



# **Braver Angels 2020-2021 Report**

**Depolarizing During the Pandemic**



**Braver Angels**

The background of the page is a close-up, slightly blurred image of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes in shades of blue, white, and red. The flag is oriented vertically, with the stars in the upper left quadrant.

## Acknowledgments

This report was compiled by the Braver Angels Evaluation Steering Committee, with special thanks to Eliza Tanner Hawkins, April Chatham-Carpenter, Amy Schumacher-Rutherford, Tayla Ingles, and Paul Kuhne. Graphic design by Melinda Bowers.

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# Executive Summary

## Overview

*Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Braver Angels expanded its programming, reach, and outcomes. In this section, we list the top priorities of the organization, our major achievements from March 2020 to February 2021, and the key findings from participant evaluations.*

## Top Priorities

**Our mission at Braver Angels is to bring Americans together to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic.**

We have several priorities that are instrumental in achieving this aim:

- ☆ Equip people with the skills to navigate hard topics and difficult conversations
- ☆ Expose individuals to people with differing views in a productive manner
- ☆ Enliven our democracy through more respectful cross-party engagement
- ☆ Educate people about their own biases toward and stereotypes about others
- ☆ Encourage the sharing of knowledge obtained through our programming
- ☆ Expand our offerings to address more issues and better reach target participants

## Major Achievements

Effectively depolarized participants in Braver Angels programs, even during a year of high polarization.

Dramatically increased membership from 2,950 in March 2020 to 9,262 by February 2021.

Hosted 443 unique events with nearly 6,000 participants between March 2020 and February 2021.

Agilely shifted our main in-person workshops to online.

Developed three new online workshops, as well as the common ground single-issue workshop.

Significantly diversified participant demographics compared with the 2019 report.





## Key Findings

82% of Braver Angels participants feel more comfortable with people on the opposite political side.

86% feel they understand the other side, and 71% feel understood by the other side.

88% have a better handle on their inner polarizer and 81% feel prepared to apply their new skills.

Between 77% and 91% of participants are likely to share what they learned in a Braver Angels event.

89% to 95% evaluated the programs as well-designed and well-run.

## Participant comments

“The variety of opinions was invigorating and gives hope for our democracy”

“Talking across the divide is worthwhile, healing and challenging”

“Common ground exists – we just have to be able to talk about it without being shut down”

“Family is more important than politics”

“Individual conversations with people you disagree with are invaluable. Seek them out, even if initially uncomfortable.”

“‘Ordinary’ Americans display a lot more thoughtful reflection, nuance, and intelligence about this issue than is often reflected in the media and fiery slogans.”

“Despite our differences, we can find common ground in our humanity. That should be our starting point in engaging folks of opposing viewpoints.”

“Reasonable people can disagree, and a respectful debate reminds us of what active democracy looks like.”

# Introduction

## A Watershed 12 months for the Nation, a Critical Moment for Braver Angels

2020 proved to be a challenging year as the nation was embroiled in the all-consuming COVID-19 pandemic, racial strife, economic tumult, and one of the most divisive elections in American history. Concurrent with those challenges, affective polarization plagued the American public, with a Pew study noting that nearly 90% of both Biden and Trump supporters believed that victory of their opposing candidate would lead to lasting harm to the nation (Dimock & Wike, 2020). That same study pointed to stark divisions in levels of trust towards scientists and the handling of the pandemic.

Political polarization is not a new phenomenon. Political scientists have tracked how our distinct identities have increasingly converged around political ideology over the past three decades. In 2008, Stanford University noted that nearly a quarter of Republicans expressed concern at the thought of a son or daughter marrying a Democrat (Iyengar et al., 2018). By 2010, that figure had rocketed to 49 percent. Democrats who expressed similar views increased from 20 to 33 percent during the same period (Iyengar et al., 2018). Months before the 2016 presidential election, Pew Research reported that inter-party animosity was creeping higher, as 52 percent of Republicans labeled Democrats “closed-minded,” and 70 percent of Democrats felt the same way about Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2016).

In the fall of 2020, academics shared the results of a YouGov survey that asked: “Would you condone violence if the other party’s candidate wins the presidential election?” (Dia-

mond et al. 2020). Their survey showed that 1 in 3 Democrats and Republicans believe that violence would be justified to advance their political goals. Meanwhile, Diamond et al. (2020) reported the timeline of our extremist attitudes increased from June to September as the proportion of Democrats who claimed that there would be “a lot” or “a great deal” of justification in political violence jumped from 16 to 19 percent. While this represents a small fraction of the electorate, other studies note that incidents of political violence tend to increase public approval of violence as a response mechanism, leading to a vicious cycle (Kalmoe & Mason, 2018).



Despite this development, Braver Angels found evidence that violence was not the outcome that many Americans wanted. We released a new poll in October 2020 with YouGov concerning Americans’ attitudes toward the election, and the prospects for coming together afterward (Braver Angels, 2020). The poll found that while over 70% of respondents across party lines believe that America will “not recover” if their preferred candidate loses the election, more than 70% also said they believe

that the two parties working together after the election is more important than the winning side getting its way, demonstrating that for all the partisan fear, Americans still want to see our leaders work together to solve problems.

Braver Angels rapidly scaled its programs to meet the growing need to tackle affective polarization. Between March 2020 and February 2021, Braver Angels hosted more than 400 programs that received almost 6,000 responses on feedback forms, as we converted our programming into a virtual setting to meet COVID-19 restrictions. Apart from COVID, 2020 was a watershed year in terms of polarization, with massive protests for racial equity, a divisive election, and increasingly violent rhetoric in our media. Braver Angels aimed to meet these challenges with initiatives like With Malice Towards None and Hold America Together. Braver Angels also attracted significant national media attention for our work to ensure that constructive dialogue was the preferred mode of addressing division and conflict.

This report highlights the successes and challenges of Braver Angels during the pandemic. Rather than focus exclusively on the calendar year 2020, we thought it would be more illustrative to review the data from one year of online programs during the pandemic between March 2020 and February 2021. The report is divided into three sections:

1. **“What did we do?”** This section explains the different Braver Angels signature programs, special offerings, and their effects on participants.
2. **“Who are the participants?”** This section looks at the Braver Angels participants and the ability the online format had to attract more people during the pandemic.
3. **“How well did we do?”** This section contains more in-depth analyses of various programs, as well as limitations and challenges of data collection and assessment.



# What did we do?

***Braver Angels offered a variety of programs throughout the pandemic, including debates, workshops, 1-to-1 conversations, and several special initiatives. The following chart includes an overview of each of these programs, the theory of change behind that program, and the total number offered between March 2020 and February 2021.***

For clarification here is the role of the moderator in each category of programs:

- ☆ Debate Moderation: A trained Debate Chair applies the Braver Angels Debate methodology and rules to lead the discussions.
- ☆ Workshop Moderation: All workshops are led by a trained facilitator who guides workshop participants through a set of discussions to hone key skills and better understand the views of the other side.
- ☆ Other Programs: Other Braver Angels offerings are often facilitated by Alliance Chairs or national-level staff.



NAME OF PROGRAM	THEORY OF CHANGE AND CHARACTER	NUMBER OFFERED	RESPONSES RECORDED
<b>National Online Debates</b>	An online Braver Angels Debate is a highly structured conversation in which a group of people think together, listen carefully to one another, and allow themselves to be challenged and perhaps changed by each other's ideas. When done well, everyone walks out with a greater understanding of alternative perspectives, more aware of the validity of opposing views, and with tighter community relationships. These debates tend to focus on national topics that can be accessed by anyone across the United States. Braver Angels debates are highly structured and through confident moderation, they are a collective search for truth that brings forth vigor, passion, and greater understanding.	48	1,363
<b>College Debates Program</b>	The college debates program seeks to address student conflict through a transformational format that teaches students to engage respectfully with each other on social divisions and political issues.		
<b>Skills for Bridging the Divide</b>	Braver Angels Skills for Bridging the Divide Workshops teach skills for having respectful conversations that clarify differences, search for common ground, and affirm the importance of the relationship. They also give participants a safe environment to practice those skills.	138	1,846
<b>Depolarizing Within</b>	The Depolarizing Within Workshop is designed to foster skills to help lessen the effects of polarization when encountered in political conversations. This workshop is focused on talking about how we regard and talk about large groups of ordinary people on the other side of the political aisle.	101	1,253
<b>Families and Politics</b>	Family relationships are becoming casualties of our toxic polarized environment. Family members are having nasty political arguments, avoiding each other, or even cutting off lifetime relationships. This skills training seeks to provide insight into why family differences over politics are uniquely challenging, recognition of common roles that family members play in political conversations (for example, the Gladiator, the Defender, and the Sniper), and strategies and skills for handling family political differences in a constructive way.	52	464
<b>Red-Blue Workshops</b>	Red-Blue workshops are the formative programmatic offering from Braver Angels and ensure that an equal number of red and blue participants better understand where the other side is coming from, with a goal of identifying areas of commonality. They can be divided into half-day or full-day workshops.	103	921
<b>1:1 Conversations</b>	This program involves two structured one-hour conversations between two people with opposing political views. They may focus on red/blue pairs, rural/urban pairs, black/white pairs, or inter-generational pairs.	>71	142
<b>Common Ground-Single Issue Workshops</b>	As one of the newest programs launched by Braver Angels, the Common Ground Workshops aim to unpack how Red and Blue sides see the underlying components of a specific issue, with the goal of mutually discovering areas of potential common ground and agreement. Workshop participants interactively learn together through 1:1 pairings and broader group discussions.	1	9

## Special Program Offering: With Malice Towards None

In addition to these standardized program offerings, Braver Angels also launched our [With Malice Toward None](#) (WMTN) initiative designed to help community organizations—civic, religious, and campus-based—deal with extreme polarization around the 2020 US presidential election. **Over 400 community organizations registered** for the initiative. Braver Angels provided leaders from registering groups training, materials, and support for a series of depolarization activities using a Braver Angels framework while weaving in their own organization's values, mission, rituals, and traditions. Braver Angels took a number of steps to implement the initiative:

- ☆ **Preparing and Supporting Participating Organizations:** Community organizations signing up for With Malice Toward None would identify one or more leaders among their membership—sometimes official leadership, e.g., directors, presidents, pastors, rabbis, provosts; other times active rank and file members, lay leaders, student leaders, etc.—to head their group's participation in the program. Those leaders would then attend a Braver Angels orientation session; be provided with event templates, suggested readings, and other resources; offered additional training on group facilitation or running Zoom events; and invited to weekly check-in meetings.
- ☆ **Encouraging Individuals to Take the Pledge:** Braver Angels created a personal pledge that individuals could sign as a commitment to work towards depolarization no matter the results of the election. The WMTN community leaders were introduced to the pledge and invited to sign it themselves and share it with their group members for consideration. The pledge eventually garnered 3,380 signatures. It read: *“Regardless of how the election turns out, I will not hold hate, disdain, or ridicule for those who voted differently from me. Whether I am pleased or upset about the outcome, I will seek to understand the concerns and aspira-*

*tions of those who voted differently and will look for opportunities to work with people with whom I don't agree.”*

- ☆ **Implementing the Program:** WMTN leaders who had signed on before the election were provided with ideas about how to introduce the initiative and could use templates to host two events.
  - ☆ *Gatherings of those happy with the election results and those who were not:* Participants were given the opportunity in a safe, like-minded space to share their feelings about the election and where the country was going, to talk about how to avoid the temptations of their own side when dealing with those with opposing viewpoints (e.g., gloating or dismissiveness on the winning side, despair and blame on the other), and to draw on their organization's principles and societal goals in preparation to meet with the other group.
  - ☆ *Follow-up Engagement:* The second event, scheduled for at least a few days later, brought together the two groups for respectful engagement, focused on hearing each other out and searching for common ground and shared goals for the country.

The Braver Angels WMTN team developed relationships with trusted community leaders across the country who remain interested in collaborating with Braver Angels. The most impactful outcome of the initiative was the development of the Community Collaborations Team. This team was tasked with designing, piloting, implementing, and maintaining the Community Collaborations Network, a program for community organizations interested in collaborating with Braver Angels in an ongoing way with projects and events not tied to a specific election cycle.

The WMTN program received 63 fully completed surveys that included a variety of observations from participants. Participants provided feedback that ranged from those who felt it was transformational to do depolarizing work to those who said they were surprised by how



respectful participants were to each other. Organizations appreciated their involvement in the initiative and valued the support from Braver Angels, including programmatic outlines, communication, and guidance during implementation.

## A Randomized Controlled Trial of a Braver Angels Workshop

In 2020, researchers from Boston University, Brown University, Texas A&M University, University of Pittsburgh, The Ohio State University, and the University of Georgia, published [a study](#) of the impact of Braver Angels' Red-Blue Workshops called "Can Americans Depolarize? Assessing the Effects of Reciprocal Group Reflection on Partisan Polarization." To understand *reciprocal group reflection*, the researchers carried out a Randomized Control Trial (RCT) of students across four universities who were either assigned to attend a Red-Blue Workshop or instead take a series of three short surveys. The study results demonstrated a significant impact on participants' polarized attitudes towards people across the aisle, both in the short and longer term, even though the evaluation took place during the politically tumultuous period between February and October 2020. Key results include:

☆ The "warmth" of attitudes toward people of the opposite political party has dropped significantly over the past three decades,

and the level of polarization—the difference between how you feel towards your party versus the opposite party—has increased significantly. Two weeks after participating in a Braver Angels Red-Blue workshop, participants' "warmth" toward the other party had increased enough to offset nearly a decade's worth of decline, and polarization had decreased by more than half of that time's increase in polarization.

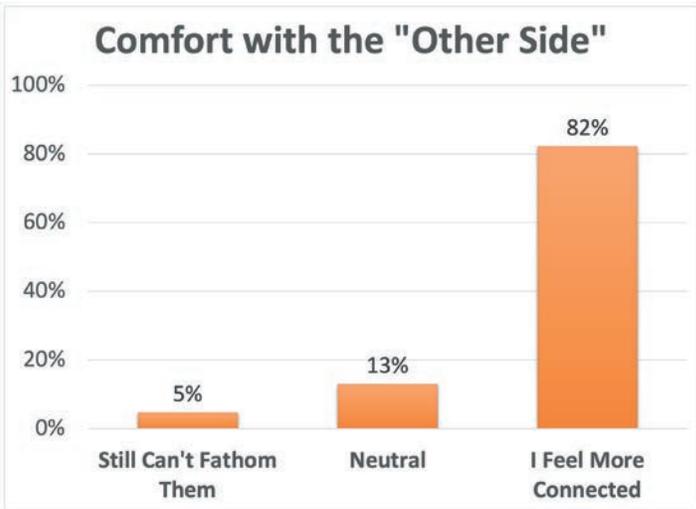
☆ In this study, people participated in a Red-Blue workshop with no further engagement by Braver Angels. The study found that while people felt significantly warmer towards the opposite party two weeks after the workshop, their level of polarization also remained less than people who had not participated in the workshop, even seven months later. This finding is particularly remarkable given that the seven-month period took place from February to October 2020, a period marked by the pandemic, the death of George Floyd, and the lead-up to the 2020 election.

☆ People put their money where their mouth was: when given the chance to keep a gift card offered by the survey researchers as thanks for participation, people who participated in the Red-Blue workshop donated nearly four times as much of the gift card, on average, to a charity focused on depolarization. Seven months later, workshop participants still donated at the same increased proportion to people who had not participated in the workshop.

# How did we do?

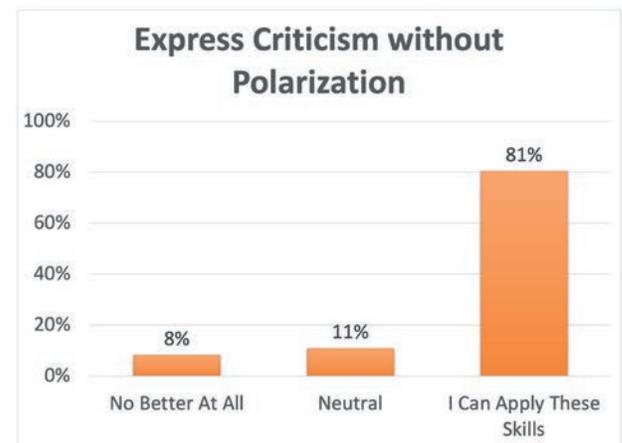
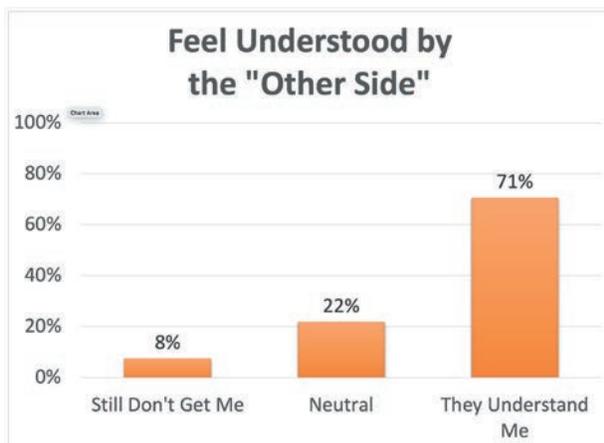
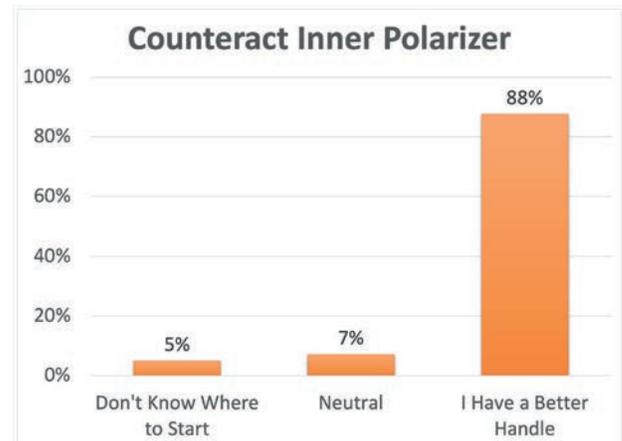
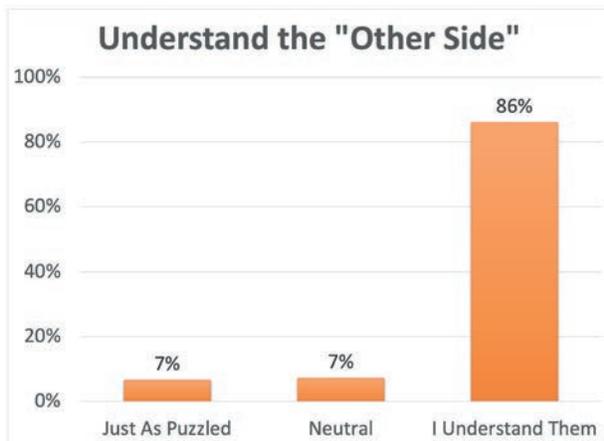
***Braver Angels' overall goal is to bring Americans together to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic. Although it is difficult to measure people's level of depolarization through a self-report on a feedback form, some of the survey questions after Red-Blue and Depolarizing Within workshops can give us a better understanding of how Braver Angels is doing in this regard.***

In the Red-Blue workshop, we asked three questions related to depolarization. The first question was, "How comfortable (or less estranged or angry) do you feel with those on the other side of the political divide?" and respondents selected from a 7-point scale ranging from "still can't fathom them" to "I feel more connected, even as we disagree." Eighty-two percent of respondents say they felt more connected to the "other side" to some degree after attending the Red-Blue workshop.



The second question asked, “Did you come to understand the experiences, feelings, and beliefs of those on the other side of the political divide?” On a 7-point scale between “just as puzzled as before” and “I see and understand even if I still disagree,” 86% of respondents say they better understand to some degree. Finally, Red-Blue workshop participants were asked, “Do you feel understood by those on the other side of the political divide?” The respondents answered on a 7-point scale from “they still don’t get me” to “they understand me, even if they disagree,” with 71% of respondents indicating that they feel that they are at least somewhat understood. These are very encouraging results that indicate the Red-Blue workshop is helping participants become less polarized.

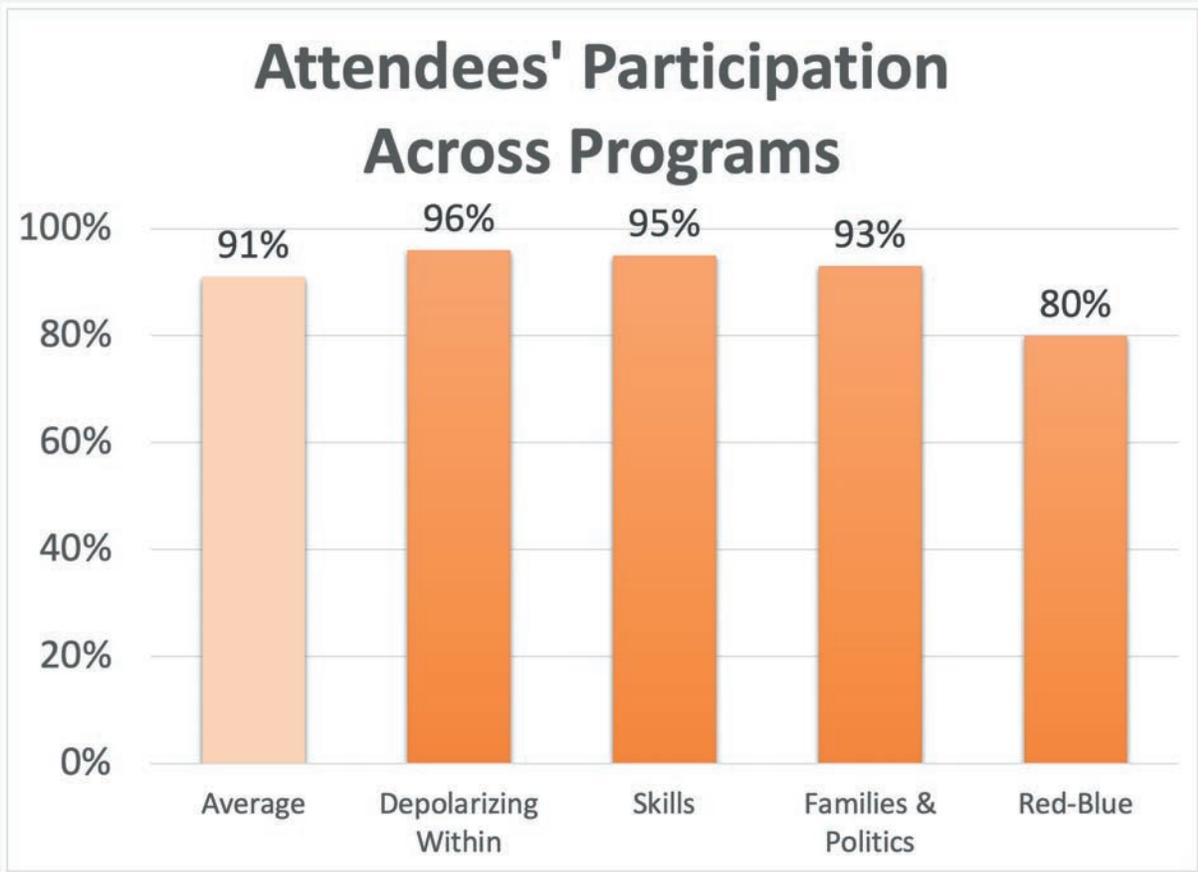
We also asked some depolarization questions after the Depolarization Within workshop. The first question was, “Do you feel more prepared to identify and counteract your ‘inner polarizer?’” Respondents answered on a 7-point scale ranging from “still don’t know how to even start” to “I have a much better handle on this,” with 88% of respondents saying they can better handle things to some degree. The second question asked, “Can you express criticisms of the other side without contributing to polarization?” Again, respondents answered on a 7-point scale ranging from “I’m no better at all” to “I can certainly apply these skills,” with 81% of respondents saying that they can apply these skills to some degree. These are very encouraging results that indicate the Depolarizing Within workshop is also helping participants become less polarized.



# Program Design

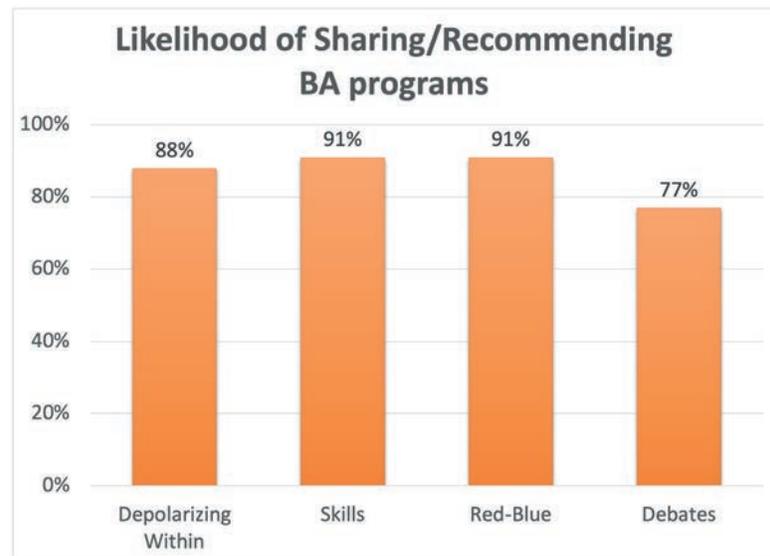
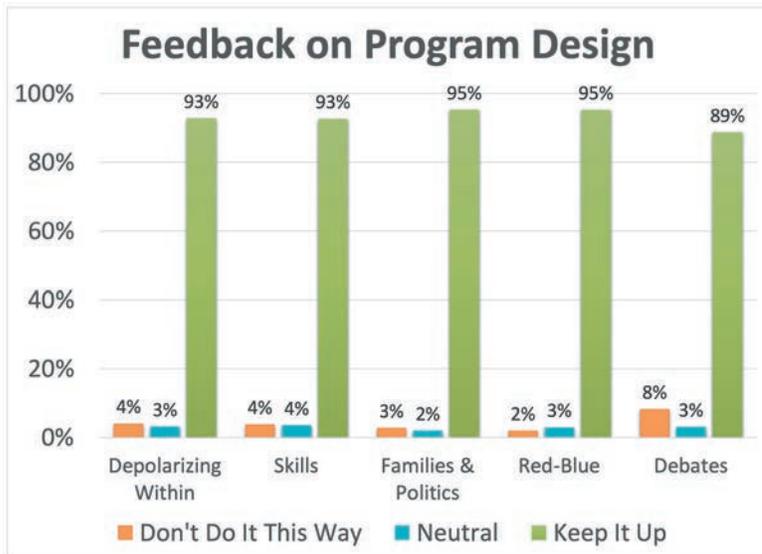
Beyond the questions of polarization, we found that the Braver Angels' offerings elicited high levels of participation across all the programs from March 2020 to February 2021. When asked, "How fully did you participate in today's conversation," on average 91% of survey respondents say they readily participated to some degree as measured on a 7-point scale ranging from "held way back" to "was all there." The highest level of participation is in the Depolarizing Within workshop with 96% of respondents rating their participation closer to "was all there" than "held way back." The participation rate for the Skills Workshop and Families and Politics workshops are very

similar, with 95% and 93% respectively. For comparison, the lowest level of reported participation is in the Red-Blue workshop with 80% putting themselves at or close to "all there," but these findings also included responses from those who attended as observers and were not active participants. Overall, these findings are encouraging since it shows that people who come to Braver Angels programs are by and large active participants, not just observers. Moreover, participation was consistent across all demographic groups and not limited to people of a certain age, sex, or political identity.



Feedback forms indicated that participants are overwhelmingly satisfied with Braver Angels' program offerings. The majority of participants say the programs offered between March 2020 to February 2021 are well-run and well-designed (Red-Blue 95%, Debates 89%, Skills for Bridging the Divide 93%, Depolarizing Within 93%, and Families and Politics 95%). On a scale ranging from "don't ever do it this way again" to "keep it up," large numbers of people gave the workshops and events the highest rating possible on either a 7-point or 10-point scale (Red-Blue 45%, Debates 48%, Skills 37%, Depolarizing Within 45%, and Families and Politics 50%). Only a very few survey respondents are more negative than positive about the workshops or events in which they participated (Red-Blue 2%, Debates 8%, Skills for Bridging the Divide 4%, Depolarizing Within 4%, and Families and Politics 3%).

Braver Angels' ultimate goal is that our offerings will have effects that extend into communities. Although the Evaluation Committee still has not yet measured the impact across social networks, some of the survey feedback indicates broader community effects, as the participants indicated a willingness to share what they learned or to use new skills. In the Debates workshop, we found that when asked "How likely are you to share something you learned here," 77% of respondents say that they are interested in sharing something they learned. In the Red-Blue workshop, 91% of respondents say that they are interested in sharing something they learned. For the Skills workshop, 91% of respondents say they would recommend the workshop to others. Finally, in the Depolarizing Within workshops, 88% of respondents say they can intervene in polarized conversations to some degree. Again, these are encouraging results, showing that Braver Angels may be able to reach more than just the people who directly participate in their many programs.

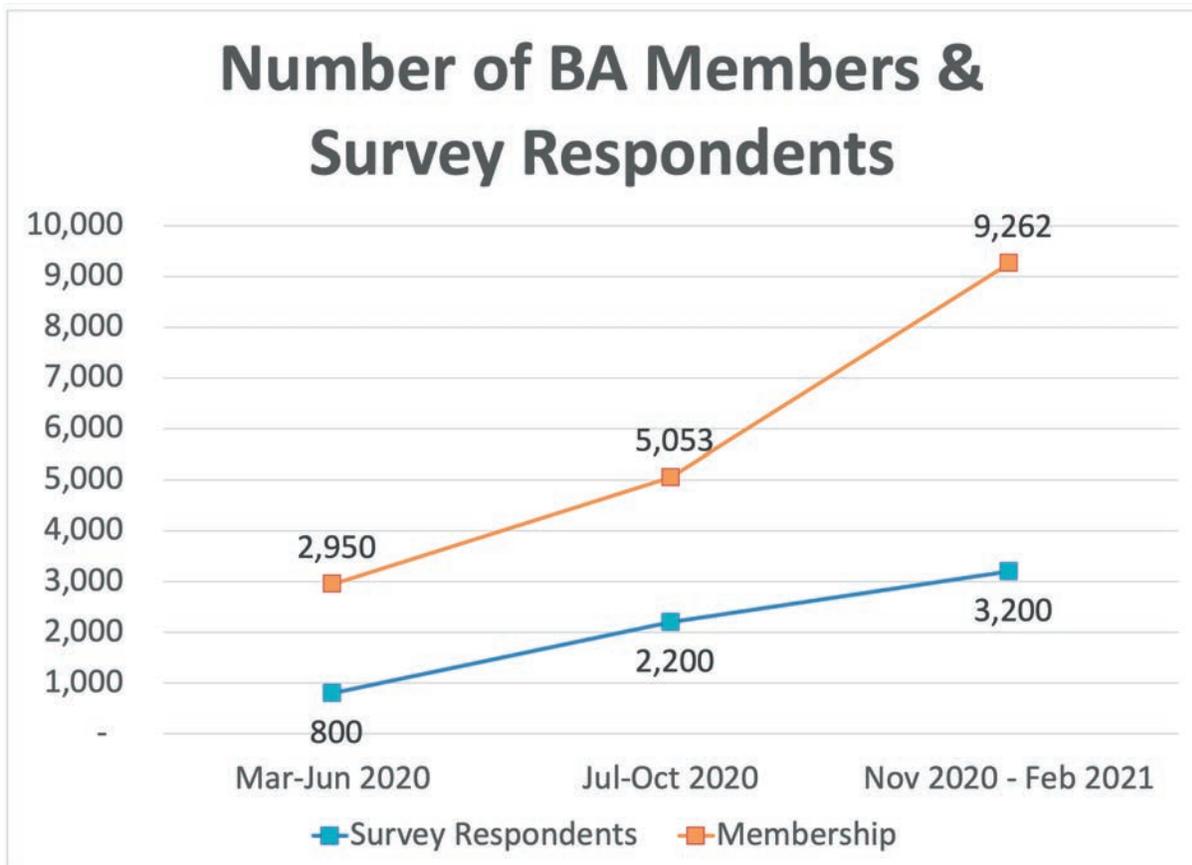


# Who are the participants?

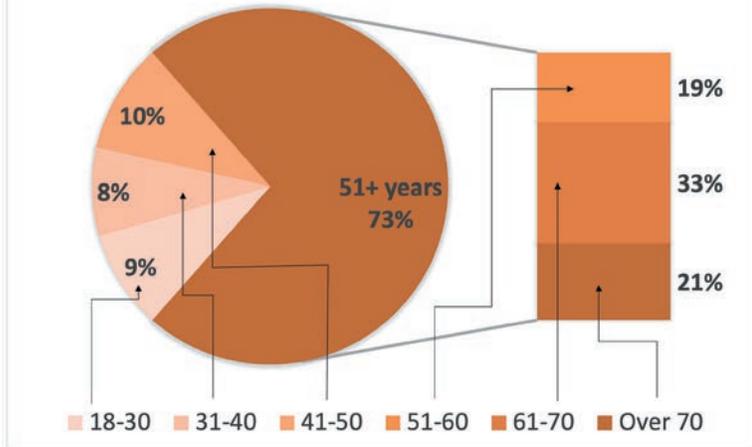
The biggest change that happened to Braver Angels during the pandemic is that we attracted more people to our offerings. Braver Angels increased its membership substantially from a baseline of 2,950 members in March 2020 to 9,262 by the end of February 2021. In order to see the changes more clearly, we looked at trimesters (March-June 2020, July-October 2020, and November 2020-February 2021). During those time periods, the number of respondents to Braver Angels feedback forms increased from a little over 800 to about 2,200 and finally to 3,200 respondents. Not all of the people who filled out feedback forms are members of Braver Angels. However, these numbers indicate both the increase in membership and the increase in survey feedback data.

In terms of broad demographics across Braver Angels programs, the feedback forms capture information on age, location, ideology, political party, the strength of partisanship, gender, race, and education. This section aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the people who attended Braver Angels programs during the pandemic (March 2020-February 2021).

**Age:** We overwhelmingly find that program participants are older, with 73% more than 50 years old. The largest group of participants is those aged 60-70, and this section makes up 33% of all participants. The next largest group is those 70 and over, who make up another 21% of all participants. On the younger side of things, we find that only 8% of all participants are between the ages of 18-30. Overall, we find that the average age is between 50-60.

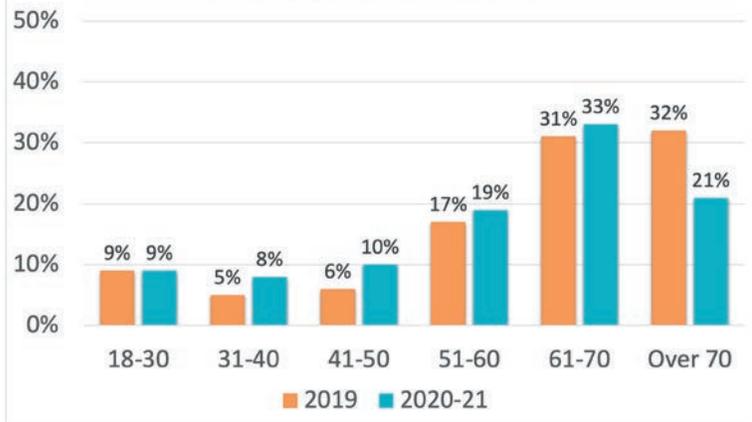


## AGE OF PARTICIPANTS



In looking at these age demographics, we see that Braver Angels attracts an older group of individuals and is struggling to attract younger people. However, Braver Angels has diversified our participant demographics since the release of our [2019 Evaluation Report](#), with now more than a quarter of participants under the age of 50.

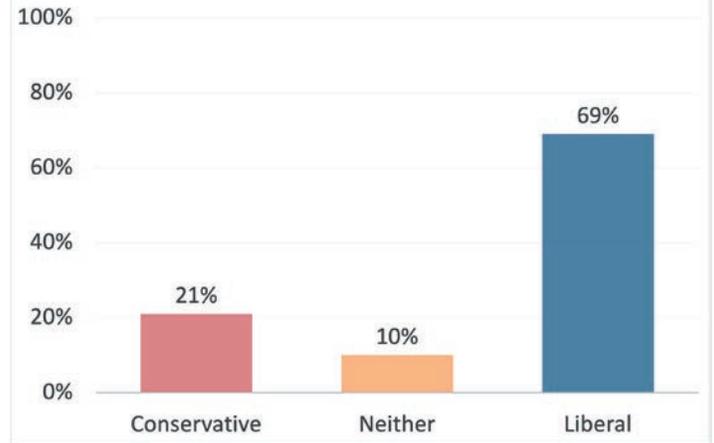
## Comparison of Participant Ages, 2019 with 2020-21



**Ideology:** Across all programs, participants lean liberal. The largest group of participants report being liberal, making up 31% of all participants. 18% of participants say they are strongly liberal, whereas only 4% of participants report being strongly conservative. Only 21% of participants report being at least somewhat conservative. Overall, we see that Braver

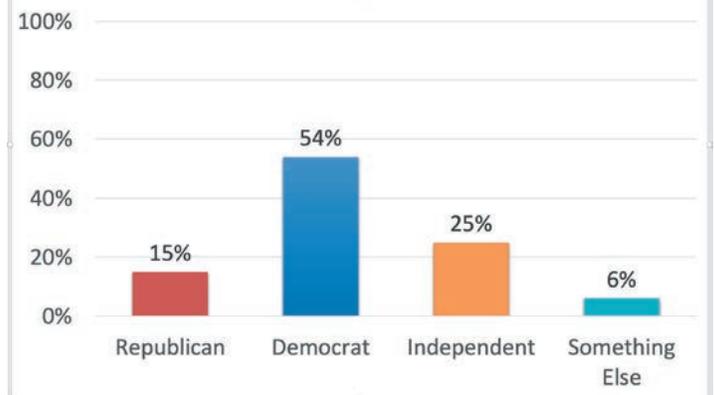
Angels was attracting more liberal and fewer conservative participants.

## Ideology of Participants



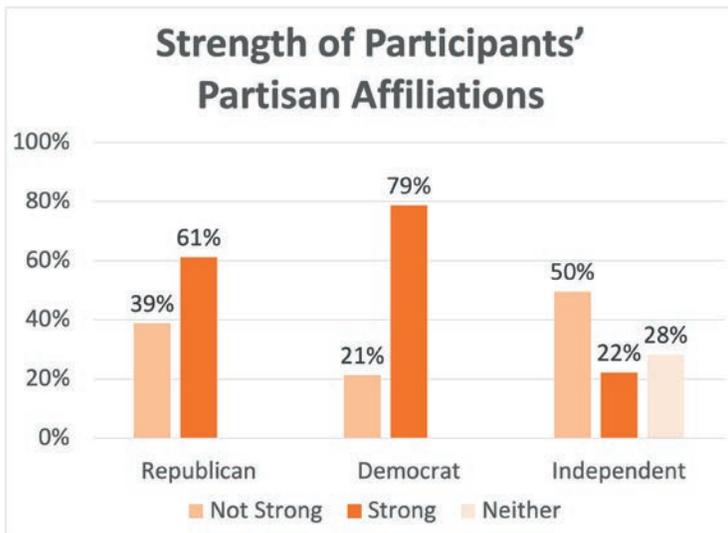
**Partisanship:** Partisanship follows ideology in that the majority of participants report being a Democrat. We find that 54% of participants identify as Democrats while only 15% of people identify as Republicans. Almost a quarter (25%) report being independent. The rest of the participants indicated that they belong to a different party. These results show that the programs were attracting many liberal Democrats and few conservative Republicans.

## Partisan Affiliation of Participants



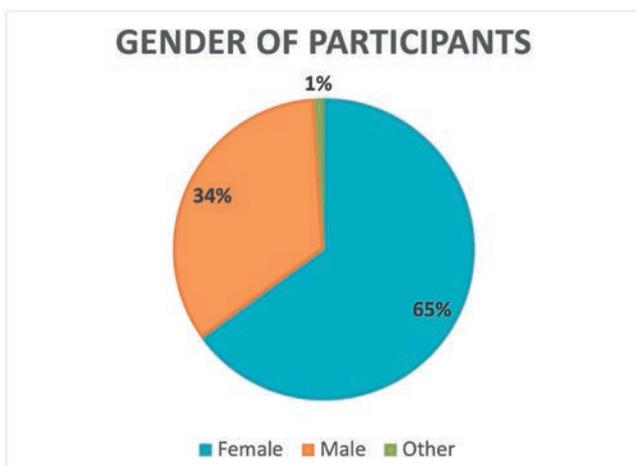
**Strength of Partisanship:** We also asked those that identified as Democrats and Republicans if they see themselves as strongly associated

with their party or not. 61% of Republicans say they are strongly Republican. 79% of Democrats say that they are strongly Democratic. Finally, we found intriguing results with participants who identify as independent. We asked them if they lean Democratic or Republican; 50% of participants say they lean Democratic, 22% say they lean Republican, and 28% say neither. These results show that even among independents, Braver Angels is attracting more people who lean toward the Democratic Party.



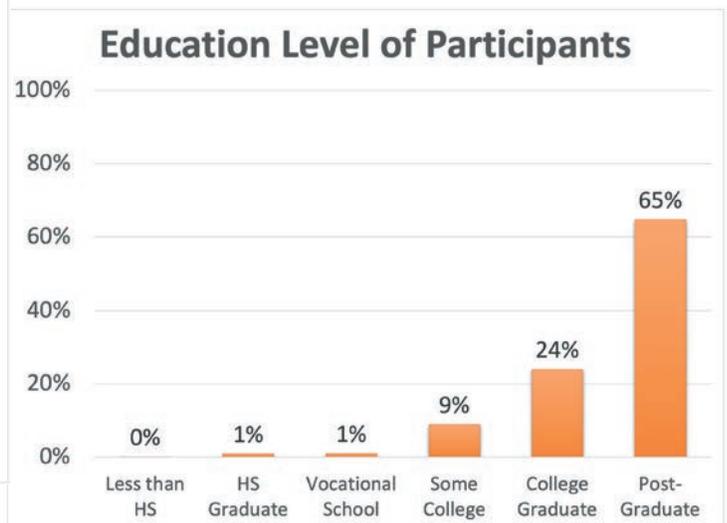
**Location:** Across all programs, we find at least one participant from each state. The largest state represented is California with 12%, followed by Minnesota with 9%, North Carolina with 6%, Texas with 5%, and Washington with 4%. Across the rest of the states, we see that the Midwest and South seem to be the least represented regions.

**Gender:** We find that women make up the majority of participants across all programs, with 65% of people identifying as female, 34% of

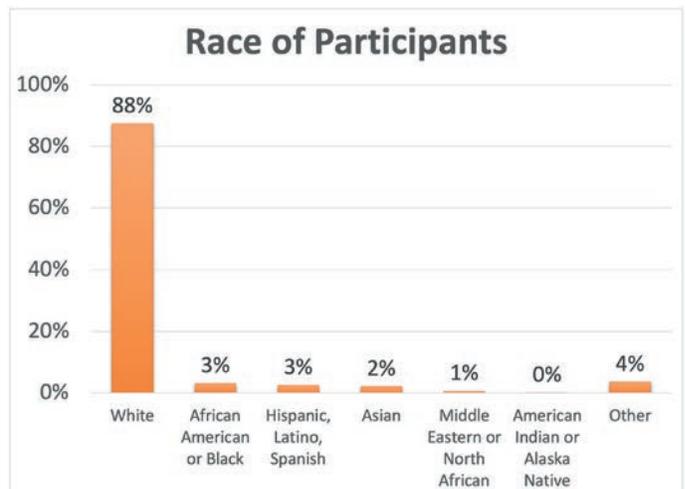


participants identifying as male, and 1% of participants identifying as other. It is clear that across all programs, Braver Angels is attracting more women than men.

**Education:** Braver Angels participants are overwhelmingly well educated, with 89% of all participants having at least a college degree, while 65% of the participants have post-graduate training/schooling. Only 2% of participants have no college schooling at all. Braver Angels is attracting very educated people and struggling to attract those with less education.



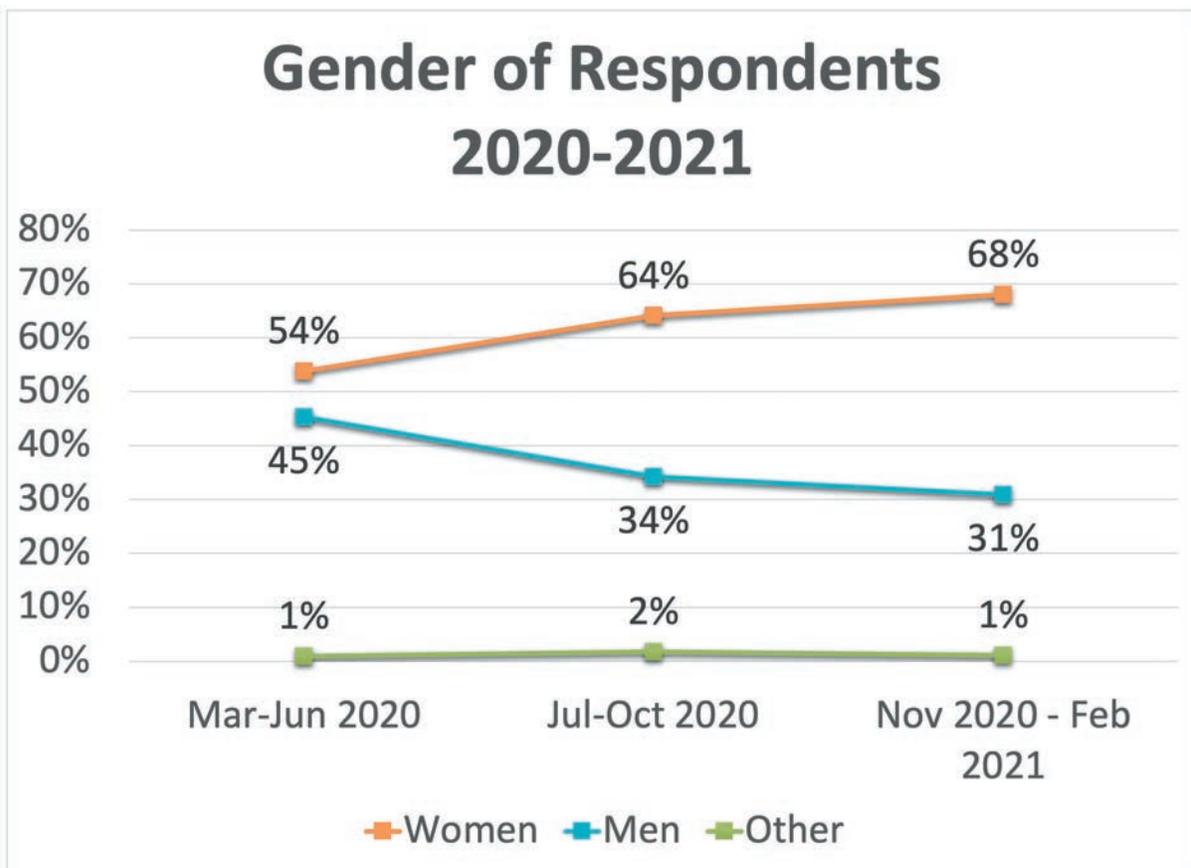
**Race:** Braver Angels participants are overwhelmingly White, with 88% of all participants across all programs identifying as White. Those who identify as Black and Hispanic each make up another 3% respectively. Only 2% of participants identify as Asian and 4% of participants identify as other. The other groups make up less than 1%. While Braver Angels



is attracting White participants, we are struggling to attract other racial groups.

Looking at changes in participants over the trimesters (March-June 2020, July-October 2020, and November 2020-February 2021), we found no substantial differences in ages, education levels, or the ideologies. On race, there was a slight increase in the diversity of participants during the July-October months, but no overall change. The percent of Democrats was relatively the same across the trimesters, but the percentage of Republicans slightly decreased, while the percent of Independents increased. The biggest change over the year occurred with

gender. We also found that the percentage of females to males became increasingly less balanced as time went on. At the beginning of the pandemic, participants were mostly evenly balanced between men and women (women 54%, men 45%, other 1%). However, by the end of the year, more than two out of every three Braver Angels participants were women. Braver Angels has not previously collected data on gender and we are still exploring the reason behind this imbalance, including a consideration about the political and social climate of the time (election, Biden's win, holiday gatherings with family members, etc.).



# Beyond the Numbers

In this section, we will provide more in-depth information on specific Braver Angels programs. This section includes an overview of qualitative data from open-ended questions, a case study review, and an internal review of the limitations of this Impact Report.

## Qualitative Analysis

In addition to ranking their experiences on a quantitative Likert scale, participants in Braver Angels programming were also able to describe qualitative findings of their experiences in these programs during the time period studied from March 2020-February 2021. The following list captures these themes by program area with participants all responding to the following question prompt:

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

See the Appendix for more information on the qualitative themes that were found.

### Red-Blue Workshops:

Braver Angels received written feedback from 804 participants in Red-Blue workshops. The list below shows a synthesis of themes from participants:

- ☆ The issues are very complex & nuanced, and neither side has all of the answers.
- ☆ Listening is essential to the healing process for our country.
- ☆ Practicing listening to those on the other side in a moderated and structured format enhances understanding.
- ☆ The kind of questions we ask of the other makes a difference.
- ☆ A posture of humility is needed to establish trust.
- ☆ Trust needs to be established before common ground is identified.

- ☆ It is possible to find common ground, especially when we recognize our differences are more about policies than values.
- ☆ The extremes of both parties are not the norm, but are what is heard the most.

### Skills for Bridging the Divide

Braver Angels received written feedback for 1,642 participants in Skills workshops. The bulleted list below captures a thematic synthesis from respondents:

- ☆ The value of listening, including paraphrasing, empathy, curiosity, and asking questions without an agenda
- ☆ Sharing perspective, including stories, using “I” statements, and “Yes and” versus “Yes, but”
- ☆ Depolarizing within, including embracing that it’s not about winning, humanizing the other, and practicing open-mindedness
- ☆ Hope, including hope for the country and hope for relationships
- ☆ Role-playing, which helps with understanding the other side
- ☆ Having a safe space for practicing and continuing practice afterward
- ☆ Understanding that it’s possible to find common ground and that we share common values

### Depolarizing From Within

Braver Angels received written feedback from 1,110 participants in Depolarizing Within workshops. The bulleted list below captures major themes from participants.

- ☆ Address polarization among own cohort, including how we talk about others and embrace listening to the other side.
- ☆ Be aware of our own biases and polarization, especially with stereotyping.
- ☆ Use the LAPP skills when communicating about the other side with your own side.
- ☆ Embrace that one must practice in order to implement these findings.

## Family & Politics

Braver Angels received written feedback from 404 participants in Family & Politics workshops. The bulleted list below synthesizes those major themes:

- ☆ We can find ways to communicate by listening, clarifying, agreeing, pivoting, sharing perspectives, and telling personal stories.
- ☆ Breaking common patterns of interactions and understanding the roles our families play in this.
- ☆ Approach conversations as a place to share perspectives rather than change opinions.
- ☆ Focus on the value of relationships and how to engage calmly in politics.
- ☆ It is possible to exit gracefully from a non-constructive conversation.

## One-to-One Conversations:

Braver Angels received written feedback from 142 participants in One-to-One Conversations. The bulleted list below shows a synthesis of themes from participants:

- ☆ It takes time and practice to understand the issues from another person's perspective and come to common ground.
- ☆ Individual conversations with people you disagree with are important.
- ☆ Structured conversations open doors to connection.
- ☆ It is important to create emotional safety by sharing perspectives.
- ☆ We can find common ground if we approach each other with acceptance.
- ☆ People on the other side aren't as bad as the media portrays them.
- ☆ It is important to not stereotype someone just based on one label.

## Debates

Braver Angels received written feedback from approximately 1,424 participants in the 2020 debates. The list below shows a synthesis of themes.

- ☆ It is important to understand all sides of an issue, since issues are complicated and nuanced.
- ☆ Absence of common trusted sources of in-

formation is a roadblock to understand and trust each other.

- ☆ Respectful exchange of ideas encourages respect for people with a different viewpoint.
- ☆ We can find common ground in our humanity, realizing that we approach issues differently due to past experiences.
- ☆ This type of forum can give us hope for our country's future.

## Virtual Debate Case Study: Donald Trump and Black America

On September 22, 2020, Braver Angels led an online national debate with the resolution: **Resolved: Have President Trump's policies been good or bad for Black America?** With the protests around George Floyd and Brianna Taylor growing in volume, and COVID-19 disproportionately impacting communities of color, there was a growing narrative that Trump's policies had adversely impacted the African American community. With the 2020 presidential campaign unfolding in the fall, Braver Angels decided to pivot from debates that discussed social justice-related topics to those that would relate to issues pertinent to Trump's America. Braver Angels has long focused on holding debates that challenge individual assumptions on a particular issue, and this debate was no different in that way.

Braver Angels' National Ambassador, John Wood, Jr., helped recruit a number of high-level speakers and was facilitated by Braver Angels' Director of Debates April Lawson. The debate featured several prominent conservatives in favor of the resolution, such as Republican candidate for Congress Joe Collins, Immanuel Jarvis, the County Chairman of the Durham Republican Party, and Will Reilly, a political science professor at Kentucky State University. It also included several against the resolution, including Dominique DiPrima, a popular talk radio host in Los Angeles, Derek Steele of the Social Justice Learning Initiative, and Damien Howard of Per Scholas.



The debate was one of the most popular virtual debates held that fall with 1,268 Eventbrite registrations, 886 in attendance, and nearly 120 feedback form responses from the experience. Feedback form responses found that nearly 60 percent of respondents felt that they had a better understanding of the issues in the debate. An even higher percentage felt they had an understanding of other viewpoints. Nearly 3 out of 4 participants said they were likely or very likely to share the debate with their friends and families.

Participants also shared a number of learnings and suggestions about the debate process, including:

- ☆ The complexity and nuance of the issue
- ☆ The value of dialogue during this difficult moment in our country
- ☆ The value of the debate format which ensured that people were able to have a respectful dialogue on these issues
- ☆ It was refreshing to have panelists respectfully share their true opinions on this subject without shifting from those viewpoints
- ☆ Learning that someone's assumptions were wrong or could change

Overall, the debate served as an example of a Braver Angels virtual offering in a contentious period and how individuals from around the country can connect with one another.

## Challenges with assessment and evaluation

Experience has revealed several challenging areas in doing Braver Angels evaluation—things inherently challenging to “wrestle to the floor,” not just technical obstacles. These represent part of the evaluation team’s work agenda for 2022:

- A. Pre-post measurement—to assess change over time.
- B. Network effects—ripples throughout a community from Braver Angels programming.
- C. Alignment of goals, concepts, and metrics with broader polarization literature.
- D. Specify and evaluate competencies or practices for depolarizing conversations.
- E. Braver Angels programs attracting Blues of high education; how to bring in others
- F. Limitations—issues more technical than the larger challenges above.

**A. Pre-post measurement—to assess change over time.** This has two aspects:

**Obtaining pre-program baselines using self-report questions.** Our post-program evaluations often ask participants to judge a change on a given dimension from where they were before the BA experience. This builds in implicit pre-post comparison via self-report, which is more

informative than asking without reference to where the person saw themselves before.

At present are no pre-program surveys to compare with post-program surveys to confirm or better measure pre-post change assessed with the implicit “pre-post” question design. Such baselines are felt to be desirable as a potentially more valid measure of change from a Braver Angels program. However, this is not simple.

Before a BA experience, people are likely not realistic about their skills and confidence in doing non-polarizing conversations (or even be clear on what that looks like), not having been exposed to the experiences that demonstrate it. It is well known that people tend to overestimate their skills in self-reports, e.g., everyone considers themselves a good driver and all physicians consider themselves good communicators. This is arguably more pronounced with skill-building that people haven’t yet dived into, experienced, and appreciate. Consequently, a pre-program survey with the same kinds of questions as in the post-program survey is unlikely to provide a valid change measure. Arguably, post scores could be lower because the person now appreciates what is involved and becomes more realistic about how they are actually doing with it; their “ruler” is far better calibrated than before.

In other areas such as patient-physician communication, the pre-post measures are done via observation of performance by trained observers on specified dimensions in actual or simulated situations. But this kind of approach would be far more intensive and formal than the present global survey approach to BA evaluation.

***Measuring change in a group vs. change in a subset of those individuals.*** It is convenient to report average responses to BA experiences (or resulting changes), and people often ask for the “average” response to BA programming. But responses typically fall along a distribution—with some individuals highly satisfied or reporting significant change, and others not so much. This is why most BA evaluation results are shown in distributions or ranges rather than as means.

But evaluation can ask not only “what’s the effect?”, but “for whom is there an effect”? Can we discover what subset of participants report a strongly positive response to the experiences and high levels of change from those who are more neutral or even negative about it? What can we tell about or learn from those people who respond positively? Do we expect BA experiences to affect everyone positively as a goal or standard for effectiveness? Or is the goal that BA experiences resonate with a significant subset of participants? Around which goals and reporting methods do we organize BA evaluations?

A related distinction is the difference between “pre-post” based on aggregated group scores vs. a longitudinal cohort of identified individuals to track in pre-post fashion over time. This is a variation on the “average” vs. “responding individual” question.

**B. Network effects—ripples throughout a community from Braver Angels programming.** Braver Angels has only started to evaluate the community ripple effects of our programming and how participants are sharing what they’ve learned with their broader community. This generativity—how participants affect what happens around them in their own communities is a horizon for evaluation

**C. Alignment of goals, concepts, and metrics with broader polarization literature.** Braver Angels is still adjusting our program materials and evaluation forms to align with the concepts in the broader polarization field, which includes adding a standard “Polarization Battery” to our feedback forms. We will pilot and assess these forms during 2022. The balance to strike is alignment with concepts and metrics of the larger field and responsiveness to particular or unique Braver Angels goals and concepts. It is good to align language and concepts where they are the same, but continue to feature distinctively Braver Angels concepts, goals, and measures where they are not merely restatements of those more widespread.

A related task is the need to adapt our consistent core of evaluation concepts and measures

to different BA programs e.g., for skill-building workshops, for families, for political figures, for debates and all the rest. Build a family of highly related evaluations that are tailored in language to the specific BA experiences but reflect the underlying BA goals and concepts.

**D. Specify and evaluate competencies or practices for depolarizing conversations.**

Evaluation up to now has focused primarily on the immediate responses to Better Angels experiences and self-reported changes in skill, comfort, or confidence with specific dimensions from before the experiences. A horizon for evaluation is to describe the competencies or practices involved in successfully depolarizing conversation—what people have to know how to do and then actually do—to depolarize the interactions around them.

What would a measure of competency in depolarization—knowledge and skill—look like for those who want to get good at this as part of what they do? For example, how could you measure in a credible way the extent a politician (or anyone else) is using these skills in their own environment? What specific things to look at—a systematic account of *competencies* (what you know how to do) or *practices* (what patterns of action you routinely do). And to get away from measuring only self-perceptions. An example of evaluating for specific competencies or practices is research into public speaking or patient-physician communication.

This goes beyond evaluating how people do, but also helping them articulate clearly what they are doing and why they are doing it in this situation. This is “conscious competency” that leaders and teachers need to have, not only just being good at it in an “unconscious competence” way.

**E. Braver Angels programs attracting Blues of high education;** how to bring in others.

The reported evaluation is for those who participate—mostly “Blues” with high education. What can we learn from the evaluations of “Reds” or those with less education? What works or not for them? How can these expe-

riences be framed or done in ways that appeal to what already matters to a wider audience—and has immediate attraction. Polarization is a widespread concern—how can that wide audience be better attracted?

**F. Limitations—issues more technical than the larger challenges described above:**

1. *Feedback surveys are not filled by every participant.* Feedback forms are filled out voluntarily, with no incentives to complete. This means we don’t have information about people who may have attended an event, but didn’t fill out the survey and we don’t know what leads people to fill them out or not. Based on reviews of Eventbrite participation versus evaluation survey numbers, we estimate that a much smaller proportion fill out the surveys than attended. However, we are starting to have a large number of respondents to our feedback surveys, which gives us more confidence in what we report.
2. *Data and platform challenges:* Braver Angels overhauled much of our online evaluation system during the pandemic, eventually combining Google and Qualtrics survey instruments with real-time reporting to Google Data Studio. We are still systematizing the measures and questions and expect greater data and operational consistency.

# Concluding Remarks

Despite the array of challenges faced by the United States throughout the pandemic, Braver Angels' programs carried out more national programming than ever before and reached more Americans than in previous years. This report provides an overview of what Braver Angels managed to achieve, who it reached, and how well it carried out our programs. **Overall, Braver Angels programs appear to be effective in depolarizing participants, even during moments of high polarization.**

Braver Angels is still increasing the reach of its depolarization programs, and we have made impressive steps forward with data architecture, breadth of programs, and consultations with other groups. We are heartened to see other depolarization initiatives begin to implement their own evaluation frameworks to understand their programs and build capacity in the bridging space. We are particularly gratified with academic partnerships that are interested in providing independent evaluations of our programs. In the coming months, we hope to engage the newly formed Scholars Council to carry out new research and evaluation initiatives.

## 2022 Goals for the Evaluation Team:

1. Pilot pre- and post-program surveys.
2. Incorporate academically-tested polarization measures in our surveys.
3. Develop collaborations with external researchers and evaluators.
4. Collaborate with other depolarization groups to test survey measures.

# Sources

For datasets and more information on this report, please contact the Braver Angels evaluation team. Corresponding author Dr. Eliza Tanner Hawkins, [eliza.t.hawkins@byu.edu](mailto:eliza.t.hawkins@byu.edu)

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# Appendix: Qualitative Data

## Red-Blue Qualitative Feedback

Braver Angels received written feedback from 804 participants in the 2020 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?”*

Theme	Examples
<p>The issues are very complex &amp; nuanced, and neither side has all of the answers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It’s very refreshing to hear nuanced &amp; diverse perspectives.</li> <li>• We need the viewpoint of both colors in order to have a better place to live</li> <li>• Both Reds and Blues had a diversity of views</li> <li>• The variety of opinions was invigorating and gives hope for our democracy</li> <li>• How heartening it was to hear the diversity of opinions in a context of shared values</li> <li>• That I must seek the belief and nuance behind a disagreement</li> <li>• Everyone’s views are more nuanced than I tend to assume</li> </ul>
<p>Listening is essential to the healing process for our country.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respectful communication across parties is critical.</li> <li>• Intentional listening is critical to bridging divides</li> <li>• It’s an important endeavor due to the need for cross-political understanding</li> <li>• Opportunity to talk with others having different viewpoints is invaluable</li> <li>• This is important work to keep on doing so that we keep communication happening</li> <li>• Talking across the divide is worthwhile, healing and challenging</li> </ul>
<p>Practicing listening to those on the other side in a moderated and structured format enhances understanding.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a clear formula that can facilitate productive political conversations.</li> <li>• Understanding requires listening and pausing inclination to judge</li> <li>• Good practice for listening compassionately and kindly to another view</li> <li>• It’s nice to come to the table and agree to ground rules and talk about things in a civil way</li> <li>• A structured setting does wonders to dispel polarization</li> <li>• Ground rules gave way to meaningful and thoughtful questioning and conversation</li> </ul>

<p>The kind of questions we ask of the other makes a difference.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curiosity is essential for good discourse.</li> <li>• Continuing to look beyond stereotypes and ask questions instead of making assumptions</li> <li>• Structuring questions to assist non-defensiveness</li> <li>• Having to constructively articulate questions</li> <li>• Thoughtful inquiry is critical</li> <li>• Asking genuine questions of curiosity is the heart and soul for me</li> </ul>
<p>A posture of humility is needed to establish trust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both sides can see their strengths and weaknesses.</li> <li>• Great to hear the other side be honest about its shortcomings</li> <li>• This is a process that can work if people are open-minded and patient</li> <li>• Listening to understand and political humility allows us to embrace and learn</li> </ul>
<p>Trust needs to be established before common ground is identified.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build social trust before sharing differences</li> <li>• Let go of stereotypes and assume higher motivation on the opposite side to start</li> <li>• Common ground exists – we just have to be able to talk about it without being shut down</li> <li>• If you seek to understand, you can find some common ground</li> </ul>
<p>It is possible to find common ground, especially when we recognize our differences are more about policies than values.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have more in common than we think.</li> <li>• Common ground exists when we listen.</li> <li>• There is more common ground and more people willing to find it than we think.</li> <li>• There is more common ground than I anticipated and much goodwill on both sides</li> </ul>
<p>The extremes of both parties are not the norm, but are what is heard the most.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both sides are painted with the extremes of their group</li> <li>• The issues are not what divides us – it’s the over the top rhetoric</li> <li>• Most people are in the center and don’t seem to realize it – extremes are louder</li> <li>• The fringes don’t represent our parties</li> <li>• Both sides are misrepresented by the media</li> <li>• Both sides are concerned about extremes</li> <li>• We all need to pay less attention to the most extreme reports of both sides in the news</li> <li>• Media emphasizes the extremes of the parties, not middle common ground</li> <li>• Extremism on both sides is damaging our country</li> </ul>

# Skills Workshops

## Skills for Bridging the Divide

Braver Angels received written feedback from 1642 participants in the 2020 Skills for Bridging the Divide workshops. The table below shows a synthesis of themes and sub-themes.

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

Theme	Description/Sub-themes
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Paraphrasing</li><li>• Empathy</li><li>• Curiosity</li><li>• Asking questions without an agenda</li></ul>
Sharing perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sharing stories</li><li>• Using “I” statements</li><li>• “Yes and” (vs. “yes but”)</li></ul>
Depolarizing within	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It’s not about winning</li><li>• Humanizing the other</li><li>• Open-mindedness</li></ul>
Hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hope for our country</li><li>• Hope for relationships</li></ul>
Role-playing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Important for understanding the other side</li></ul>
Practicing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Having a safe space for practice</li><li>• Continuing to practice afterward</li></ul>
Common ground & values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It is possible to find common ground</li><li>• We share common values</li></ul>

## Depolarizing Within

Braver Angels received written feedback from 1110 participants in the 2020 Depolarizing Within workshops. The table below shows a synthesis of themes and sub-themes.

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

Theme	Description/Sub-themes
Address polarization among own cohort.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How we talk about the other has an impact</li> <li>• All sides need to do this</li> <li>• Recognize that listening is essential for depolarization</li> </ul>
Be aware of own biases & polarization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizing the other in ourselves</li> <li>• Self-understanding is key to this work</li> <li>• Acknowledge &amp; avoid stereotyping</li> </ul>
Use the LAPP skills when communicating about the other side with own side.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to understand</li> <li>• Look for common ground &amp; values.</li> <li>• Invite, don't push</li> <li>• Acknowledge self in perspective statements (e.g., “I” statements; personal stories)</li> <li>• Prepare for pushback</li> </ul>
Practice is needed to implement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's important to practice these skills in various settings.</li> </ul>

## Family & Politics

Braver Angels received written feedback from 404 participants in the 2020 Family & Politics 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?”*

Theme	Examples
We can find ways to communicate. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen</li> <li>• Clarify</li> <li>• Agree</li> <li>• Pivot – get permission to share</li> <li>• Share perspective</li> <li>• Tell personal stories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen &amp; respect</li> <li>• Ask permission to share my opinion</li> <li>• Learning to clarify first instead of jumping into a debate</li> <li>• How to clarify &amp; pivot</li> <li>• CAPP strategies – the clarify, agree, pivot, and perspective steps were fantastic</li> <li>• It is good to acknowledge, clarify, &amp; pivot before offering a perspective</li> <li>• Having or using a personal story adds to the conversation</li> </ul>

<p>It is possible to mindfully break patterns of interactions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the roles played in our families is key to this.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning more about ourselves and what happens to us in the presence of family</li> <li>• I can identify roles people play and decide how to best voice my perspective</li> <li>• I need to have the courage to be an engager</li> <li>• It helped me to think, to remember to be more deliberative</li> <li>• We can talk politics in family – if we don’t fall into old dynamics</li> <li>• I learned that I was a gladiator when I thought I was an engager</li> <li>• It’s helpful to recognize the different roles people take and how to respond</li> <li>• I got insight into the role I play in the family dynamics, and tools to help change</li> <li>• Increased mindfulness that I have tools I can try to not feel quite so helpless</li> </ul>
<p>Approach conversations as a place to share perspectives (vs. change opinions) by being curious about others’ views.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not try to change others. Try to understand them.</li> <li>• Objective is to share perspectives NOT to change opinions.</li> <li>• Clarify what others are saying – be curious about their viewpoint</li> <li>• You don’t have to change the other person’s mind</li> <li>• Actively listening for the issue, belief, concept, or concern of the other person</li> </ul>
<p>Relationships are more important than politics. It’s important to learn how to engage calmly on politics with family.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People are more important than politics.</li> <li>• Family is more important than politics</li> <li>• I can actively engage with family members with opposing political views</li> <li>• Together we can communicate again</li> <li>• It’s important to learn how to engage calmly on politics</li> <li>• We must have these conversations with family if we are to move forward</li> </ul>
<p>It is possible to exit gracefully from a non-constructive conversation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to exit when necessary</li> <li>• To have boundaries in our conversations and know when to exit</li> <li>• Learning to exit without getting upset will be helpful</li> </ul>

## One-to-One Conversations

Braver Angels received written feedback from 142 participants in One-to-One conversations held in 2020. 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?”*

Theme	Examples
It takes time and practice to understand the issues from another person’s perspective and come to common ground.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big issues are often complex. When we explore the details of the issue, we often can find common ground.</li> <li>• The importance of getting to know the “why” behind the other person’s opinion.</li> <li>• Articulating my thoughts in a common language in a way that would be understood by the other person is a skill to practice.</li> <li>• Understanding this person’s perspectives from her personal story really made the difference.</li> <li>• I learned about my partner’s personal experience with the issue. That really softened my viewpoint – it was great to put a trustworthy face to the opposing view and humanize the subject of my critique.</li> </ul>
Individual conversations with people you disagree with are important.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual conversations with people you disagree with are invaluable. Seek them out, even if initially uncomfortable. There is wealth in the wrestling of ideas and treasure in shared values.</li> <li>• We disagreed on some big stuff, but going in with an open mind and without malice meant we walked away happy and without confrontation.</li> </ul>
Structured conversation opens the door to connection.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Braver Angels conversational style was an amazing way to gain a friend and connect across divides.</li> <li>• I value the ability to have this kind of conversation one on one. We don’t need to avoid talking about politics and differences; we need to learn how to talk about them, and this was great practice in learning how to do this better.</li> <li>• Ground rules create a discipline that works.</li> <li>• Structural guidelines for the conversation were very helpful.</li> </ul>
It is important to create emotional safety before sharing perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to listen first before saying anything. Then say something positive.</li> <li>• If we can come with curiosity and drop defensiveness, beautiful things can happen.</li> <li>• The importance of creating emotional safety beforehand</li> </ul>

<p>We can find common ground if we approach each other with acceptance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We can find common ground across any divide if we approach each other with acceptance.</li> <li>• It reinforced that people of different races, ethnicities, and upbringings can find common ground and understand each other's differences with a little bit of effort.</li> <li>• The two of us have much in common regarding the "issues."</li> <li>• Lots of points of commonality.</li> <li>• We share so much common ground for our country as a whole and for the individuals making up our country.</li> </ul>
<p>People on the other side aren't as bad as the media portrays them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My partner had a very nuanced view of the world – certainly much more nuanced than media portrayals of her "side."</li> <li>• People on the other side aren't as bad as the media would have you believe.</li> <li>• We really do live in different realities that are shaped by corporatized media.</li> </ul>
<p>It is important to not stereotype someone just based on one label.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assumptions we make lead us to believe we're more different than we really are.</li> <li>• Importance of not pigeonholing someone just based on one label.</li> <li>• In order to understand others, we must set our assumptions aside for a moment.</li> </ul>

## Debates

Braver Angels received written feedback from approximately 1424 participants in 2020 debates. 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?"*

Theme	Examples
<p>It is important to understand all sides of an issue, since issues are complicated and nuanced.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good people can have very different understandings of the truth.</li> <li>• Perspectives and opinions differ even within "sides."</li> <li>• That to really understand the whole picture of any issue it's important to hear from as many sides as possible</li> <li>• In the process of debating, asking and answering questions, it is easier to see the issue more clearly.</li> <li>• We need to listen carefully to what each of us is saying and stop and think about what the other side may be bringing to the discussion to help us understand how they arrived at their positions.</li> <li>• It helped me crystallize that this is not an "either/or" issue, but rather "all of the above."</li> <li>• It's important to hear as many angles as possible, and give a space for people to speak and be heard.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The nuance can be found once people are brave enough to speak their beliefs in environments like this online debate.</li> <li>• I really enjoyed the structure. I learned a lot about both points of view that opposed my own and points of view that supported my own.</li> <li>• It was refreshing to have so many points of view voiced in a respectful place.</li> <li>• Very nuanced view across the perspectives.</li> <li>• I learned to think about this issue in a non-binary way and in a more creative way.</li> <li>• The issue is complex, but there are a multitude of possibilities for solutions.</li> <li>• “Ordinary” Americans display a lot more thoughtful reflection, nuance, and intelligence about this issue than is often reflected in the media and fiery slogans.</li> <li>• Sometimes we think we are at polar opposite positions on a topic, and then find out that differing interpretations and nuances of vocabulary might provide more common ground than expected.</li> <li>• Asking questions allows you to better understand all perspectives than pushing your own opinion does.</li> </ul>
<p>Absence of common trusted sources of information is a roadblock to understanding and trusting each other.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The polarization of sources of information has a great impact on how folks think about issues that affect them personally.</li> <li>• Our historical, fewer news sources were more unified in providing information and facts. The explosion of news media, social media and technology impact us having a shared reality and a shared set of facts.</li> <li>• It would be helpful if Braver Angels provided neutral fact checkers on their website to facilitate better understanding of facts surrounding controversial issues.</li> <li>• I learned that there is a way of seeing the difference between fact and truth. My main takeaway is that a person can value certain facts over other facts, and with a mix of beliefs and perhaps spirituality, come up with what they see as truth.</li> <li>• There isn't room for debate without a shared sense of facts, which is different from a shared sense of reality. A sense of reality allows for different perspectives based on someone's experiences. Agreement on facts and data is needed to move our country forward.</li> <li>• We all must hunt and search and research many different news sources to get a clearer understanding of the true picture of what is happening where.</li> <li>• It was clear to me that a lot of us have similar hopes and values, wanting to obtain an accurate and productive view of the situation, but the way in which we seek out information, weigh it, and interpret it is what varies greatly.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We, as Americans, have to stop getting our “truth” from social media and educate ourselves on the facts and truly listen to one another.</li> <li>• Our echo chambers give us different information that makes us have strong opinions.</li> <li>• It is our personal responsibility to seek out facts and credible news sources, as well as manage our personal emotions and reactions to news that’s being reported.</li> </ul>
<p>Respectful exchange of ideas encourages respect for people with a different viewpoint.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It’s possible that people with opposing views have them for sound reasons even if you don’t agree with them.</li> <li>• We can discuss important issues without attacking others.</li> <li>• Substantive conversation can only occur when there is complete honesty and there is space for opinions to be challenged. An echo chamber offers no diversity of opinion, and a shouting match discourages free expression.</li> <li>• People who have extreme differences in their opinions can, in a controlled situation like this one, listen to each other.</li> <li>• Empathy means that we are not only feeling for someone else, but willing to consider their needs as valuable, valid, and deserving of care.</li> <li>• I feel that when discourse is civil, you are able to avoid demonizing people who have beliefs different than your own.</li> <li>• Even when people stood on opposite sides of the resolution, there was overlap and having these conversations allows us to see this overlap and develop mutual trust and respect.</li> <li>• It is possible to talk about a subject like this for 2 hours without getting into a shouting match.</li> <li>• Well run and formatted civil discourse on complex and confusing issues can be exciting and safe.</li> <li>• Seeing the humanity and personality of people with disagreements is very beautiful and good.</li> <li>• I am better able to understand the opposing viewpoint, even though I still don’t agree with it, I understand what is driving it.</li> <li>• Structure is important for having tough conversations.</li> <li>• The most important thing I learned is that I could passionately and emotionally make my point and still show respect to others.</li> <li>• The opportunity to listen (and be listened to) respectfully is a gift, opening hearts and minds.</li> <li>• The structure made me tolerate hearing all the views.</li> <li>• It was refreshing to be able to express my viewpoint without being condemned or demonized.</li> <li>• Not all debates have to be fiery arguments. They can be calm conversations just like this one.</li> </ul>

<p>We can find common ground in our humanity, realizing that we come at issues differently because of our past experiences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Despite our differences, we can find common ground in our humanity. That should be our starting point in engaging folks of opposing viewpoints.</li> <li>• Our views are derived from our experiences and personal history and the sharing of that connects us to each other and makes us realize our humanity.</li> <li>• I really was reminded how people speak from and vote based on issues and policy decisions that have affected their lives personally.</li> <li>• When we listen to each other, we begin to feel connected, and when we feel connected, we begin to be more open to compromise.</li> <li>• We need to understand and empathize with what others are experiencing so we can work together to resolve the issue.</li> <li>• It was interesting to see that even when people stood on opposite sides of the resolution, there was overlap and having these conversations allows us to see this overlap and develop mutual trust and respect.</li> <li>• I learned that many of us on both sides agree. A good part of the division is semantics.</li> </ul>
<p>This type of forum can give us hope for our country's future.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My feelings of hope are growing, and I don't feel hopeless about our house divided because I am learning of the power of the collective, of getting together with others even if our political views are totally the opposite.</li> <li>• We cannot share a sense of reality; however, we must share that our democracy is the highest value.</li> <li>• We can still come together in our democratic republic to participate in a government that helps us all meet our needs and take care of each other even if we have differences in our ideas about reality, as long as we consider each other's reality and perceptions without violating our own values.</li> <li>• It gave me a sense of community/community building (coming together with a shared commitment to understanding one another), especially at a time of polarization and now isolation.</li> <li>• People are willing to listen to each other in a controlled environment. There is HOPE!</li> <li>• Helpful civil discourse is happening! It's easy to be overwhelmed by the current state of things. I'm so grateful to have found people forging ahead in this area.</li> <li>• As Americans, as human beings, we need to be more open to listening to each other. The debates and the workshops I've attended thru Better/Braver Angels have made it clear to me that we need more CIVIL in our civil dialogue and that means we have to be willing to LISTEN to one other, or our republic, our democracy, is doomed.</li> <li>• Reasonable people can disagree, and a respectful debate reminds us of what active democracy looks like.</li> </ul>