



Braver Angels 2020-2021 Report

Depolarizing During the Pandemic



Braver Angels

A faded, close-up image of the American flag serves as the background for the entire page. The stars and stripes are visible, though the colors are muted and the image is slightly out of focus.

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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Table of Contents

Executive Summary 4

Introduction 6

What did we do? 7

 Special Program Offering: With Malice Towards None 9

 A Randomized Controlled Trial of a Braver Angels Workshop 10

 How did we do? 11

 Program Design 13

Beyond the Numbers 16

Conclusion 18



Executive Summary

Overview

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Braver Angels expanded its programming, reach, and outcomes. In this section, we denote the top priorities of the organization, our major achievements from March 2020 to February 2021, and the key findings detailed in the remainder of this report.

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.



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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.

87% 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).

Other polls found similar results. A YouGov 2020 survey showed that 1 in 3 Democrats and Republicans believe that violence would be justified to advance their political goals (Diamond et al. 2020). A Braver Angels YouGov poll taken about the same time found that 70% of respondents across party lines believed 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. This appears to indicate that for all the partisan fear and threats of violence, Americans still want to see our leaders work together to solve problems (Braver Angels, 2020).

Braver Angels rose to the occasion and 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. Braver Angels also started With Malice Towards None and Hold America Together initiatives to address the uncertainty surrounding the 2020 election. 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 on-line programs during the pandemic between March 2020 and February 2021. The report focuses on what we did during this time and the impact Braver Angels programs had on participants across the United States.

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
National Online Debates	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
College Debates Program	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.		
Skills for Bridging the Divide	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
Depolarizing Within	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
Families and Politics	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
Red-Blue Workshops	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
1:1 Conversations	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
Common Ground-Single Issue Workshops	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.

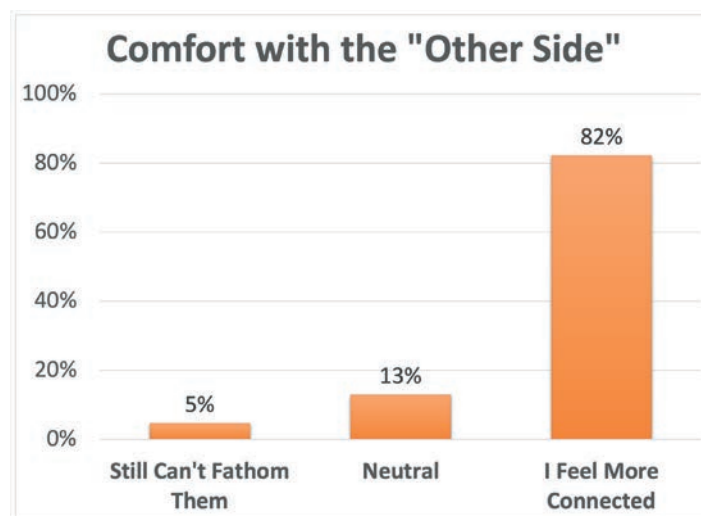
- ☆ In this study, people participated in a Red-Blue workshop with no further engagement by Braver Angels. The study found that while people felt significantly warmer towards the opposite party two weeks after the workshop, their level of polarization also remained less than people who had not participated 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?

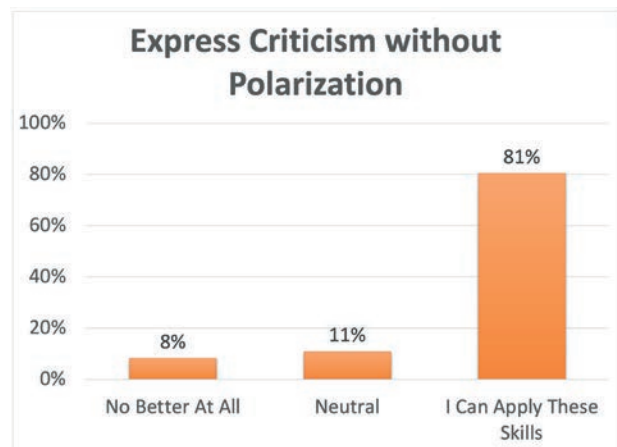
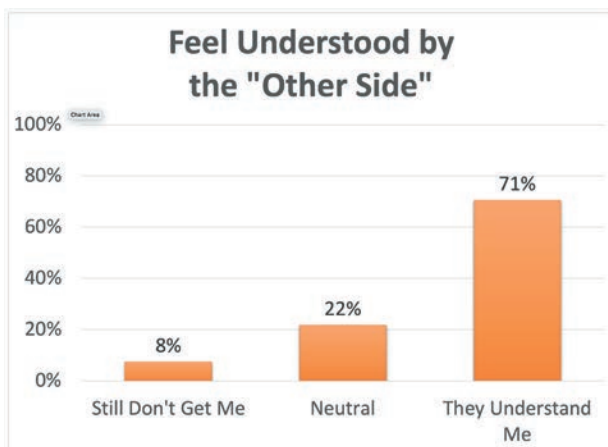
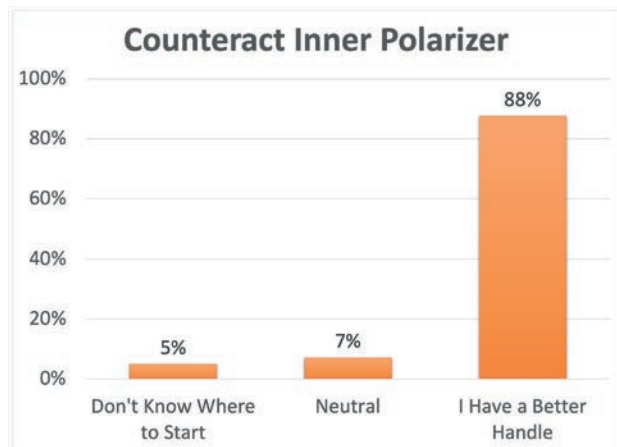
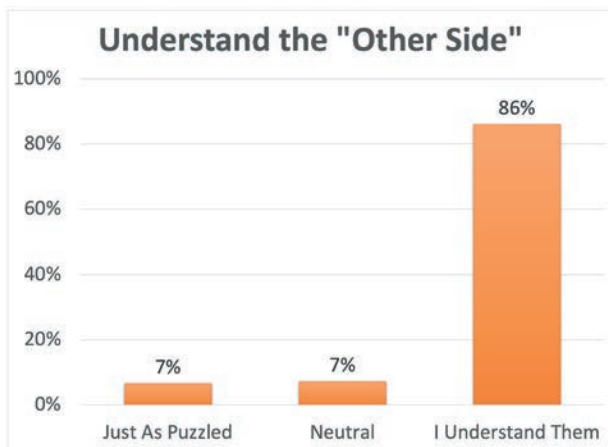
Braver Angels' overall goal is to bring Americans together to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic. Although it is difficult to measure people's level of depolarization through a self-report on a feedback form, some of the survey questions after Red-Blue and Depolarizing 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,” 92% 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.

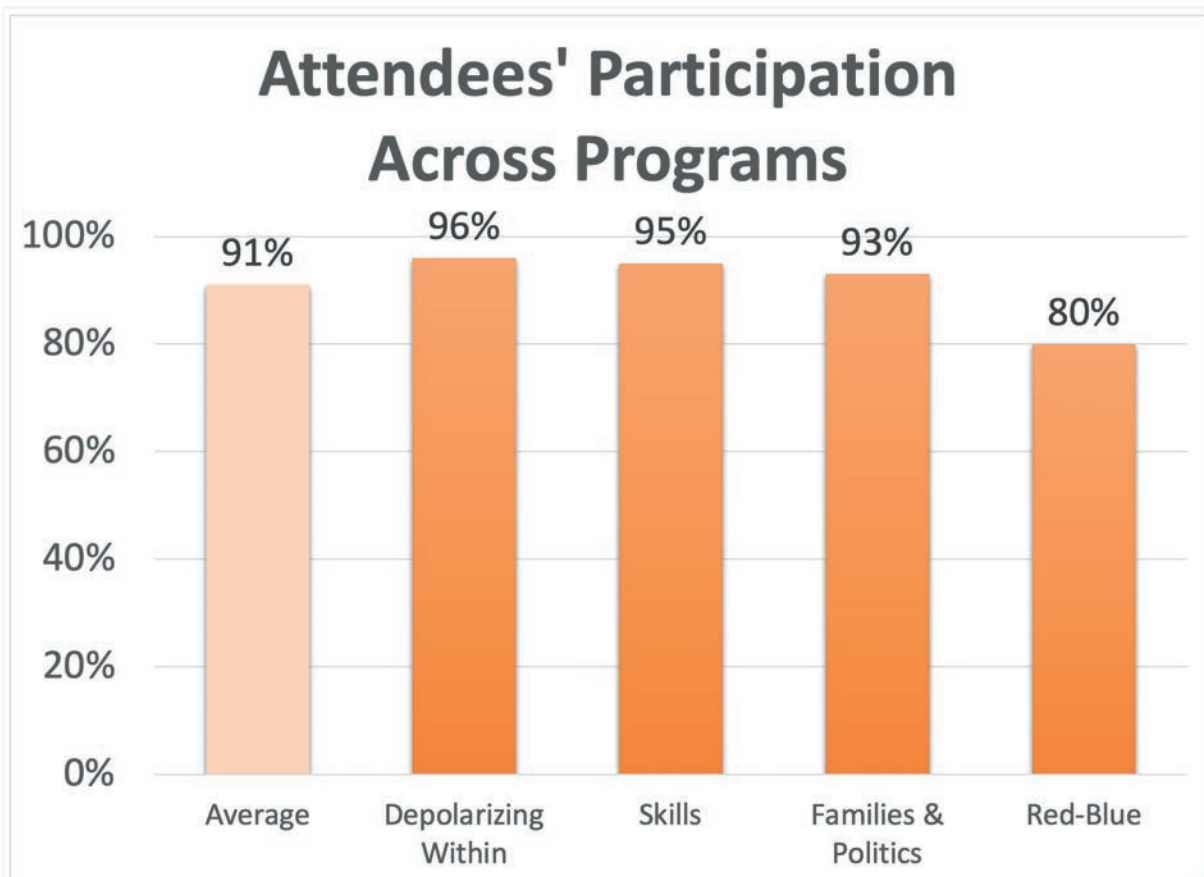
We also asked some depolarization questions after the Depolarization Within workshop. The first question was, “Do you feel more prepared to identify and counteract your ‘inner polarizer’?” Respondents answered on a 7-point scale ranging from “still don’t know how to even start” to “I have a much better handle on this,” with 93% 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 89% 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.



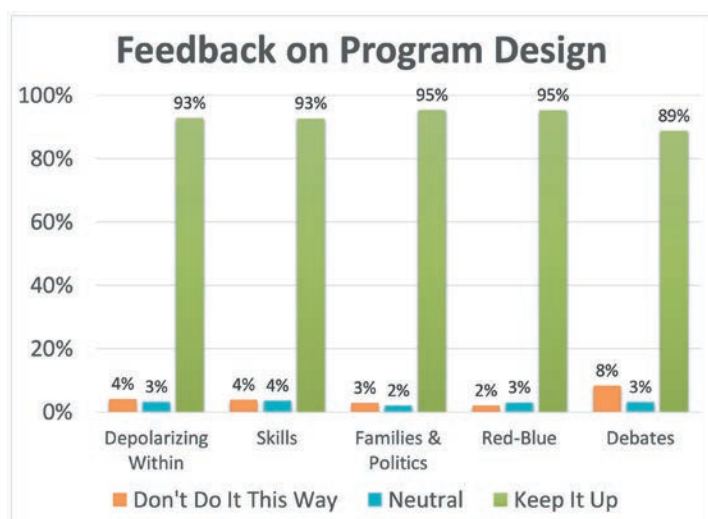
Program Design

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

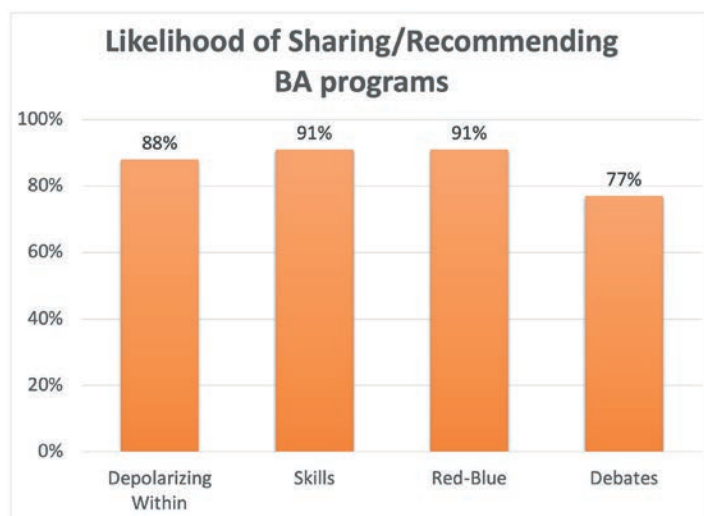
similar, with 95% and 93% respectively. For comparison, the lowest level of reported participation is in the Red-Blue workshop with 80% putting themselves at or close to "all there," but these findings also included responses from those who attended as observers and were not active participants. Overall, 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.



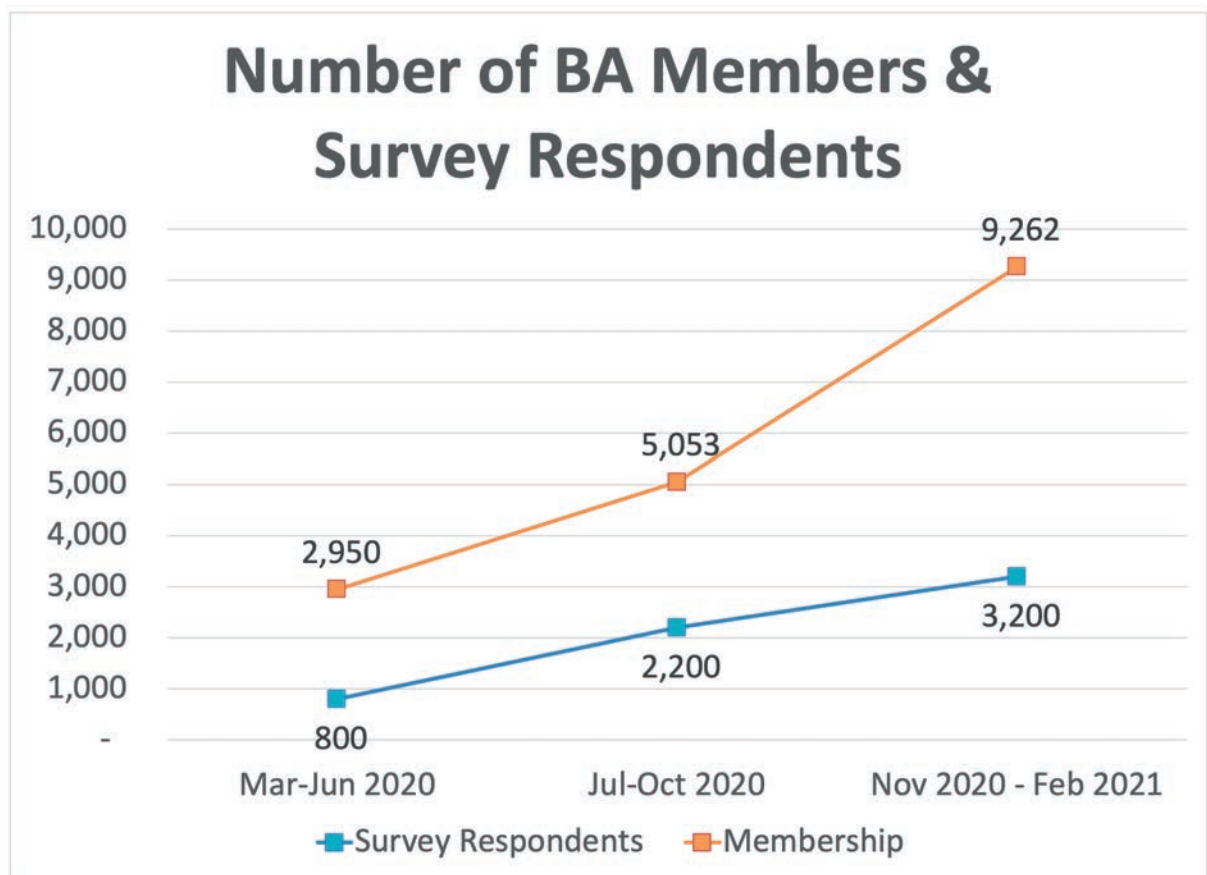
Moreover, feedback forms indicated that participants are overwhelmingly satisfied with Braver Angels' program offerings. The majority of participants say the programs offered between March 2020 to February 2021 are well-run and well-designed (Red-Blue 95%, Debates 89%, Skills for Bridging the Divide 93%, Depolarizing Within 93%, and Families and Politics 95%). Furthermore, 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.



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.



Beyond the Numbers

In this section, we will provide more in-depth information on specific Braver Angels programs. In addition to ranking their experiences on a quantitative Likert scale, participants in Braver Angels programming were also asked the question, “What is your single most important learning, or the most important message you want to share about this gathering?” The following list shows what participants learned. Again, we looked at feedback from March 2020-February 2021.

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.

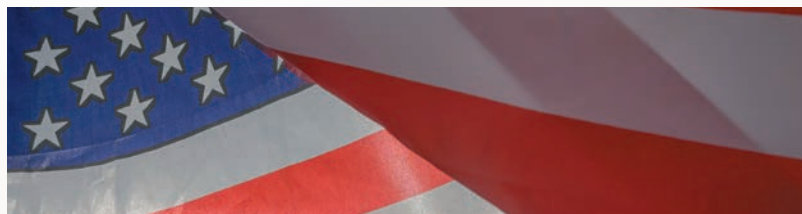
- ☆ It is important to understand all sides of an issue, since issues are complicated and nuanced.
- ☆ Absence of common trusted sources of information is a roadblock to understand and trust each other.
- ☆ Respectful exchange of ideas encourages respect for people with a different viewpoint.
- ☆ We 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.



Conclusion

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 provided an overview of what Braver Angels managed to achieve 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. To encourage that, we hope to work with the newly formed Scholars Council to carry out new research and evaluation initiatives. As we review 2020-2021, we are optimistic as we look to the future.



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