for and against the Islamist Ennahda party, amid suspicion from secular groups regarding Ennahda’s intentions, especially given the regional context of a recent coup against President Morsi and subsequent violence in Egypt.

Against this backdrop, trade unions, legal, and human rights groups stepped in to facilitate a “national dialogue”.¹⁰² Ennahda’s leadership compromised on key constitutional clauses and the formation of a technocratic government with the secular Nidaa Tounis party, providing important “signals and commitments” to reassure secular Tunisians.¹⁰³

This required strong internal leadership within Ennahda, with Rached Ghannouchi offering to step down if the compromise was not successful.¹⁰⁴ In turn, Nidaa Tounis compromised on the completion of the constitution and the formation of a coalition government. While Tunisia still faces many challenges, it now has the most progressive constitution in the region on guaranteeing citizens’ rights and is on track to be the fastest transition in history on voice and accountability indicators.¹⁰⁵

Political **apologies** can also play a valuable role, particularly when societies are emerging from conflicts or other shared experiences of trauma. While some political apologies can be dismissed as mere words, conflict analysts note that in other cases they have the potential to reconstitute the moral framework that governs communities and help steer them towards a future based on dignity and mutual respect. In South Africa, for example, the country’s last apartheid President, F.W. de Klerk, made a formal apology to the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the “pain and suffering” caused by decades of racial separation.¹⁰⁶

Erin Wilson and Roland Bleiker meanwhile argue that the *performative* dimensions of apologies, and potentially of accompanying gestures of forgiveness from victims, are especially important, citing as an example the powerful image of German Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling in 1970 before a monument to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943.¹⁰⁷

All of these examples are about signifying recognition of past wrongs and willingness to share power, and can be applied to many different contexts, such as action against corruption, to remove discriminatory laws, or to reform abusive civil service practices. The 2011 World Development Report provides a useful scan of other examples, including in Timor-Leste in 2007, Aceh in Indonesia in 2005, Chile's political transition in 1990, and Ghana's transition to multi-party democracy.¹⁰⁸

However, restoring trust in political systems depends also on concrete *actions* taken to mend the wrong that has been done (the process known, in its original religious context, as atonement).¹⁰⁹ In the political context, what this means is that merely untriggering the immediate effects of political polarization is not enough. If leaders are to get to grips with polarization comprehensively, they also need to understand and act on the underlying drivers that led to political polarization emerging in the first place: a theme we return to in more detail in the section below on addressing grievances.

Building psychological resilience

Finally, another area where political and civil society leaders can help to untrigger politics is through **investing in resources to help citizens manage their mental and emotional states better**, to become more resilient to becoming triggered in the first place.

So-called “nudge theory” offers one potential avenue for governments to use psychology to influence the decision making or behavior of groups or individuals. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein define the idea of a nudge as follows:

“A nudge ... is any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. Nudges are not mandates. Putting fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not.”¹¹⁰

This approach has been used extensively in a wide range of policy areas, for instance in nudging more citizens to sign up as organ donors or to pay their taxes on time. More recently, researchers have explored how to use the same underlying approach to promote social integration, for instance through developing the skills needed to live in diverse societies or emphasize similarities between citizens.¹¹¹

More broadly, research and practice in psychological well-being and resilience over recent decades has built up a sizeable toolkit of other mechanisms that can overcome threat perception, build mental resilience, and develop empathy. Cambridge University's Integrative Complexity Thinking unit, for example, aims to reduce conflict through helping people to see their worlds in more complex and sophisticated ways, through training in areas like values affirmation, active listening, emotion regulation, and critical thinking, and has piloted interventions in countries including Pakistan, Kenya, Bosnia, and Finland.¹¹²

There are historical precedents for such efforts, too. Lene Rachel Andersen and Tomas Björkman have argued that a key factor in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden's successful transition from quasi-feudal agricultural societies at the bottom of Europe's economy in 1860 to progressive, industrialized, egalitarian democracies at the top of Europe's economy by the 1930s and beyond was their investment in education systems designed to produce active citizens capable of seeing past their differences:

“Our countries were developed by populations among whom a critical number of people could see the nation as a whole, cared about the totality, and elected leaders with the same big, yet detailed picture in mind.”¹¹³

Today, most countries are just at the very beginning of recognizing the need for widespread access to support systems that offer citizens training in such practices, much less actually building those systems up. Instead, even the richest economies tend to focus on mental health provision on crisis rather than prevention and resilience, and in education curricula to prioritize fact retention over citizenship, collaboration, or critical thinking.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

Finding ways of untriggering political discourse is a crucial first step towards overcoming starting to rebuild common ground. But the fact also remains that in many cases, common ground has broken down precisely because important injustices or other issues have gone unaddressed. So, what can political leaders do to address these underlying grievances?

Addressing grievances

In practice, actions to address underlying grievances that can contribute to breakdown of common ground can be categorized into four possible areas: moderating the immediate pace of change; longer term policy reforms; restoring the relationship between citizens and states; and changes in the multilateral system.

Moderating the short term pace of change

In the first instance, political leaders can address real world causes of breakdown of common ground by **moderating the pace of change**, for as Robert Wright notes, “there is such a thing as change that is ultimately good but is proceeding too fast, and with too little attention to its short term costs”.¹¹⁵

On various aspects of globalization – whether openness to trade, investment, or immigration – the big picture of marginal utility, economic efficiency, and the well-being of society as a whole can overlook the concerns of particular constituencies that may feel left behind, and in particular the kinds of fears (of perceived threats, of change, of loss outweighing gain, or about the future) touched on earlier. In many cases, this may be a community or subnational phenomenon rather than a nationwide one, which can hence readily dovetail with dynamics like the urban/periphery tensions discussed in Part One.

Immigration is an especially significant policy area in this vein, and one where subjective perceptions can matter more than objective facts. In Europe, some of the countries where tensions over immigration are highest are also countries where actual levels of immigration are lowest compared to European averages, as is the case in Poland and Hungary, for example.¹¹⁶ To some extent, this may be explained by data suggesting that tensions over immigration may sometimes center not on how much of it there is, but the *pace* at which it happens – and whether immigration is into societies that are already highly diverse (and hence used to multiculturalism) or those that are more homogenous and unused to high numbers of newcomers.

In a related vein, Paul Collier argues that “while some immigration is better than none, there are solid reasons for thinking that beyond a certain rate it can be excessive”, offering both arguments based both on economics (for instance, the effects of high levels of immigration on wages, housing, or public services) and culture. On the latter, he suggests that while highly diverse societies can certainly coexist peacefully,

such diversity can, past a certain point, undermine “mutual regard” and hence the cooperation and generosity necessary for an equal society.¹¹⁷

While questions of social cohesion and integration among populations with diverse ethnicities, values, and worldviews are covered in the next section, political leaders do have the option of moderating the pace of change on immigration by applying “emergency brakes” to the rate of immigration.¹¹⁸ But there are also other options open to governments for softening the pace of change, such as undertaking targeted investments in communities experiencing high levels of immigration to address public service constraints (for instance, in education or healthcare), housing shortages, or concerns about fairness in the allocation of resources.

Longer term policy reforms

Looking to the longer term, there are many more areas where political leaders can tackle the needs and concerns of communities that may feel left behind by economic progress or political agendas.

One example is **social protection**, where the last decade has seen far-reaching innovations in many countries, for instance in conditional cash transfer programs in many middle income countries (such as Mexico’s *Oportunidades* program¹¹⁹) or social assistance and cash for public works programs in low income countries (such as Ethiopia’s National Social Protection Policy¹²⁰). Overall, however, only 29 percent of the world’s population enjoys access to comprehensive social security, with the International Labour Organization recommending increased expenditure especially in Africa, Asia, and the Arab states.¹²¹

Again, the objective picture on social protection coverage and expenditure may matter less than people’s subjective perceptions – for instance, of the adequacy of coverage, of whether it is better or worse than it used to be, or of the conditionalities that may be imposed in order to qualify. These perceptions can become particularly charged in the context of national austerity programs, above all if the burden of austerity becomes seen as unevenly shared between geographical, ethnic, or demographic groups.

Over the longer term, there is also the question of how social protection provision may need to evolve in response to a changing picture on employment. As noted in the last part of the paper, wage stagnation and perceptions of falling social mobility are already part of the polarization picture. In the future, if the “fourth industrial revolution” – the fusion of technologies increasingly merging the physical, digital, and biological spheres – results in widespread automation of jobs, then social protection predicated on supporting short periods of unemployment may no longer make sense, and new approaches such as universal basic incomes may emerge as key political demands.¹²²

More broadly, political leaders can do much to rebuild common ground if they are prepared to embrace major **redistribution** efforts as a response to income and wealth inequality, both through social spending and through progressive changes to taxation rates.

In Brazil, for example, the governments of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff drove a sustained period of economic progress from 2003 to 2014, during which 29 million people left poverty, the country’s Gini inequality score declined by nearly 7 percent, and the income level of the poorest 40 percent of the population increased by an average of 7.1 percent compared to 4.4 percent for the population as a whole.¹²³ Subsequently, however, progress stalled as a long commodity boom ended and amid

widespread corruption charges against both governments' officials – showing how easily perceptions of corruption can undermine the political impact of even highly progressive real world policy outcomes.

In Colombia, meanwhile, extreme poverty rates were halved between 2002 and 2014, with more Colombians now considered to be middle class than in poverty for the first time in the country's history.¹²⁴ In many cases, moves to tackle inequality have moved forward in tandem with the country's 2016 peace deal – for instance, in how the government has focused on reparations given to victims of conflict and processes for restoring land ownership to people displaced by the conflict.

Political leaders can also pursue redistribution agendas by focusing specifically on **unearned wealth**: wealth that is received not as a result of generating new value, but instead purely as a result of having wealth in the first place (rents, as an economist would term them).

In particular, governments can decide to levy taxes on windfall house price rises, for instance through land value taxes, which tend to be highly progressive in that tax rates will usually be highest on land in the most expensive locations, which will in turn generally be owned by the wealthiest people in a society. Land value taxes have been used successfully in many countries, including Chile, Colombia, Denmark, Estonia, Japan, Mexico, and South Africa – but have the potential to be scaled up much more.¹²⁵ Similarly, governments could do much more to tax transfers of wealth (for instance, through inheritance or gifts), which tend towards inequalities in power and opportunity as well as wealth, and hence undermine social mobility.

Restoring the relationship between citizens and the state

Healthy social contracts between states and their citizens depend on **reciprocity**, with citizens perceiving the state to be acting in the public interest; where the state and its leaders have the will and the capacity to execute their functions, meet public expectations, and uphold citizens' rights, then citizens are more willing to pay taxes, accept the state's monopoly on the use of force, and comply with laws and regulations.¹²⁶

Conversely, few things are more corrosive to the social contract than perceptions of endemic **corruption**. Such perceptions have been a factor in virtually all of the examples of polarization and/or authoritarianism discussed in Part One, and as noted earlier, many authoritarian populist leaders have excelled at making highly visible demonstrations of their intention to fight corruption (even if, ironically, many of the same leaders themselves have often been accused of murky business or tax dealings).

What such leaders arguably understand better than many centrist politicians is that, as with political apologies, the *performative* dimensions of anti-corruption drivers may matter more than the substance. So while important progress has been achieved through processes such as Publish What You Pay, the Extractives Industry Transparency Initiative, the UN Convention Against Corruption, or G8 moves to reform beneficial ownership regimes and make company ownership more transparent, all of these steps may pale in communications impact next to the imagery of a populist leader like Tanzania's President Magufuli dropping in to government offices to check that civil servants are actually at work.

Relatedly, **transparency** is another key reform area – although, as Tom van der Meer notes, increasing it does not have an unconditionally positive effect on political trust, in that it is inherent to transparency that it also brings to light the shortcomings of the political system.¹²⁷ As with anti-corruption, many positive steps have been made by many governments in recent years, with the Open Government

Partnership (OGP) one of the most important. The OGP brings together government reformers and civil society leaders to create action plans for making governments more transparent and accountable, and governments required to agree to country action plans in order to take part. So far, 79 governments have joined.¹²⁸

Another key area is **participation and involvement**, which can build citizens' self-reliance, capacity for collective action, and sense of agency, while also creating opportunities to use transparency to hold states accountable. More deliberative processes – like structured consultations or citizens' assemblies – can be especially powerful in conditions where common ground has broken down, or when considering particularly charged issues.

Again, South Africa's experience as it emerged from apartheid is instructive. As the country considered its new constitution, ANC leaders deliberately managed two years of consultation and discussion about how sexual and reproductive health rights would be reflected in the document – in effect, making time to listen and generate consensus rather than moving forward as quickly as possible.¹²⁹

Examples of successful citizens' assemblies, meanwhile, include Ireland – where a 100 person jury helped build consensus ahead of a national referendum on access to abortions¹³⁰ – as well as Canada and Australia, which ran similar exercises on nuclear waste management and ways of expanding transport infrastructure.¹³¹

The multilateral system

Finally, given that **supranational governance** is also a frequent target for populist criticism, it is also worth considering how multilateralism could be reformed to make it less prone to be seen as a looming threat to national sovereignty, more responsive to publics, and less vulnerable to the accusation of typifying the idea of remote and unaccountable elites.

As Part One of the paper explored, members of the international policy elites that work at bodies like the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, or European Central Bank are often seen – not unreasonably, in many cases – as sharing a “Davos crowd” world view that believes more openness is always better, or that tends to focus more on the global big picture than on people who have lost out and feel left behind.

But as Robert Wright observes, even populist leaders who are opposed to this kind of internationalism may find it in their interests to forge collective action frameworks of other kinds – like Donald Trump's recent negotiation of a new trade deal between Mexico, Canada, and the US (often called Nafta 2.0). Where the original North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) was a source of unease to US trade unions, who feared Mexican workers would undercut those in the US, the new agreement includes a requirement that 40 percent of the content of cars that trade freely in North America be made by workers earning at least \$16 an hour.¹³²

For Wright, this example is part of a bigger story: the potential for global institutions to tame unfettered globalization rather than advance it, and for global governance to be done better, and in ways more responsive to publics, than it has been to date. As he puts it,

“Bodies of global governance, like bodies of national governance, can in principle serve various constituencies. They can lean right or lean left. To take one possible, far-off scenario: A future version of the WTO could authorize punitive tariffs against—or even deny membership to—

nations that don't let unions organize. It could set baseline environmental or even workplace safety standards for factories in member nations, which not only would make for a cleaner environment and safer jobs but also would raise production costs in low-wage countries, making globalization less threatening to workers in affluent countries."¹³³

Conclusion

So far, we have looked at actions that leaders can take to address the worst effects of polarization, extremism, and hate – both in “softer” areas like communications and rebuilding trust, and in more tangible policy changes to address real world grievances that have helped polarization to increase.

The next and final section turns to the larger, longer term challenge of rebuilding a sense of common ground in societies where this has eroded.

Rebuilding common ground

As we saw at the beginning of Part One, different countries experience breakdown of common ground in different ways – whether declining trust, falling citizen engagement in politics, shrinking civic space, growing autocratization, or increasing polarization of citizen attitudes or political party positioning. As we will see in this section, ways of rebuilding common ground are similarly diverse from one country context to another, but nonetheless exhibit common themes.

Before getting into specific areas in which progress can be made, then, it is worth noting the lack of standardized methodologies for assessing where countries stand in terms of their risks of erosion of common ground or, conversely, their progress in rebuilding it. For years, conflict risk analysts have developed conflict early warning indicators¹³⁴ – yet little comparable work has been undertaken outside the specific context of fragile and conflict-affected states.

One overarching recommendation could therefore be to develop a multi-country **Common Ground Index**, covering both sources of vulnerability (i.e. the kinds of issues explored in Part One of this paper) and of resilience (i.e. the areas covered in Part Two), drawing on both objective statistical indicators and subjective data from sources such as opinion polls or sample questionnaires to gauge perceptions and fears.

Defining shared national narratives

A key area for rebuilding common ground is to define a **shared national narrative** that has the ability to resonate across the political spectrum. Around the world, many countries have successfully developed stories or concepts that bring national identity to life in ways that are inclusive and that successfully meld social diversity with an underlying unity that emphasizes what citizens have in common – often in tandem with constitutional reform or other processes of national renewal.

In Africa, decolonization has provided many examples of how political leaders have responded to the challenges of nation building. Harcourt Fuller, for example, explores how national identity was shaped by Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, in particular by replacing images and emblems of British rule in “symbols of nationhood” like money, postage stamps, monuments, museums, dress, non-verbal maxims, the national anthem, and both national and party flags.¹³⁵

A similar story emerges from comparing the experiences of Tanzania and Kenya after decolonization, with Tanzania placing consistently more emphasis on nation-building than its neighbor.¹³⁶ Tanzania aggressively employed its public school curriculum as a tool for imbuing students with both national and pan-African identity, for example; overhauled local government institutions to replace tribally appointed village chiefs with elected representatives; and prioritized equitable distribution of regional investment in education, healthcare, and investment rather than allowing ethnically based divergences in resource allocation to emerge.

As a result of such policies, tribal affiliation is markedly less pronounced in Tanzania than in many other African states. When asked the open-ended question in 1999–2001, “Which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?”, only 3 percent of Tanzanians replied in terms of an ethnic, language, or tribal affiliation – compared to 36 percent in Zimbabwe, 38 percent in Malawi, or 48 percent in Nigeria.¹³⁷

Indonesia, meanwhile, has since 1945 emphasized a shared set of values known as “Pancasila”, which stresses belief in one God, a just and civilized humanity, a unified Indonesia, democracy, and social justice for all.¹³⁸ Initially, it seemed unclear whether Pancasila would survive the end of the Suharto era in 1998, after which political parties were no longer required to have Pancasila as their ideology. Yet two decades later, Pancasila continues to remain central to Indonesian identity and politics under President Widodo, who has found Pancasila an invaluable narrative tool with which to combat Islamist organizations and other forms of sectarianism.¹³⁹

If unifying national narratives can be created by political leadership, they can also be strengthened and enriched by broader **national dialogues** and by truth and reconciliation commissions. While both tools have traditionally been used by post-conflict countries, recent periods have seen them put to good use in countries which have not experienced civil war, but where electoral tensions and division or social protests have been high, as in the case of Tunisia (described above). President Macron in France has adopted a similar approach by initiating a 3 month “great national debate” to try to address the gilets jaunes protests.¹⁴⁰

A **common language** is also important in building shared narratives. The writer Benedict Anderson argues that nations are examples of “imagined communities” that people may feel themselves to be part of, even though they may not actually know the vast majority of that community’s members, and suggests that national languages are a key factor in this process.¹⁴¹ For many countries that struggled to achieve independence in the 20th century, shared national languages were important tools for national unity (as in the case of Tanzania, which quickly pushed for adoption of Kiswahili as a universal language after decolonization). In others – South Africa,¹⁴² Switzerland,¹⁴³ and the United Kingdom,¹⁴⁴ for example – the recognition of regional languages has been an important part of inclusion.

Language that captures shared values is also important, and from the point of view of building national identity, different terms may resonate more or less effectively in different countries, or with different parts of the political spectrum within them. In Canada, for example, ideas such as “peaceful pluralism” have resonated for many, emphasizing the sense that while a plurality of viewpoints is healthy and welcome in any political culture, it is also necessary for these views to remain anchored in peaceful means of participation, and perhaps also in civility and mutual respect too.

“Constitutional patriotism”, on the other hand, could be used to present the same underlying ideas to more conservative audiences, and to refer to a sense that while love of the home nation and its people

can be a powerful source of identity and cohesion, it also needs to be grounded in its proper constitutional context to avoid excesses of nativism or authoritarianism.

Constitutions and political parties

Another key area where progress can be made in rebuilding common ground is through constitutional change and shifts in the incentives affecting political parties.

South Africa is a key example of how governments can consciously invest in renewal of national identity during major **constitutional transitions**. The country's 1996 constitution was the product of a massive program of public participation and consultation as well as of an elected Constitutional Assembly. Given South Africa's history of conflict and mistrust, the fact that this participation program was strongly committed to transparency, inclusion, and openness in effect helped set the tone for future discourse, while also forging a new sense of national identity.¹⁴⁵

In Indonesia, too, constitutional change has been important in maintaining national unity through democratic transitions. Following the East Asian Financial Crisis and amidst turbulent social protests in May 1998, President Suharto stepped down after more than 31 years.¹⁴⁶ During the subsequent general election in 1999, more than 40 nascent parties fielded candidates.¹⁴⁷ Five years later in 2004, the election cycle was still highly volatile, with multiple parties emerging and dissolving between the polls.¹⁴⁸

During this time of prolonged political and economic instability, the Indonesian political class and burgeoning trade unions and civil society organizations united around the process of amending the constitution as a way out of the crisis. A qualified majority had to be mustered to enact the changes, which incentivized various political actors to compromise on a set of ground rules for the political system. Eventually, four constitutional amendments were passed, anchoring the parliamentary democracy, limits of executive power, as well as social and economic rights.¹⁴⁹ Channeling popular frustration and the need for change toward a debate about the constitution helped defuse the tension and transform it into a forward-looking national debate, and also helped strengthen the legitimacy of the constitution as the unifying political platform and a symbol of national continuity.

Political parties are another especially important area, for instance on the question of how political party leaders are selected. In many countries, political party leaders are chosen by the members of their parties, which (given that party members are often more polarized than members of society as a whole) can skew selection of leaders towards extremes.

As a result, Paul Collier suggests that elected representatives, rather than party members, should decide their leaders – on the basis that they will have greater incentives to choose leaders who they believe will find “sellable” policies with broad appeal to the electorate as a whole.¹⁵⁰

Similarly, a strong argument can be made for ensuring that political parties or candidates avoid becoming beholden to rich donors – for example, by providing public subsidies for political party activity (either in general, or just during campaign seasons). Of 180 countries sampled by the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 58 percent provide direct public funding and 60 percent indirect funding, while 25 percent of countries provide neither.¹⁵¹

Social contact between groups

A third area for building common ground is through building bridges across political divides – whether of ethnicity, class, geography, or values. Social contact theory, which explores how positive social contact between antagonistic groups in societies can reduce prejudice and discrimination, offers a rich library of experience about how to go about this, and has been trialed in a range of different environments – from post-conflict situations in fragile states through to communities in developed countries experiencing high levels of immigration.

The data on the effectiveness of such approaches reveal nuanced findings. A major 2016 study of social contact between Christian and Muslim young men through a vocational training program in northern Nigeria, for example, found that 16 weeks of positive social contact did not reduce prejudice per se, but *did* generate significant increases in generosity and decreases in discriminatory behavior towards members of the religious out-group.¹⁵²

There is also some data to suggest that contact between groups may, in some conditions, actually have negative effects. A 2014 study, for instance, saw researchers placing higher than usual numbers of Mexican immigrants on commuter train platforms in Boston to test the effect on other commuters – who, after three days, showed increasingly anti-immigrant attitudes. (The effects eased after commuters got used to seeing more Hispanic people on their trains, though with respondents still warier of immigrants than before the study started.)¹⁵³ Another study found that more exposure on social media to opposing views had the effect of increasing political polarization, especially among right wing voters.¹⁵⁴

But overall, a meta-analysis of 27 different intergroup contact studies found that contact *did* typically reduce prejudice, but also that there was wide variation in the effectiveness of such approaches – with interventions targeted at racial or ethnic prejudice generally generating weaker effects.¹⁵⁵ The same analysis also stressed the lack of research into the specific conditions in which contact is most beneficial.

One widely cited attempt to define those conditions, authored by Gordon Allport in 1954, argued that three factors are crucial in making intergroup contact successful as a force for cohesion and integration:

- **Equal status** between the groups involved in the relationship, with differences in education, wealth, skill, or experience minimized to the extent possible.
- **Common goals**, with both groups working on some shared problem or task that can only be attained if they cooperate.
- **Support of authorities, law, or customs**, with both groups acknowledging some source of authority that supports the contact and interactions, and that encourages friendly attitudes while condemning in-group versus out-group comparisons.¹⁵⁶

Around the world, governments and civil society organizations are increasingly focusing on using social contact theory in practice. Canada and Sweden have both invested in people-to-people contacts to improve inclusion of refugees, for example. Canada's household sponsorship of refugees' program has become well known worldwide and encourages Canadian households to band together to finance refugee reception and to support refugee families socially and culturally when they arrive in Canada,¹⁵⁷ while in Sweden, government and NGOs have jointly tried to play a bridging role.¹⁵⁸

But while many governments (both national and local) and civil society organizations have forged ahead with programs designed to increase integration and social cohesion in post-migration contexts, there have been fewer attempts to use social contact to promote cohesion across political “values tribes”. Given the risks of sociological sorting explored in previous sections, this could be a fruitful area for experimentation in many countries.

At the same time, the fact that breakdown of common ground is so often associated with perceptions that elites are remote, unaccountable, and concerned with their own self-interest rather than the common good, suggests that another important area for building bridges across political divides may be to look for ways of increasing elites’ sense of responsibility to wider society.

As earlier sections have explored, the process of sociological sorting has meant that members of elites often share similar backgrounds and outlooks – creating rich potential for dissonance in assumptions or values with people from other backgrounds. Chrystia Freeland (formerly a journalist and now Canada’s foreign minister) observes in her book *Plutocrats* that while the world’s very rich tend to be hardworking, they also see themselves as meritocrats who are the deserving winners of a tough economic competition.

As a result, while they tend to believe in institutions that allow social mobility, they are much less enthusiastic about economic redistribution through higher tax rates – and their wealth also confers on them considerable power to make their views felt politically (not to mention economic power to avoid paying taxes through using offshore jurisdictions).¹⁵⁹

Of course, this attitude is clearly in tension with the realities of economic inequality and declining social mobility in many countries – and it is also worth noting that the word “meritocracy” was first coined by Michael Young in 1958 as a satirical term, intended to highlight the extent to which people who see themselves as having achieved success through merit have actually often done so through accidents of birth and education privilege.¹⁶⁰

Using technology to build common identity and values

Efforts to build national identity are bucking a big trend, particularly in countries where social capital and participation in civic organizations has been in long term secular decline, thereby undercutting a key source of citizen engagement in public life. As long ago as 2000, the sociologist Robert Putnam argued that the main cause of this decline lies in how technology has “individualized” leisure time through television and the internet, and suggested that “virtual reality helmets” would only accelerate this trend in the future.¹⁶¹

In many ways, the story of the rise of social media since then might seem to prove Putnam’s point, particularly given how social media use has been correlated with loneliness, depression, anxiety, and political polarization.¹⁶² On the other hand, the ways in which we use social media will clearly evolve dramatically over the next ten years and beyond – and *might* do so in ways that facilitate more connection and community than social media today.

Wired founding editor Kevin Kelly observes, for example, that as internet and social media use increasingly relocates to virtual reality, this will transform how we connect.¹⁶³ As the immersiveness of artificial reality ushers in “an internet of experiences” that will replicate the authenticity of real life interaction in a way that current social media does not, we may find that social media use becomes much more conducive to

empathy. Some early signs are encouraging: when the United Nations tried offering General Assembly delegates the opportunity to try VR and meet a Burundian refugee living in a camp in the DRC, staff providing the service reported that it was “not uncommon to get the goggles back covered in tears”.¹⁶⁴

It is not hard to imagine how such technologies could be used to create an application of social contact theory that does not rely on individuals being in the same place – and which hence unlocks the potential for more people to see themselves as part of a “larger us” that is global rather than based in a particular community or nation.

In many ways, catalyzing such a shift in identity among a critical mass of people – and showing that such collective identity need not be in tension with diversity of individual people or peoples, much as the collective entity of a forest is in no way in tension with the diversity of the species that make it up – may well be a prerequisite for responding effectively to the defining challenges of the 21st century.

Conclusion

Overcoming the breakdown of common ground that can be seen in so many countries around the world is not something that will happen overnight. On the contrary, just as many drivers of the trend are long-term, the same will be true of the solutions.

It also bears emphasizing that the options for leaders sketched out in Part Two of the paper are not mechanistic levers that can be pulled to set off linear chains of cause and effect. Just because a government undertakes large scale redistribution effects does not mean that it will avoid backlashes from perceptions of corruption or a refugee crisis, for example.

Part One of the paper argued that rather than seeking to isolate individual causes of breakdown of common ground, it is more helpful to explore the dynamics between multiple causes, and in particular to think (as conflict analysts do) of stressors, vulnerabilities and catalytic shocks. In this sense, Part Two of the paper sets out options for sources of resilience that can be placed on the other side of the scales.

It is worth noting, however, that even far-reaching progress in these areas may not be enough to offset the reality that politics today takes place in a time of historically high exposure to exogenous shocks – economic, social, environmental, and political – and that there is no guarantee that governments will be able to muster the collective will to manage these risks preventively rather than merely responsively.

The world may already be committed to a period of “rapids” on the river hallmarked by systemic crises, in other words, and this may well have the effect of accelerating breakdown of common ground despite leaders’ best efforts to reduce it.

But there is also ample historical precedent to show that periods of crisis and turbulence can provide highly fertile ground for non zero-sum cooperation, normative renewal, and widely shared feelings of common identity and common purpose.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, an argument can even be made that major institutional renewal *only* happens in the wake of crises, when the “Overton window” of the politically possible is suddenly, and often only briefly, flung open far wider than usual.¹⁶⁶

This still leaves the question of how to prepare for such a period of crisis, such that the crisis becomes a prompt for pulling together rather than falling apart. As the field of disaster sociology (which studies how

people behave during humanitarian emergencies and other catastrophes) explores, while shocks are often the catalyst for extraordinary cooperation and selflessness,

they can drive the opposite in societies that are already highly divided, or where elites panic and impose inappropriately command-and-control responses on the situation.¹⁶⁷

In this sense, the current extent of tribalism, political polarization, and authoritarianism risks undermining the cooperation and normative renewal that a period of turbulence and crisis might otherwise provide. Leaders cannot afford to wait to address the challenges explored in this paper, in other words: at a high stakes moment in human history, each step back towards common ground has the potential to be decisive.

The Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies is a group of UN member states, international organizations, global partnerships, civil society, and the private sector. We work to accelerate the delivery of the SDG targets for peace, justice and inclusion (SDG16+). Pathfinders is hosted by the NYU Center on International Cooperation.

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