



# **Participant-Identified Effects of Better Angels Experiences**

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**With thanks to David Blankenhorn for editorial review and suggestions**

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## Key Findings

Survey data gathered from about 1,800 Americans experiencing Better Angels programs through August of 2018 yield the following key findings.

### In Red / Blue Workshops:

1. About 79 percent of participants report that as a result of the experience they are better able to “understand the experiences, feelings, and beliefs of those on the other side of the political spectrum” and more than 70 percent say that they feel more “understood by those on the other side of the political divide.”
2. About three of every four participants report that as a result of the experience they feel “less estranged or angry” with those on the other side and about the same proportion say that the experience caused them to “learn something that might be helpful to nation.”

### In Skills Workshops:

3. Nearly 8 out of 10 participants feel that the experience caused them to feel more able to “start constructive conversations” with individuals on the other side of the political divide and about the same proportion say that as a result of the experience they feel better able to “understand the experiences, feelings, and beliefs” of those on the other side.

### In Better Angels Debates:

4. More than 70 percent of participants in community-based debates say that the experience caused them to have “more understanding of other viewpoints,” about the same proportion say that they “learned something that might be helpful to others,” and more than three of four participants report that they want to follow up on relationships begun in the debate.
5. Pre- and post-debate series surveys of high-school-age debate participants show, among conservative students, a 10 percent increase in the number viewing liberals as “generally good people,” and among liberal students, a 15 percent increase in the number viewing conservatives as “generally good people.”
6. Pre- and post-debate series surveys of high school participants show, among conservative students, a 6 percent increase in the number of those saying that liberals have “valid viewpoints on important issues,” and among liberal students, a 10 percent increase in the number of those saying that conservatives have “valid viewpoints on important issues.”

## The Crisis of Affective Polarization

*By polarization I mean ... an intense commitment to a candidate, a culture, or an ideology that sets people in one group definitively apart from people in another, rival group. Such a condition is revealed when a candidate for public office is regarded by a competitor and his supporters not simply as wrong but as corrupt or wicked; when one way of thinking about the world is assumed to be morally superior to any other way; when one set of political beliefs is considered to be entirely correct and a rival set wholly wrong.*

James Q. Wilson, 2006

*Political polarization is the defining feature of early 21st century American politics, both among the public and elected officials.*

Carroll Doherty, Pew Research Center, 2014

*So often blamed just on the politicians, polarization actually has its roots in us, the electorate.*

Larry J. Sabato, University of Virginia, 2013

Affective polarization refers to having strong, personal, and emotionally charged negative feelings about those with whom you disagree about politics. To illustrate, research indicates that Americans increasingly avoid political conversations with family members who do not share their beliefs. Studies of online dating reveal that growing numbers of Americans consider political compatibility in prospective partners to be at least as important as similar levels of education and similar social class status. These and many other extra-political, affective (rooted in emotions and feelings) consequences of today's polarization distinguish it from polarization based merely on differences in positions on public policy. With affective polarization, not only do I strongly disagree with my opponents, but I also typically consider them to be bad, flawed, inexplicably misguided, or even dangerous people.

As a form of civic blindness – the condition of viewing one's fellow citizens inaccurately – a high level of affective polarization endangers society. It produces policy gridlock, degrades public discussion, likely contributes to inequality, segregates us, erodes social trust, thwarts empathy, and weakens our intellects. By lowering our civic IQ and compromising our ability to be good neighbors and good citizens, the spread of affective polarization means the steady loss of civic capacity. What's ultimately at stake is the health of our republic, because what effective self-government depends on is what this form of polarization destroys.

Better Angels was born in 2016 to address this crisis. We seek to be America's largest and most effective organization uniting red and blue Americans on equal terms to reverse the trend of polarization both in our views of one another as citizens and in key institutions of politics, the media, and higher education. This report reviews our work to date and presents first-ever findings on the impact of that work based on data gathered from 1,800 of the Americans who have participated in our programs.

## A Taxonomy of Current Better Angels Experiences

Name	Character / Purpose	Facilitation style	Duration	Number
Red-Blue workshops	About 7 reds and 7 blues gather to understand each other beyond stereotypes and look for common ground. The workshop design encourages listening and learning rather than declaring and convincing, with a special emphasis on recognizing and admitting concerns about one's own side. The goal is not for people to change their minds about issues, but rather to change their minds about each other.	A tightly structured sequence of group interactions led by two moderators who enforce the structure, encourage self-reflection, and redirect when participants move off topic or stray from the ground rules.	3 hours or 7 hours	Offered: 264 Evaluated: 66
Skills training workshop	Groups of 20-80 participants learn and practice listening and speaking skills for communicating with those who differ from them politically. There are three main types of skills workshops: one for both reds and blues together, one for blues only, and one for reds only. A newer skills workshop, "Depolarizing Within," is for people who want to learn skills to depolarize conversations within their own political community.	A training process in which a moderator presents material and leads participants through structured practice experiences. The Depolarizing Within workshop also uses a tool for self-assessing one's "inner polarizer."	3 Hours	Offered: 256 Evaluated: 44
Better Angels Debate	A parliamentary style-debate, the goal of which is to encourage people who disagree to think together, listen to one another, and engage carefully with each other's statements such that they may be influenced by differing viewpoints.	The chair explains the format and directs the conversation according to the rules.	2 Hours	Offered: 14 Evaluated: 5
Alliances	Better Angels Alliances (chapters) are groups of dues-paying members that meet together locally on a regular basis to promote the Better Angels mission locally and nationally. Activities include organizing red-blue and skills workshops, membership recruitment, in-depth discussions of policy issues, and socializing with each other through potluck dinners, movies, book clubs, and other activities.	The least structured of Better Angels programs, Alliances are led by co-chairs (one red, one blue) and prioritize having rough parity in red-blue Alliance membership.	Varies	41

## Data and Evaluation Limitations

Better Angels uses post-event feedback forms (and in a few cases as described below pre-event series survey data) as its primary means of program evaluation. We recognize some of the limitations of this method of evaluation, including the following.

**Not Comprehensive:** Despite having collected many hundreds of surveys from participants' variety of Better Angels experiences, Better Angels has so far evaluated the data from only about 25 percent of its more than 600 program events to date. This lack of comprehensive limits the validity of assessments of our workshops, debates, and alliances in the aggregate.

**Missing Information:** About 20 percent of red-blue workshop and 25 percent of skills workshop feedback forms that have been completed include demographic and political information. In addition, not all workshop participants reports their political leanings; for example, only about 25 percent of skills workshops reported their political leanings. This limitation hinders our ability to assess how our programs impact diverse political and demographic groups.

**Self-Reports.** These evaluation findings are based on participants' self-reported assessments of their Better Angels experiences. Self-assessments likely fail to capture the presence of some relevant behaviors. For example, it is possible that participants, after their Better Angels experience, may fail to engage more often with those with whom they disagree politically, even though they have indicated on feedback forms that they expect and intend to do so.

**Self-Selection:** Measuring the degree and effects on outcomes of the nearly unavoidable reality of self-selection – the fact that program participants are by definition those who *choose* to participate – is a difficult challenge for any program evaluation and one that we do not, in this report, attempt to accomplish.

**Lack of Accurate Measurement of Temporal Change:** In most cases, Better Angels administers its participant surveys immediately after the conclusion of the event. Although this method is valuable and practical for purposes of evaluation, it cannot capture changes in the behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of program participants as they occur over time and as they are evident at specific points in time – for example, changes or the absence of changes six or 12 months after the (in some cases first, but not last) Better Angels experience.

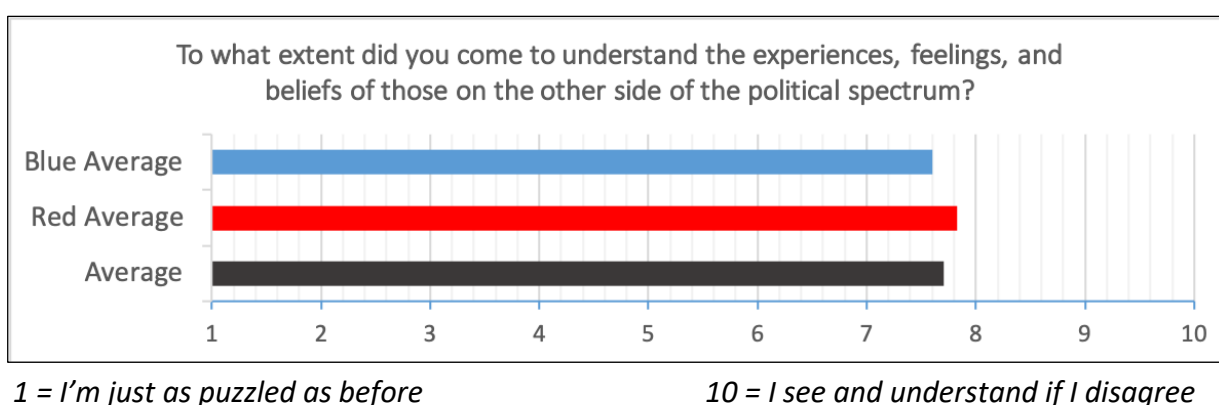
## Evaluation Results

### Red-Blue Workshops

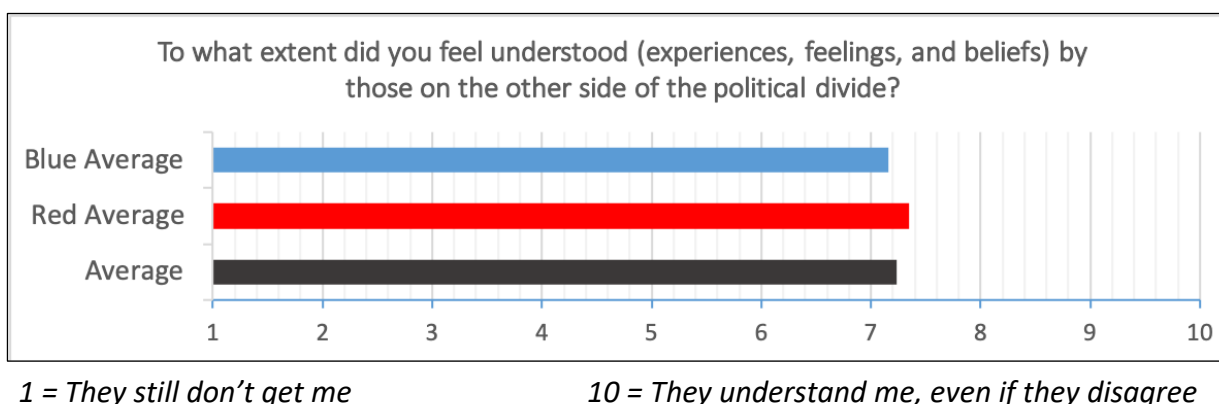
Better Angels has hosted a total of 263 Red-Blue Workshops as of August 1, 2019 across 35 states. Of these workshops, Better Angels has gathered and evaluated approximately 844 participant- completed evaluation forms for 66 workshops. These are the results.

#### Theme 1: Mutual understanding and comfort with the other side

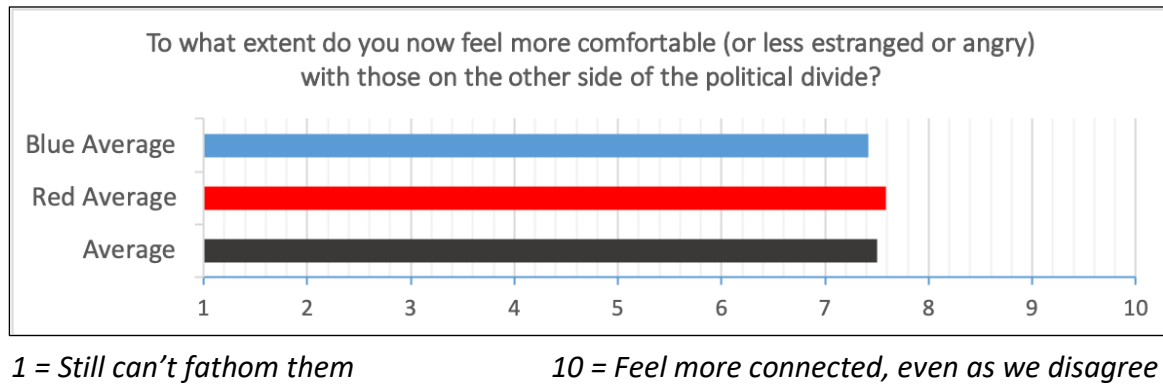
Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N = 531)



**Distribution:** 79% of participants reported a 7 out of 10 or higher for better understanding the experiences, beliefs, and feelings of those on the other side.



**Distribution:** 70% of participants reported a 7 out of 10 or higher for feeling better understood by those on the other side of the political divide.



**Distribution:** 70 percent of participants recorded a 7 out of 10 or higher for feeling more comfortable with those on the other side.

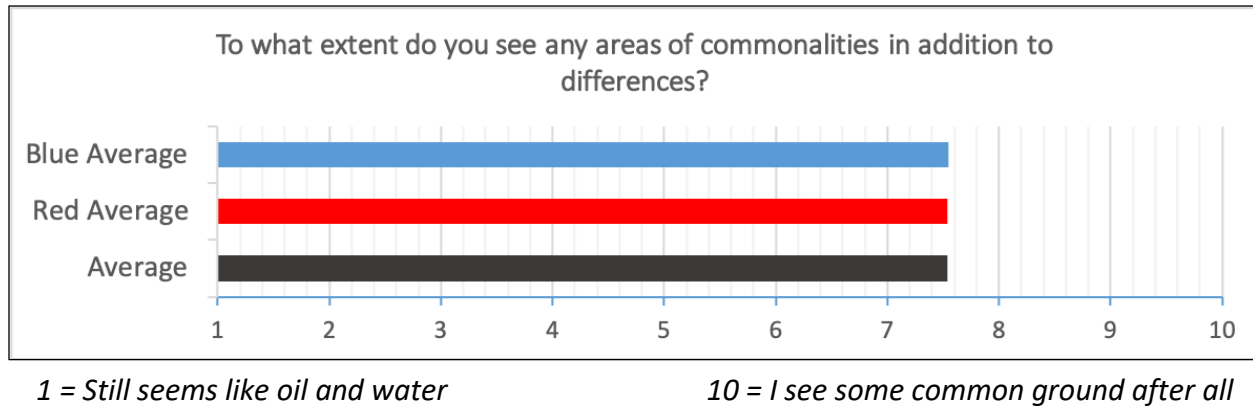
**Interpreting the Results:** About 80% of participants felt they understood the other side better, felt more understood by the other side, and felt more connected or less angry than when they walked in. This finding points to an immediate effect toward reducing polarization. Specifically, after one workshop in a highly polarized environment, these results indicate:

1. Good progress in greater understanding of the other side, especially since there were many 9 and 10 ratings on this point among the sample.
2. Similarly, many 8 and 9 ratings on feelings of being more understood by the other side.
3. No big differences emerged overall (though one might expect it) between the degree of participants' feelings of better understanding the other side as compared to their feelings of being better understood by the other side.
4. Reds and blues scored roughly equally as regards both better understanding of the other side and feeling better understood by the other side, with reds scoring slightly higher than blues; overall, the workshops seemed on this criterion to work well for both sides.
5. The consequences of the combination of better understanding the other side and feeling better understood by the other side are likely, we suggest, to include diminished feelings of anger and a greater sense of comfortableness with the other.
6. Participants voluntarily attended these workshop, suggesting that they had some motivation to make good use of their time; they were likely trying to be successful.

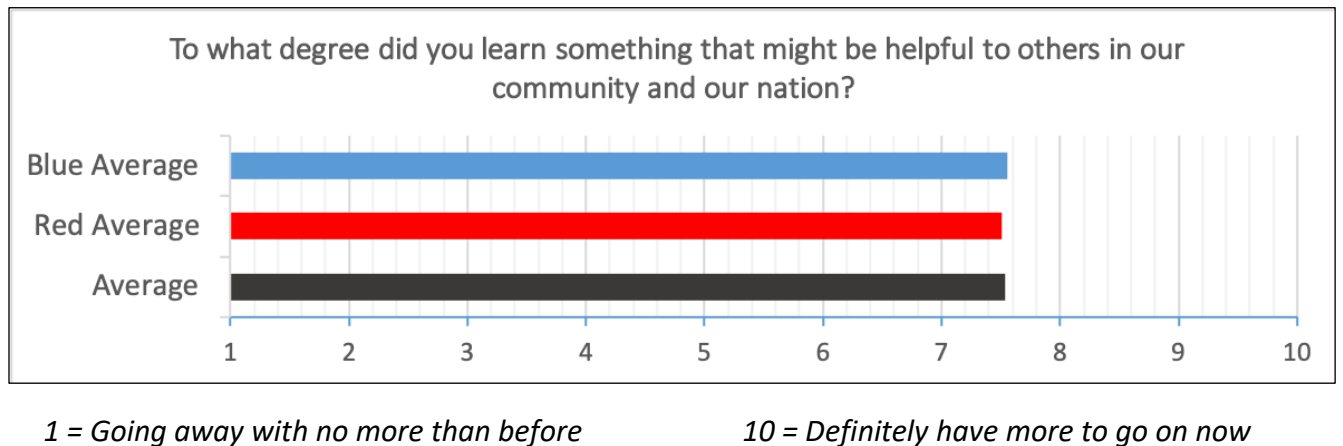


## Theme 2: Discovering areas of commonality and possibility of civic benefit

Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N = 531)



**Distribution:** 3 out of 4 participants reported areas of commonalities as a 7 out of 10 or higher on surveys.

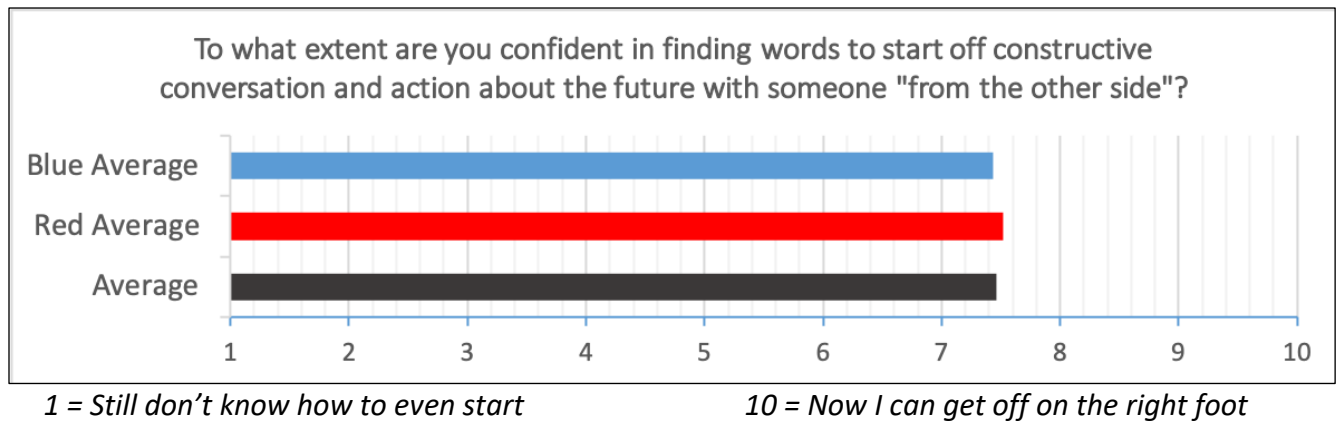


**Distribution:** 75% of participants recorded a 7 out of 10 or higher for learning something helpful for others in our community and our nation.

**Interpreting the Results:** About 80% of participants see areas of common ground and say that they gained insights helpful to their communities and the nation. For one workshop in a highly polarized environment, these data suggest good immediate progress on perceiving possibilities for working more cooperatively with the other side. Reds and blues score about equally as regards seeing the possibility of common ground, with reds scoring slightly higher than blues. The workshops appear to work well for both sides as regards identifying areas of common ground and civic benefit.

### Theme 3: More capacity for constructive conversation with the other side

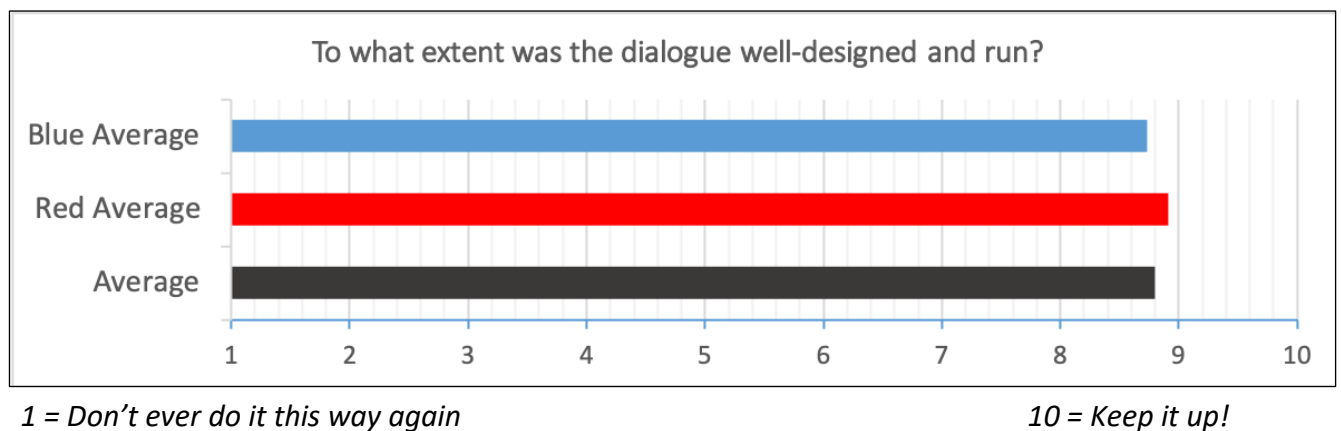
Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N = 531)



**Distribution:** 77% of participants recorded a 7 out of 10 or higher for feeling more confident of their ability to find the words to start a constructive conversation or action with the other side.

### Theme 4: Effectiveness of workshop design and leadership.

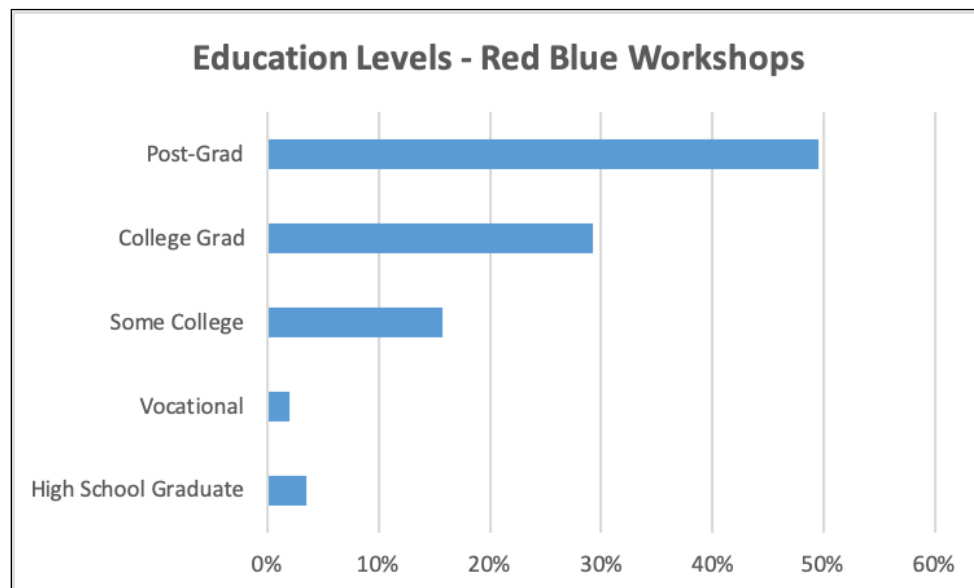
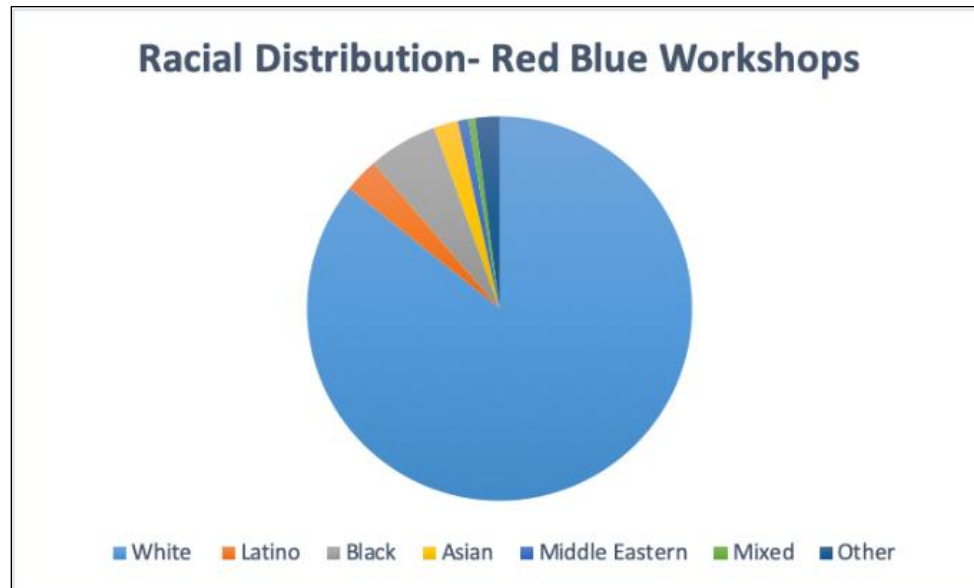
Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N = 531)



**Distribution:** 93% of participants recorded a 7 out of 10 or higher in scoring the design of the Red-Blue Workshop.

**Interpreting the Results:** Nearly nine of ten participants assess the workshop as very well designed and led. This finding suggests that the workshop experiences are typically highly acceptable to participants and bring personal benefits to participants, which should encourage Better Angels to proceed with this basic workshop template.

## Demographic Profile



## Qualitative Feedback: “Single Most Important Learning or Thing to Share”

Better Angels received written feedback from approximately 105 participants in 2019 Red-Blue workshops. The table below shows a synthesis of themes and original language.

*Question Prompt: “What is your single most important learning, or the most important message you want to share about this gathering?”*

Cluster	Feedback
<b>We came together in civil discussion and sharing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Civil debate—with cooperation, civility, sharing</li><li>• There are a lot of different opinions <i>within both</i> the red and blue sides</li><li>• Unity and communication are key to our nation being great.</li><li>• We have allowed ourselves to become divided and alienated. It is our job to heal the divide</li><li>• Having open, honest, safe dialogues; being open</li><li>• This has made me more self-reflecting about my perspectives</li></ul>
<b>The BA framework brought people of goodwill into common ground—the first step in moving beyond polarization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We have a lot of work to do to bridge the divide, but this is a great start.</li><li>• Taking time to develop listening and constructive skills is not always going to happen naturally, groups like this keep the mind open and hopeful</li><li>• Great, open discussion; very interesting</li><li>• Great learning experience about my own side as well as others</li><li>• Focus on own beliefs and where they came from rather than why other side is wrong</li><li>• Continue the dialogue and then have groups continue to work. Focus on what we agree on and we will be able to find common solutions</li></ul>
<b>Everyone listened</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Listening and not responding.</li><li>• Listen and you realize how much diversity is on the other side</li><li>• Thank you to all and especially the moderates. I learned better listening skills.</li><li>• Our personal stories and experiences define our viewpoints. They are worth sharing and listening to more fully understand</li><li>• Learn from the other side; everyone wants to be understood</li><li>• People willing to both talk AND listen to those who disagree with them</li><li>• Hearing the other side express themselves</li><li>• Listening is a beautiful resource in building civil discourse</li></ul>

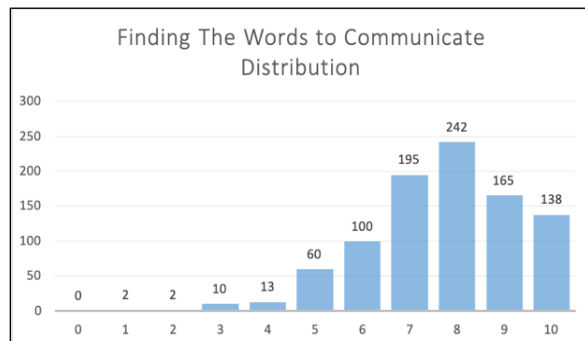
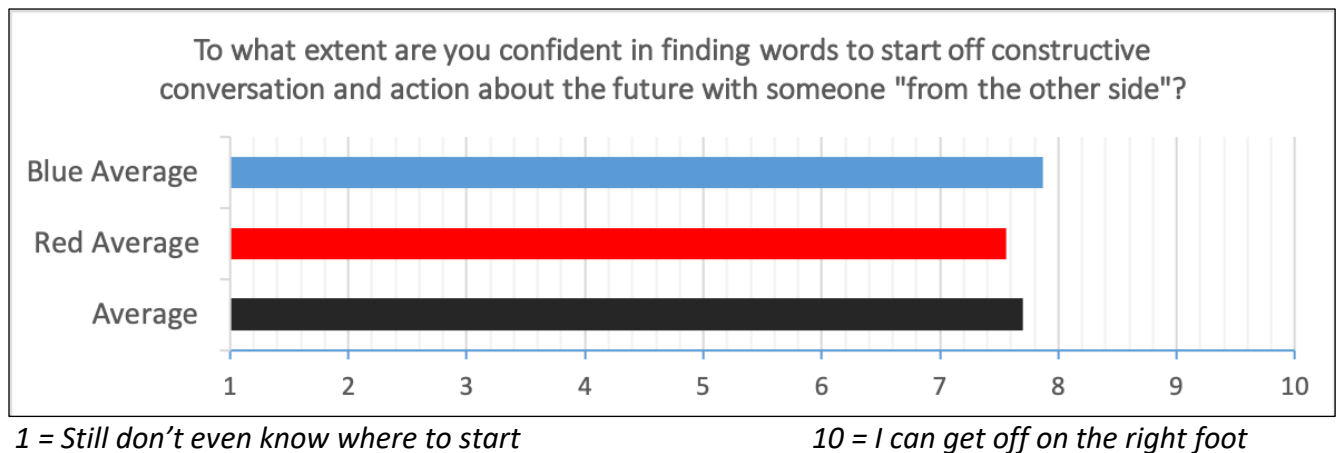
<b>Respect for those who agree and who disagree</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to opposing view and paraphrase without offering my opposing opinion</li> <li>• To be fully heard and to be sure the other side is fully heard as well</li> <li>• Showing respect to all through listening</li> <li>• Learned how to discuss and mutually share</li> <li>• Everyone wants their rationale or well-thought argument to be heard</li> <li>• People shared about themselves to understand what is behind perceptions</li> <li>• We have similar values (sometimes) but believe different "facts"</li> <li>• I learned to research my own beliefs</li> <li>• Find sources—then discuss, discuss, discuss</li> <li>• That we are all concerned; the possibility of getting along</li> </ul>
<b>We all have the best interest of our country at heart</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Red &amp; blue both want what's best for this country; neither side has all the answers</li> <li>• The other side has reservations about their ideas too</li> <li>• Both sides care for the general welfare, but advocate differing solutions</li> <li>• We all love for country, but have different ways of expressing patriotism</li> <li>• Many of us, no matter our political "slant," are unhappy with the current state of politics. However, we all want to improve on a country we believe in</li> <li>• There's hope for unity, and there's more of it than we know</li> </ul>
<b>We have a lot of general similarities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many common concerns and beliefs hiding below the walls of polarization and divide espoused and demonstrated by our leaders in Wash DC</li> <li>• There is a lot more similarity than I expected; not as different as I imagined</li> <li>• We are so much closer together than I thought we were.</li> <li>• There is significant overlap between some of the core beliefs of reds and blues</li> <li>• I found that in many instances we share the same core values</li> <li>• Everyone is much more moderate than they know</li> <li>• The focus on the commonality of beliefs of all participants</li> <li>• Surprised so many issues common to both sides; open to common solutions</li> </ul>
<b>We do indeed have common ground</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Even though we have different views there are many things we agree on</li> <li>• We have common ground on every issue and end goal</li> <li>• Reds and blues have more in common than the media would have us believe</li> <li>• More in common than different—more in common than not</li> <li>• Lots of common ground and desire for success</li> <li>• The great majority of participants had views that overlap; a lot of common ground</li> <li>• Similar end goals. Language matters in posing questions and expressing views.</li> <li>• Example: some pro-choice people want there to be as few abortions as possible</li> </ul>
<b>Both reds and blues are concerned that their own leadership is lacking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More in common than not - but that does not reflect the nation or leadership view</li> <li>• There are "real" people on the other side who truly care about the country. I was impressed that so many could speak openly about their own party's misdirection</li> <li>• Good to hear common desire for improved political action</li> <li>• Frustration with extremes, need for forces for compromise</li> <li>• People feel unable to do anything about their opinions</li> </ul>

## Skills Workshops

Better Angels has recorded feedback from 938 participants attending about 28 skills workshops from 2017 to present.

### Theme 1: Finding the right language to communicate with the other side

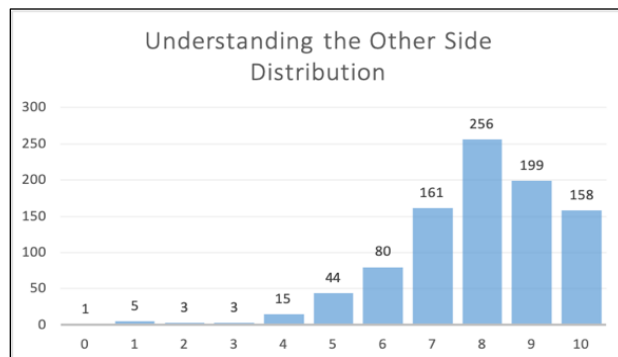
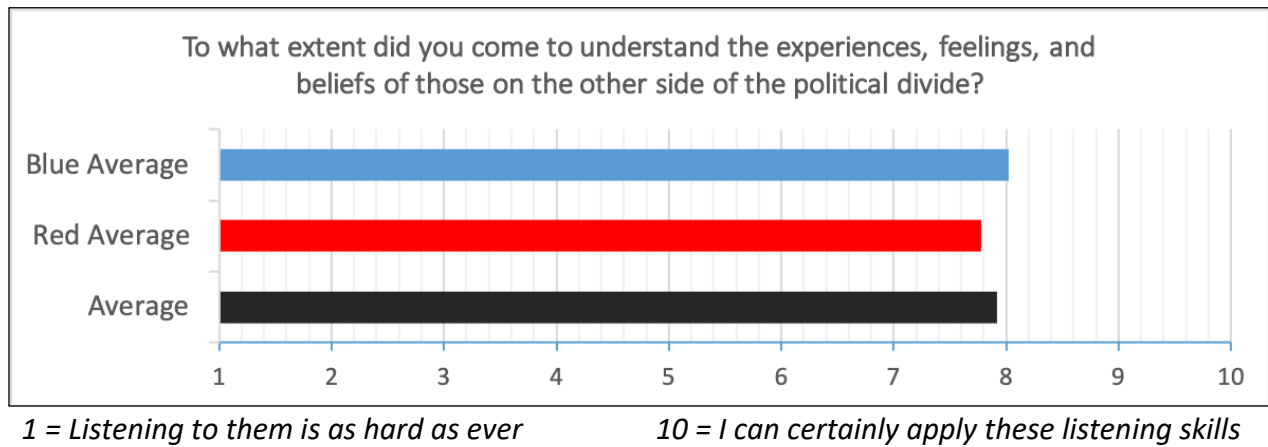
Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N=930)



Finding Communications Tools: Summary	
Median	8
Mode	8
Count	930

## Theme 2: Understanding the feelings, experiences, and beliefs of the other side

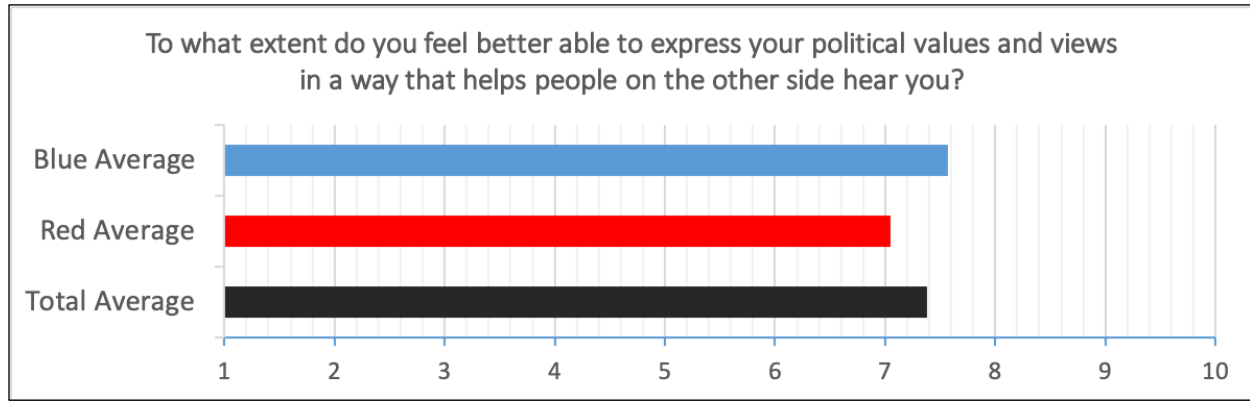
Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N=926)



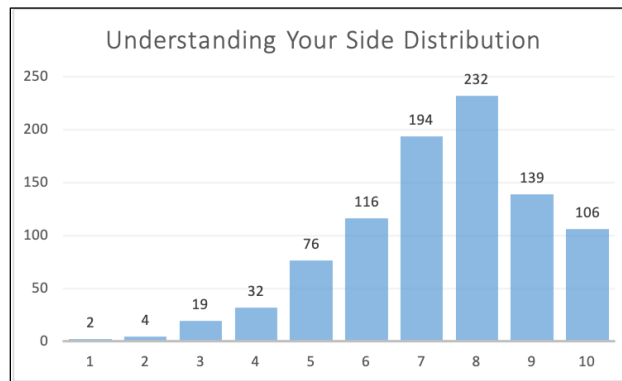
Understanding the Other Side: Summary	
Median	8
Mode	8
Count	926

### Theme 3: Expressing feelings, experiences, and beliefs to the other side

Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N=930)



*1 = I have as hard a time as ever talking to these people*  
*10 = I can share my perspectives a lot more constructively*



Able to Express Your Views: Summary	
Median	8
Mode	8
Count	930



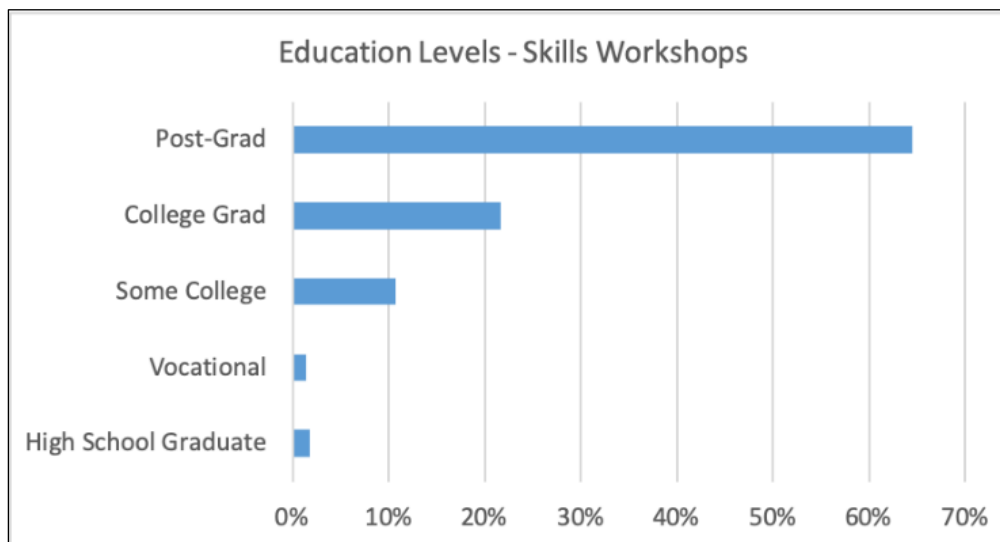
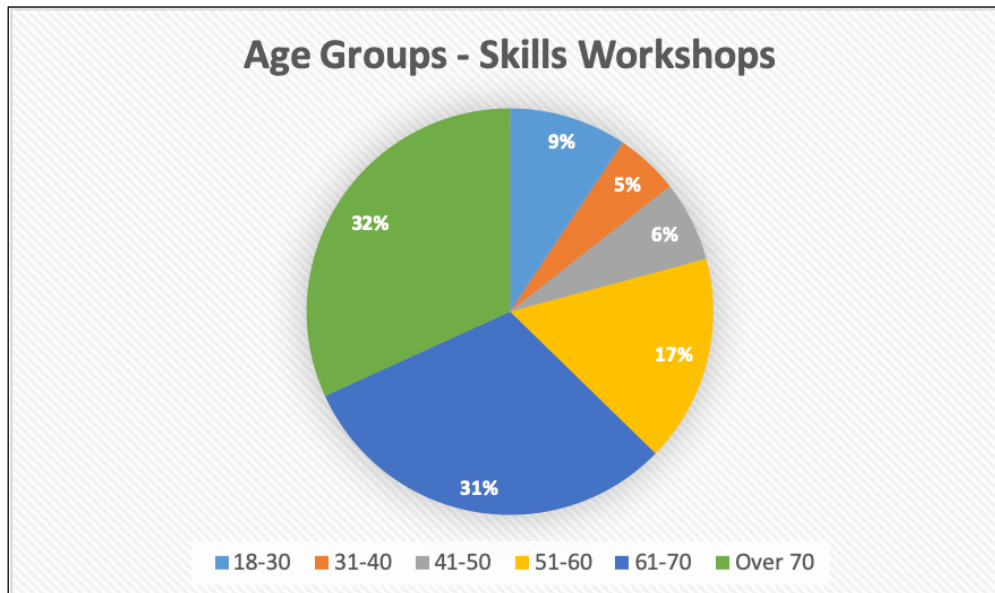
**Interpreting the Results:** Skills workshops aim to enhance the following three personal capacities:

- ✓ The *knowledge* which helps to enable one to have constructive, non-polarizing conversations with people with whom they disagree;
- ✓ The *skills* to have these conversations, and
- ✓ The *motivation* to initiate and have them.

Data from these workshops suggest the following:

1. More than 70% of participants as a result of the experience feel better able to express their political views in ways that will be more conducive to productive conversation.
2. On average, blues and reds both feel that as a result of the experience they are better able to understand the beliefs and experiences of the other side.
3. Nearly 8 out of 10 participants feel capable of using news tools and skills to speak to members of the other side.

## Demographics



## Qualitative Feedback: “Single Most Important Learning or Thing to Share”

Better Angels received written feedback from approximately 648 participants who included their single most important learning and something they’d want to share with others.

Cluster	Feedback
<b>Caring, Safe Environment for Exploring Differences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• They are your loved ones and they understand some things are important to you. Use that to start a conversation.</li><li>• The way I listen to someone else, and to what’s going on in me when I’m listening and speaking, determines the quality of my relationships and can extend out to the greater world from there.</li></ul>
<b>Seeking Common Goals and Values</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Looking for and stating common goals</li><li>• Listening with curiosity for hopes, fears and values.</li><li>• It’s wonderful discovering how much more common ground there is between red and blue than I thought.</li></ul>
<b>Openness to the Limits of Knowledge and Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The opportunity to express my thoughts as well as challenge my beliefs in civil discourse is one that is seldom provided; I am very appreciative.</li></ul>

**Snapshot:** On July 19, 2017, Better Angels convened a skills workshop in Kensington, Maryland with 28 attendees. Approximately 21 participants identified as blues and 6 as reds, and the workshop had 17 women and 11 men. The workshop included the following takeaways:

**Design:** An average of 9.3 out of 10 indicates that workshop attendees strongly approved of the workshop’s design.

**Communication:** 23 out of 28 participants said that after the workshop they felt somewhat to very confident in finding the right language to communicate with the other side.

**Self-expression:** 3 out of 4 participants felt better able to express their beliefs and values to the other side.

**From the feedback:** *“A must have for every citizen's toolbox if they want to engage in any kind of political conversation.”*

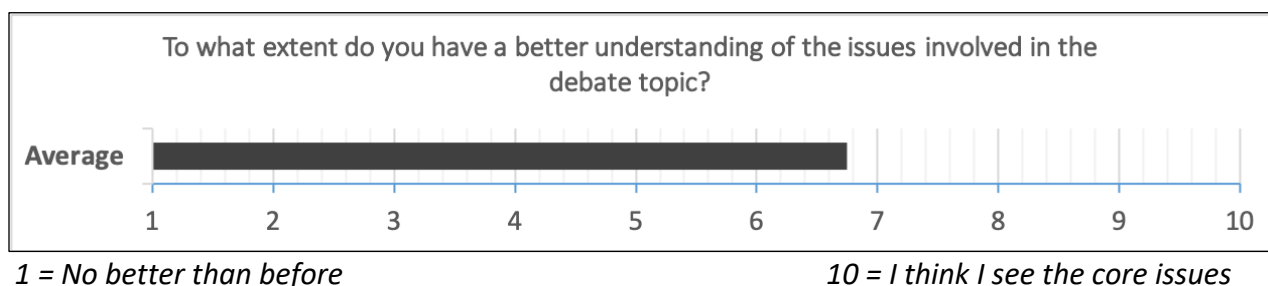
## Better Angels Community Debates

Better Angels Debates began in October, 2018. They are not like political debates, where competing candidates attempt to win votes, nor do they resemble the competitive debates many of us remember from high school or college, where people advocate positions in which they may not believe for the purpose of defeating their opponents. Better Angels Debates, by contrast, are highly structured, parliamentary-style conversations in which groups of people who disagree on an issue think together, listen to one another, and engage carefully with each other's ideas.

This evaluation considers data from 128 feedback forms collected from 7 Better Angels Debates since October, 2018, involving adults in community settings. Due to small sample sizes, we do not include participants' political affiliations and focus instead on overall averages.

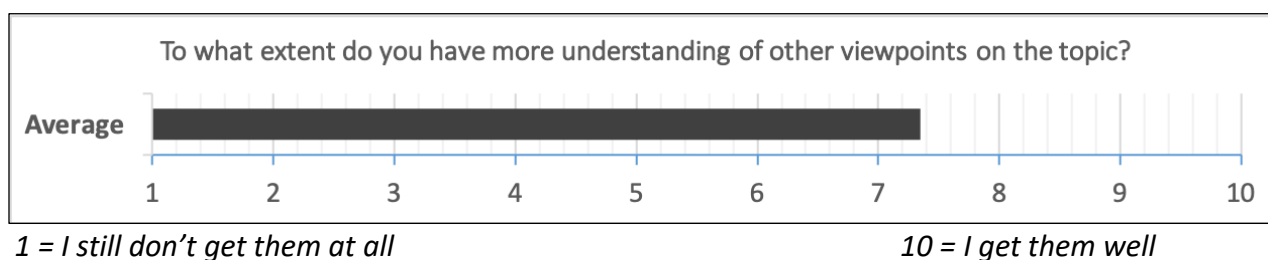
### Theme 1: Understanding of policy issue during debate

Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N=128)



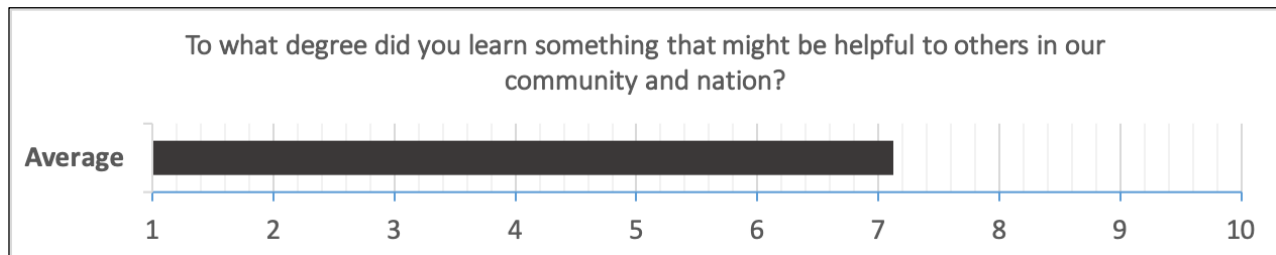
### Theme 2: Recognizing others' viewpoints on the debate issue

Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N=128)



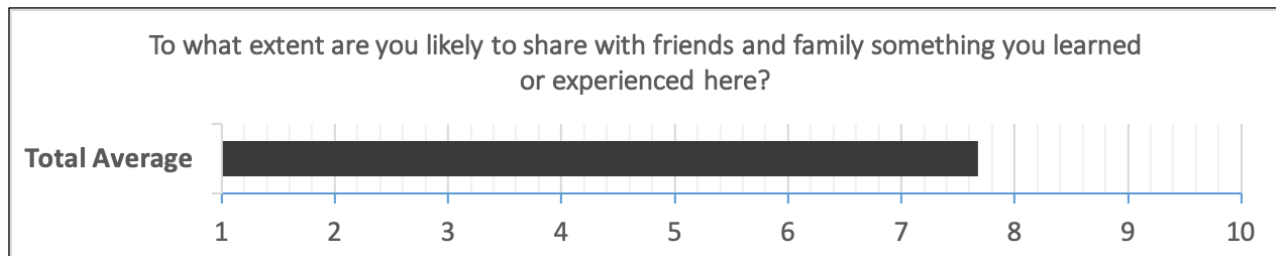
### Theme 3: Learning and sharing with your community and nation

Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N=124)



1 = Going away with no more than before

10 = Definitely have more to go on now!

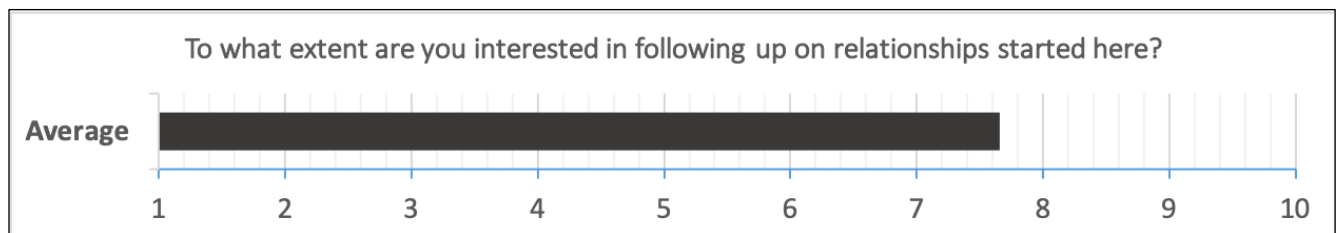


1 = Nothing to share

10 = I'll share far and wide

### Theme 4: Starting relationships with those met at a Better Angels Debate

Self-assessment immediately after workshop (N=124)



1 = Never want to see these people again!

10 = I'm eager to follow up

## Distributions:

Understanding the Policy Issues	66% of participants felt that they strongly understood the policy issue of the debate.
Understanding Viewpoints	73% of participants felt that they strongly understood the other viewpoint.
Learning and Sharing with Your Community	66% of participants felt that they would share the experience or something they learned with their community.
Starting Relationships with People at Debate	Nearly 80% of participants are interested in following up on relationships formed at the debate.

## Interpreting the Results

Data from these workshops suggest the following:

1. The debates appear successfully to encourage participants to listen more carefully to each other, learn about the opposing views, and build a tighter community of relationships.
2. Participants on average as a result of the experience feel significantly better able to understand the perspectives of those who disagree with them about an issue.
3. Nearly 4 out of 5 participants would like to follow up on relationships formed during the debates.
4. People on average feel that their participation in the debate will positively impact their networks and communities.

## Qualitative Feedback: “Single Most Important Learning or Thing to Share”

Better Angels has received written feedback from approximately 80 debate participants who reported their single most important learning and something they’d want to share with others. Below is a sampling of this feedback:

*Most of us 'ordinary' Americans are less polarized, more nuanced, less combative, more respectful, agree on more across party lines than we usually see among our national leaders. They should learn from us.*

*Loved the opportunity to discuss & hear different point of views from both sides.*

*So much hope for common ground.*

*Excellent opportunity for respectful sharing and listening. Surprised by vast amount of information shared in short period of time. On topic: left not really understanding how single-payer is paid for, which is interesting considering the topic.*

*Social contact with and witnessing of folks whose ideologies are vastly different from mine...*

**Snapshot:** On April 24, 2019, the Better Angels D.C. Alliance hosted a debate on the topic of foreign policy with over 30 participants. The debate resolution “Resolved: U.S. Global Hegemony is a force for good in the world.” The debate had approximately 8 speeches in the affirmative and 8 in the negative. Speakers spoke about the role of the United States in maintaining global order, the challenge of balancing our many competing interests, and how to think about our own American identity. Most participants positively ranked the design of the debate and also wanted to continue the relationships they began during the debate. Many participants remained at the debate after its conclusion to mingle and continue the conversations they had started.

## Better Angels Student Debates

In September 2018, the College Board published an evaluation of about 40 Better Angels Debates involving AP high school students held during the summer of 2018 at a summer camp run by the National History Academy. This evaluation included pre- and post-debate-series responses from 82 participating students. Key findings include the following:

Changes in liberals' and conservatives' attitudes	Pre-survey	Post-survey
Conservatives say that liberals are generally good people	65%	75%
Liberals say that conservatives are generally good people	61%	76%
Conservatives say that liberals have valid viewpoints on important social and political issues	77%	83%
Liberals say that conservatives have valid viewpoints on important social and political issues	64%	74%
Participants who say they are good at seeing the world from another perspective	81%	92%

Among conservative participating students, the proportion who agree *completely* with the statement that “liberals are generally good people” increased from (prior to debates) 11% to (after the debates) 29%, while the proportion who agree *completely* with the statement that “liberals have valid viewpoints on social and political issues” increased from (prior to debates) 20% to (after the debates) 38%.

Among all participants, the proportion who say they “enjoy having conversations with those with very different views” increased from (prior to debates) 76% to (after the debates) 87%, while the proportion who say they are “good friends” with someone with very different views increased from (prior to debates) 75% to (after the debates) 79%.



## Better Angels Alliances

Better Angels Alliances are local Better Angels groups (chapters) consisting of people who have become dues-paying members of the organization and who want to meet and work together on a regular basis to promote the Better Angels mission in their communities and in the nation.

Alliances are required to be led by one red and one blue co-chair and to prioritize having no greater than a 60/40 split as regards red and blue members. Alliance activities include the following:

- Sponsoring Red-Blue workshops, skills training workshops, and Better Angels Debates locally;
- Recruiting new members;
- Holding in-depth discussions about public policy issues, including organizing bipartisan Town Hall meetings with officials and candidates;
- Forming Better Angels Policy Groups to develop and propose on an equal red-blue basis new public policy proposals; and
- Socializing with each other through potluck dinners, movie nights, and other activities.

As of October 1, 2019, there were 41 registered Better Angels Alliances in 19 states, with others in the process of formation.

The transition from stand-alone Better Angels events to dues-paying membership in Better Angels, participation in a local Alliance, and other forms of volunteer leadership and on-going participation are critical processes as regards both understanding intellectually the dynamics of polarization and depolarization in a community and measuring empirically the effectiveness of the Better Angels mission and program.

To date, this work of evaluation has not been done. When adequate funding is secured, the Better Angels evaluation team aims to study these factors carefully, including what motivates event participants to join Better Angels and participate in local Alliances; the circumstances most likely to keep members engaged and active; the impact of Alliance membership on participants' personal and political experiences; and the differences, if any, in these areas between red and blue Better Angels members.

## Takeaways

Overall, this evaluation suggests that participants emerge from Better Angels activities more able and willing to have conversations and experiences with individuals from the other side:



**Greater mutual understanding.** Participants consistently feel they better understand, are better understood by, and are more confident in having conversations with people from the other side.

Both reds and blues are equally positive about their experience in the workshops. This suggests that the experiences are designed and run in ways that work for both.

Positive initial Better Angels experience is evidence that there is something effective taking place worthy of development and deeper evaluation.



**Common ground is evident.** Participants often begin to see common ground, shared values, or opportunities to contribute to civic life together.



**Civil discourse is possible.** Participants come to believe that reinvigorated civil conversation is possible.

## Plans and Needs for Further Evaluation

### **Summative – Effects on building habits of depolarization:**

*Time:* The effects of Better Angels experiences over time.

*Generativity:* The effects on members' interactions with families and networks.

*Cooperation:* The effects on on-going partnerships and cooperative work across the divides.

### **Formative – Data to improve Better Angels programs:**

*Effectiveness:* Identifying the core dynamics of citizen-to-citizen depolarization.

*Practicality:* Assessing program feasibility, local acceptance, leadership training, success in attracting diverse participants, and cost-effectiveness.

*Reach:* Identifying effective methods of scaling Better Angels.

### **Possible tools for such future research include:**

- ✓ Qualitative interviews over time;
- ✓ Focus groups;
- ✓ Outside evaluation teams; and
- ✓ New scholarship on the dynamics of polarization and depolarization.

## Better Angels Conceptual Framework

Social scientists and theorists have proposed various solutions to reduce affective polarization. In *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, the political scientist Liliana Mason argues for implementing contact theory, changing social norms, and focusing on super-ordinate goals as strategies to lessen animus between groups. Contact theory as developed by Gordon Allport is the belief that interpersonal contact can be decisive in reducing group political animosity. Other theorists have argued that organizations and grassroots movements should focus on correcting misperceptions and stereotypes currently so strongly influencing the public debate.

Better Angels seeks to develop a “we” over an “us-them” framework for understanding and approaching political conflict:

- We create depolarizing experiences for individuals and groups in local communities.
- These experiences are repeated in many local contexts.
- Individuals and groups with these experiences spread a new conceptual framework by virtue of how they act in their families, communities and networks, and the various social institutions in which they participate.
- Generativity of depolarizing engagement is aided in part through skills education along with training and practice in the principles and habits of depolarization.
- Individual and grassroots change aims when well organized to contribute to institutional change, which in turn affects more and more individuals.

Through our work we seek to cultivate in ourselves and others certain habits, attitudes, and ways of thinking.

**Criticize from within.** Engage the “other” on the basis of something shared, rather than on the basis of an accusation originating from outside of any shared understanding, value orientation, or frame of reference. Criticizing from within is more likely to be understood and more likely to benefit instead of diminish the one whose view is being criticized.

**Look for goods in conflict.** Identify competing positions in which both sides to the dispute can see at least something of value. The challenge is to see the terms of the disagreement as “good versus good” more than (or not merely as) “good versus bad.”

**Count higher than two.** Avoid the temptation to view the conflict in binary, either / or terms. In the real world, as opposed to the exaggerated and overly simplified work, very few questions are reducible to a simple choice between two completely opposite answers.

**Doubt.** Embrace the idea that your views, no matter how strongly held, may be fallible and therefore should always be subject to further consideration. Embracing doubt as a friend helps you to acknowledge the possibility that your own view might benefit from criticism from others. Intellectual humility does not require passivity; it requires avoiding the smug and almost certainly invalid certitude that no idea and no person can improve or find legitimate flaws in your viewpoint.

**Specify.** Steer around stereotypes and broad categories and labels in favor of delving into (often complicated and hard-to-pigeonhole) specifics.

**Qualify (in most cases).** For purpose of both accuracy and proper intellectual humility, seek to make your claims in language that is not definitive, comprehensive, certain, or severe. Replace phrases like “it’s undeniable that” with phrases like “it appears that” and add to your claims, whenever you feel that you honestly can, qualifying and careful words such “largely” (instead of “entirely”) and “perhaps” (instead of “certainly”).

**Keep the conversation going.** Even when it’s frustrating and seemingly futile, try keeping the debate alive in some way, even if not in this moment, rather than ending it definitively. Ending the conversation is big step toward ending the relationship, which, among other things, means that everything hardens and that polarization intensifies.

## Theory of Change

At Better Angels, three assumptions guide our theory of change. The first is that it’s necessary and possible to generate a virtuous cycle in which a critical mass of organized individuals work together to change institutions, and changed institutions in turn encourage more individual change. The second is that this virtuous cycle can be ignited and accelerated by scholars and intellectuals making compelling public arguments and by overlapping networks and coalitions of organizations working together to achieve shared goals. The third is that an effective movement to depolarize America depends decisively on equal participation of liberals and conservatives.

To realize our vision of a depolarizing America, Better Angels working with others seeks to:

- Involve one percent of voters (about 1.5M people) in active efforts to depolarize America.
- Involve a critical mass of opinion leaders in active efforts to depolarize America.
- Achieve a steady accumulation of depolarizing changes in the rules and cultures of political institutions, media organizations, and institutions of higher education.
- Achieve a general societal consensus on what unites us as Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## About This Initial Evaluation

This initial evaluation was designed and carried out on a *pro bono* basis in 2019. We at Better Angels are deeply grateful to these three leaders for their generosity and hard work in producing this first evaluation of the Better Angels program.

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**Paul Kuhne** currently works at the Center for Open Data Enterprise, a nonprofit which maximizes the value of open government data for the public good. He leads the Roundtables program, which brings together government agencies, industry experts, nonprofits, and other stakeholders. He has experience in community engagement, program development, and partnership building. Paul holds a Master's Degree in Global Policy from the LBJ School of Public Affairs, where he studied program monitoring and evaluation as well as other areas.

**C.J. Peek** is a professor in the Department of Medicine and Community Health at the University of Minnesota Medical School. A clinical psychologist, he focuses on care system transformation, organizational effectiveness in family medicine, leadership development, and the integration of health care research and education in academic medical centers. He has participated in research and evaluation projects in clinical and organizational areas, including building research capacity in family medicine departments.

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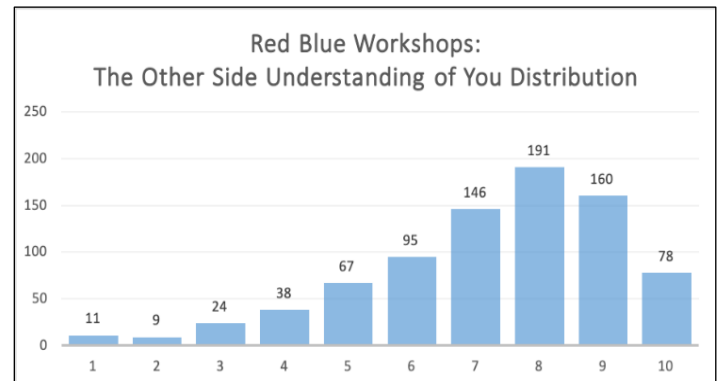
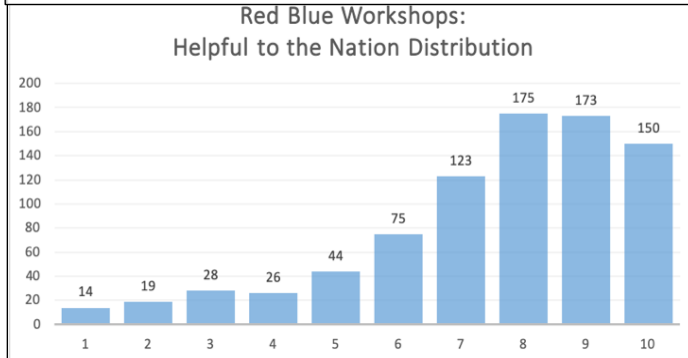
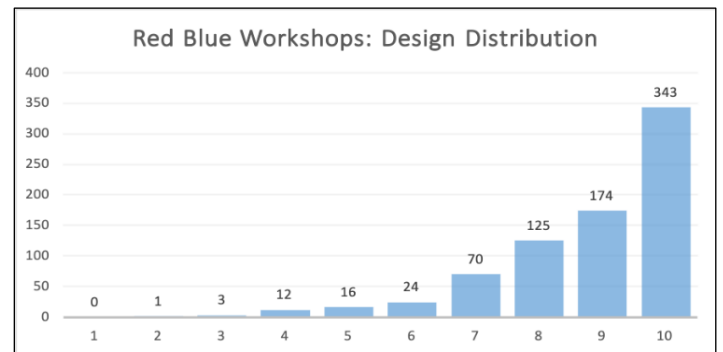
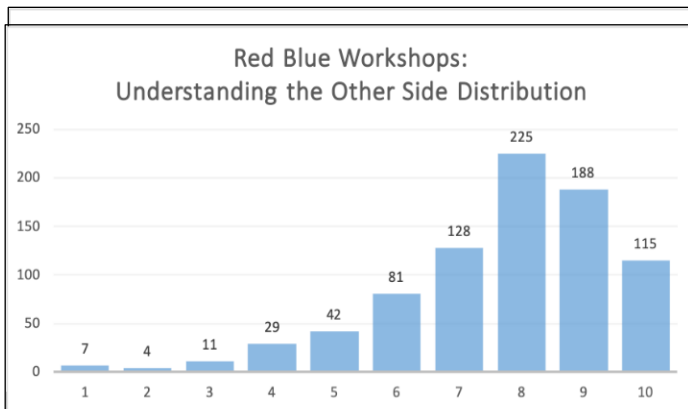
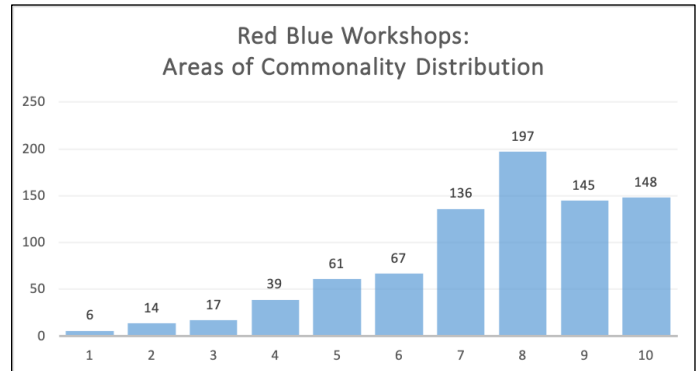
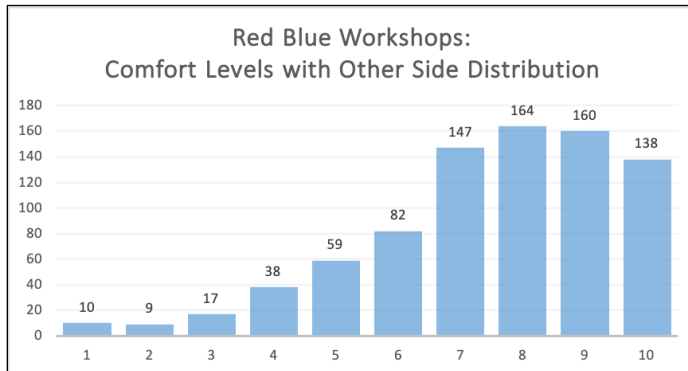
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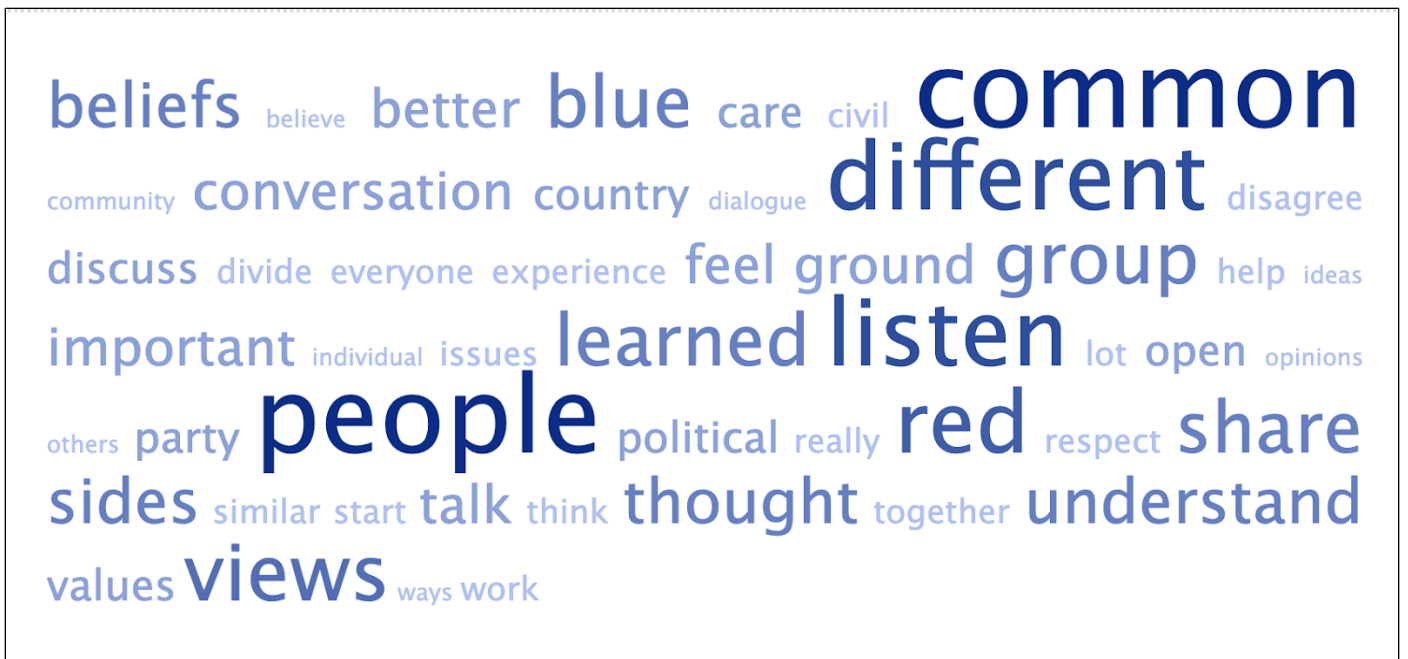
## Appendix 1: Red-Blue Workshop Answer Distributions





## Appendix 2: Word Clouds

### Skills Workshops



### Red-Blue Workshops





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*We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory...will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.*

Abraham Lincoln, 1861