

Dignity in America

Building a Culture of Dignity: Insights from the 2026 Dignity Barometer, Related Research, and Practice



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Authored by:

- Samantha Ball, Dignity Initiative Research Director, Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute/Dignity.US
- Tom Rosshirt, Chief Strategist and Director of Research, UNITE/Dignity.US
- David Witt, Dignity Initiative Program Associate, Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute/Dignity.US

Dignity.US Executive Team & Co-Creators of the Dignity Index

- Tim Shriver, CEO & Founder of UNITE
- Tami Pyfer, Chief Impact Officer
- Tom Rosshirt, Chief Strategist & Director of Research

Introduction

In recent years, the deterioration in how Americans view each other, and the belief that the two political sides have little in common, has been well-documented. In 2025, a 25-country survey found that the U.S. was the only country where the majority thought the morality and ethics of the people in their country were bad.¹ In 2024, Merriam-Webster announced the word of the year was “polarization,” which “happens to be the one idea that both sides of the political spectrum agree on.”² Research likewise suggests that partisan bias and political sectarianism are bipartisan challenges.^{3, 4}

Against this backdrop of growing political and social division, UNITE has advanced a “Dignity Lens”—a concept first introduced by conflict resolution specialist Donna Hicks.⁵ Seen through this lens, the cause of division is not disagreement itself, but the normalization of contempt during disagreement. It suggests that treating others with dignity rather than contempt when we disagree can help ease division. UNITE’s work is grounded in the belief that all people deserve to be treated with dignity, which UNITE defines as honoring their inherent worth as human beings.

Feedback from presentations, workshops, and trainings about using dignity in response to disagreement has been so positive, UNITE realized there is a need for data about dignity in America. The 2026 Dignity Barometer, a survey of 1503 Americans who are representative of a cross-section of adults nationwide, marks the launch of a new annual tracking poll.* It is the first survey to measure how Americans perceive, experience, and think about dignity during these divisive times. The results underscore Americans’ dissatisfaction with the lack of dignity in American culture but also highlight shared values and human fallibilities.

This report brings together findings from the Dignity Barometer, relevant research, and lessons from UNITE’s experience designing, implementing, and refining programs to strengthen a culture of dignity and ease Americans’ divisions. The results reveal both reasons for hope and important challenges for those who are dissatisfied with the way Americans treat each other when they disagree.

Americans Share Dignity Perspectives and Dignity Gaps

Despite disagreements on many issues, Americans share a common concern: 78% are dissatisfied with how Americans treat each other. Eighty-three percent share a sense that political divisions are a big problem—putting it on par with concern about the cost of living (86%).[†] However, Americans also agree on something positive—the foundational value that all people should be treated with dignity, when dignity is defined as treating others in a way that honors their inherent worth as human beings (94% strongly or somewhat agree).

Together, these shared concerns and values provide a backdrop for how to understand and address three dignity gaps that emerged from the Dignity Barometer.

The first dignity gap is the difference between the value Americans place on dignity and the amount of dignity they perceive in American society. While 94% of Americans think all people deserve to be treated with dignity, only 31% say people

Gap 1: Near-universal support of dignity as a value compared to perceptions of how people in the U.S. treat each other when they disagree

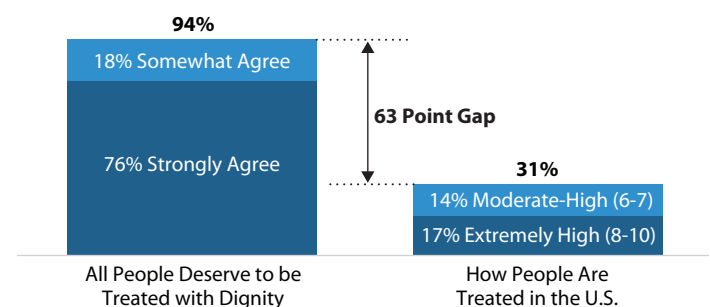


Figure 1. Value vs. National Reality. Q17: (Value) Do you agree or disagree that all people deserve to be treated with dignity? Q20a: (Perceived National Reality) Thinking now about the past year here in the United States, use this 0 to 10 scale to rate how you think most people in the United States tend to treat each other when they disagree.[†]

* The sample is a representative cross-section of adults nationwide based on basic demographic characteristics including gender, age, race, educational attainment, employment status, and income; geographic distribution, including region and urbanicity; and is reflective of the 2024 presidential election results and self-reported political party identification. Weights were applied to the following characteristics to ensure the sample is representative of adults nationwide, based on U.S. Census data: gender, age, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, employment status, and geographic region. Due to rounding, not all tables will add to 100. When totaled responses differ from individual responses, totaled responses are more precise.

† See Appendix for the complete question wording.

Gap 2: How Americans view their own behavior and how they perceive the behavior of others when it comes to dignity

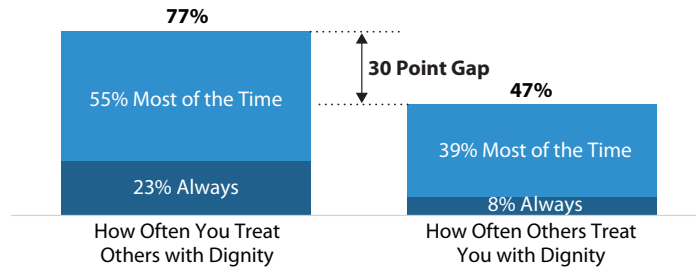


Figure 2. Own Behavior vs. Other's Behavior. Q25b: (Own Behavior) Honestly speaking, how often do you treat people that you disagree with, with dignity rather than contempt? Q25a: (Others' Behavior) How often do people you disagree with treat you with dignity rather than contempt?†

Gap 3: Americans' personal support for always treating others with dignity as a value compared to their self-reported actions

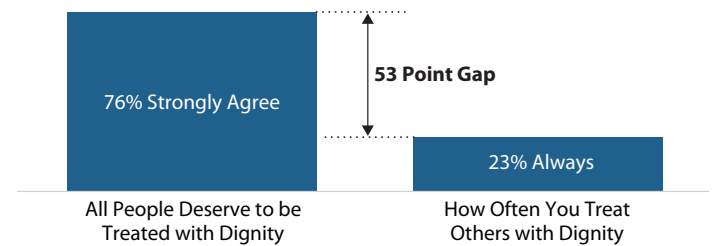


Figure 3. Self-Perception vs. Personal Experience. Q17: (Self-Perception) Do you agree or disagree that all people deserve to be treated with dignity? Q25b: (Personal Experience) Honestly speaking, how often do you treat people that you disagree with, with dignity rather than contempt?†

These dignity gaps reflect established social and psychological dynamics... People's perceptions and actions are influenced by cultural and behavioral norms that may not align with their values.

in the United States tend to treat each other with dignity when they disagree.* Given the almost universal agreement on the value of treating each person with dignity, this gap at first seems surmountable with more effort and attention, but the second and third gaps suggest

progress may be tricky. The second gap contrasts Americans' perception of their personal behavior with their perception of others' behavior—while 77% thought they were treating others with dignity rather than contempt “always” or “most of the time”, only 47% thought others treated them with dignity “always” or “most of the time” during disagreement. The third gap highlights the extent to which Americans personally report not acting in accordance with their own values. Seventy-six percent said they “strongly agreed” that all people deserve to be treated with dignity, but only 23% said they “always” treated others with dignity.*

These latter two gaps reflect established social and psychological dynamics identified in other research discussed later in the report. People's perceptions and actions are influenced by cultural and behavioral norms that may not align with their values. This report examines what is understood about some of these dynamics, including how culture can sometimes prompt people to act in ways that conflict with their own values—such as treating others with dignity—and how cognitive biases can lead people to view their own actions more generously and favorably than those of others.

The Role of Culture in The Dignity Movement

Several of the Dignity Barometer questions were designed to measure differences in Americans' perceptions and experience with dignity depending upon their cultural surroundings. Observation through everyday experiences and news coverage suggests the potential for culture to shape behavior. In a culture where contempt is prevalent, there are often rewards for treating an opponent in a way that denigrates, devalues, or dismisses them or their ideas. Alternatively, a dignity culture supports a response that treats the other person as worthy of engagement based on their inherent worth.

Dignity Barometer findings highlight differences in how dignity and contempt are expressed across organizational and group subcultures that make up American society. Additionally, the findings point to opportunities to increase the use of dignity by strengthening a culture of dignity, paving a way for more constructive engagement across differences. As renowned American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues, human nature does not exist outside culture: “Our central nervous system – and most particularly its crowning curse and glory, the neo-cortex ... grew up in great part in interaction with culture, it is incapable of directing our behavior or organizing our experience without guidance provided by systems of significant symbols.”⁶ The dominant narratives in any culture are examples of these systems.

UNITE's work seeks to support a cultural shift in which dignity replaces contempt as the socially rewarded response to disagreement.

* These questions use different response scales.

† See Appendix for the complete question wording.

According to philosopher Glenn Hughes, "... every culture communicates and enforces (often through the soft power of mass sentiment) disapproval of certain ideas, words, and phrases ... [T]he winds of disapproval can change direction abruptly; certain ideas and words that yesterday were socially approved of ... may suddenly today be prohibited."⁷ UNITE recognizes the dominance of America's current cultural narrative—namely, that each side should expect contempt from those with whom they disagree and may face disapproval from their own group if they treat the other side with dignity. In response, UNITE encourages people to question that narrative and act instead in accordance with their own deeply held value, shared by most Americans, that every person deserves to be treated with dignity.

National culture, and the organizational and group subcultures within it, exert important influence over human behavior because they define what norms are acceptable; they provide a "tool kit" of habits, skills, and styles that guide Americans' behavior.⁸ During periods of what cultural sociologist Ann Swidler calls "unsettled" times, new cultural narratives can emerge as people reorganize this set of tools.⁹ The Dignity Barometer findings suggest that the current moment may present an opportunity for this to occur. Most share a dissatisfaction with the way Americans treat each other and may be open to a changed narrative that highlights dignity, rather than contempt, as a way to engage across differences and ease division.

Realizing this opportunity requires understanding the factors that can encourage a response of contempt even among people who embrace the value of dignity. For instance, within some organizational and group subcultures, expressions of contempt for the other side have become signals of loyalty and belonging. The deep and universal human need to belong,¹⁰ and the awareness of an outgroup¹¹ motivate a show of contempt for opponents even among people who value treating others with dignity. Organizational leaders, individuals, and the broader culture continually shape and influence one another. Group leaders establish norms of acceptable behavior and create conditions for belonging.¹² When a group's norms require contempt for outsiders, members may compete to express that contempt in order to remain accepted or gain stature in the group.¹³ Social exclusion research shows that the threat of rejection is powerful enough to suppress behavior that conflicts with group norms. Those who are excluded pay a significant price, including increased aggression from others, reduced empathy,

and social isolation.¹⁴ UNITE's work seeks to promote a cultural shift in which dignity replaces contempt as the preferred response to disagreement, resulting in a culture better aligned with the broadly held dignity value that Americans share, and eventually leading to a culture that rewards dignity as a response to disagreement.

How to Create Cultural Change

Those who want to build a culture of dignity need to change Americans' shared expectations about how people speak to one another during disagreement. The 78% of Americans who are dissatisfied with the way people treat each other in America today and the 88% who say it is important to treat someone with dignity even if you disagree* suggest this is an "unsettled" time that is ripe for change.¹⁵ Americans are likely suffering from "pluralistic

ignorance" when it comes to appreciating what proportion of people—particularly those on the other side of the political aisle—believe all people should be treated with dignity. Pluralistic ignorance,^{†, 16} is described by social psychologist Dale Miller as "a situation in which group members systematically misestimate their peers' attitudes, feelings, and private behaviors."¹⁷ The Dignity Barometer shows that pluralistic ignorance is quite relevant for dignity. While the majority of Americans personally support treating others with dignity, they may assume that most others do not. Correcting this misperception is an important part of culture change. At the same time, becoming aware that treating others with dignity is a broadly shared value, and that most people approve of doing so, is by itself likely insufficient to produce lasting cultural change.

For new behaviors and norms to emerge, research suggests people must believe change is underway, perceiving evidence that others will increasingly expect and practice treating people with dignity. Research on social norms and behavioral dynamics explains why these expectations matter. As behavioral and cognitive scientists Bicchieri and Mercier explain, changing what people expect of one another is an important step to establishing new social norms.¹⁸ Their work suggests that people need visible evidence that others are adopting a new behavior to reduce concerns they will face disapproval and other negative social consequences.¹⁹ They also argue that public deliberation and discussion can be an important stepping-stone in the process because interacting with people and learning about others' intentions to change can reshape empirical expectations (what people expect others to do).²⁰ In

The 78% of Americans who are dissatisfied with the way people treat each other in America today and the 88% who say it is important to treat someone with dignity even if you disagree suggest this is an "unsettled" time that is ripe for change.

* Asked of half of respondents.

† Pluralistic ignorance was first developed by Floyd Allport and later named and elaborated by Katz and Allport. [16]

considering how to build a culture of dignity, public discussion of the Dignity Barometer findings could make Americans’ shared value of dignity more visible and, in doing so, reshape normative and empirical expectations about how people speak to and treat one another during disagreement, all of which can encourage the development and reinforcement of a culture of dignity.

This insight is complemented by Self-Determination Theory, which distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, and suggests that behaviors that are freely chosen and align with one’s values may be intrinsically rewarding and

promote personal well-being.²¹ Because the Dignity Barometer finds that most Americans already embrace the value of dignity, treating others with dignity can therefore provide an internal sense of integrity and psychological well-being even if no extrinsic reward accompanies their action. But over time, as dignity becomes a more widely expected norm, people may experience both the intrinsic satisfaction of acting consistently with their values as well as feel motivated to act with dignity because of the extrinsic rewards of greater belonging and social esteem.

Dignity Barometer Data: Dignity vs. Contempt in Different Subcultures

The Dignity Barometer measured Americans’ experiences and perceptions of dignity in different subcultures as well as in the larger culture.

After being asked to score how Americans treat each other when they disagree on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 signaling most extreme contempt and 10 the upper endpoint of dignity, respondents answered a set of questions that broke experience and perception down by subculture.[†] Scores varied widely between different places, groups, and institutions within our society. The group with the top dignity score was “immediate family,” with 74% of respondents giving a score on the dignity side and only 9% giving a score on the contempt side. On the other extreme was “online social media platforms,” with 57% scoring it on the contempt side and only 22% giving a score on the dignity side.

The Barometer also examined the intensity and frequency of dignity behavior in two different subcultures—in the workplace and in politics and campaigns.

In terms of frequency, 58% of respondents said people treat each other with contempt when they disagree in the politics and campaigns subculture (10% said people treat each other with dignity).^{*} In contrast, when asked how often people treat each other with contempt when they disagree in workplace interactions, 19% of respondents said they treat each other with contempt (38% said people treat each other with dignity).^{*}

In terms of intensity, 70% of respondents said the feelings of contempt are “very” or “fairly” strong in the politics and campaigns subculture when asked “for the time that they spend treating each other with contempt, how strong do you think those feelings are?” (only 6% said feelings are “not that strong”

The dignity and contempt rankings are not tracking an inherent trait of the people in these groups, but rather a set of incentives that tend to operate in these groups.

Differing Perceptions of Dignity by Subculture

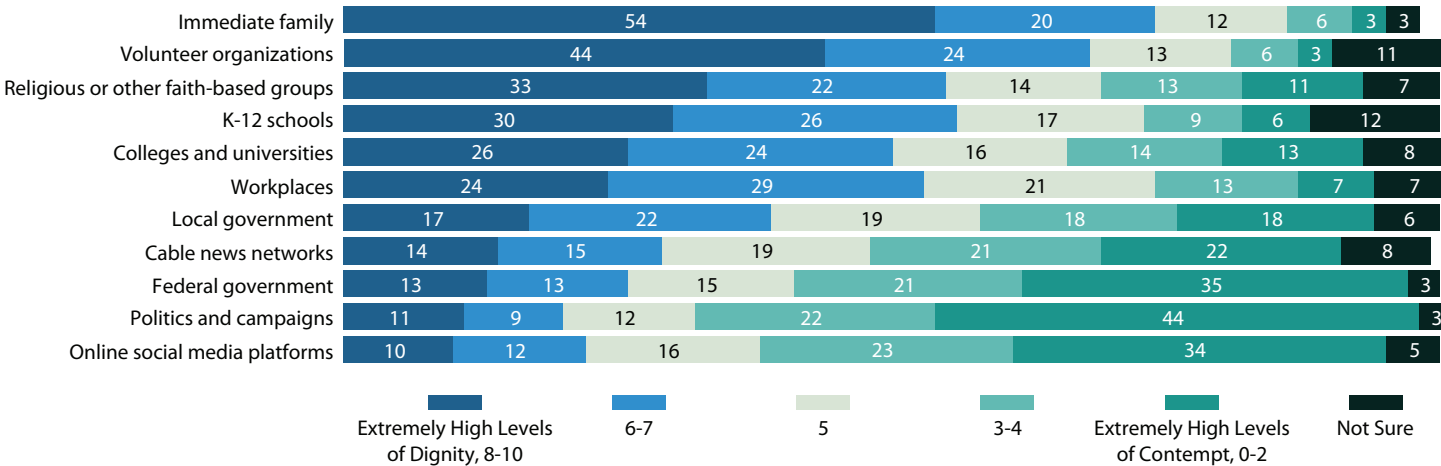


Figure 4. Q21: Listed here are different places, groups, and institutions within our society. For each one, indicate the degree to which you think of it as a place where, generally, people treat each other with dignity or contempt when they disagree.[†]

^{*} Asked of half of respondents.
[†] See Appendix for full question wording.

Frequency of Contempt: Politics/Campaigns vs. Workplace Subcultures

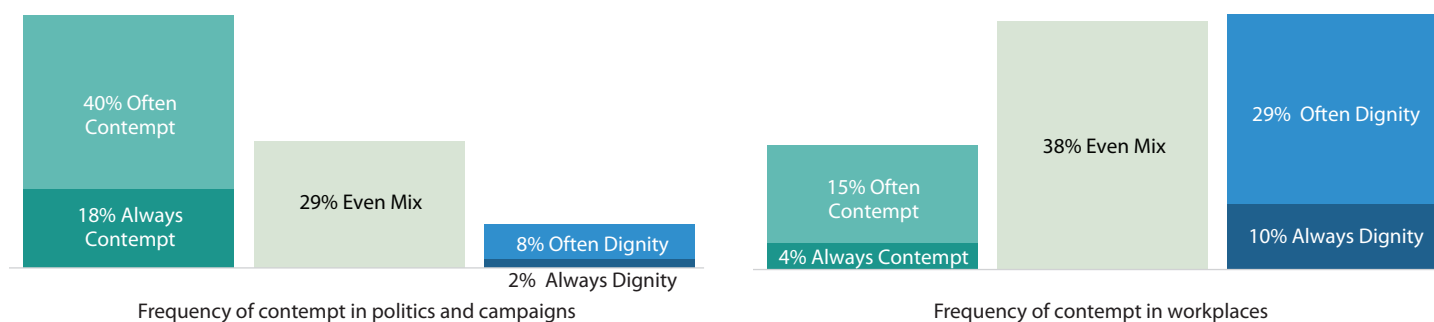


Figure 5. Q22a: In politics and campaigns, when two sides that disagree on an issue engage with each other on that issue, which of the following do you think generally describes those interactions?. Q23a: In workplace interactions, when two sides that disagree on a work-related issue engage with each other on that issue, which of the following do you think generally describes those interactions?

Intensity of Contempt: Politics/Campaigns vs. Workplace Subcultures

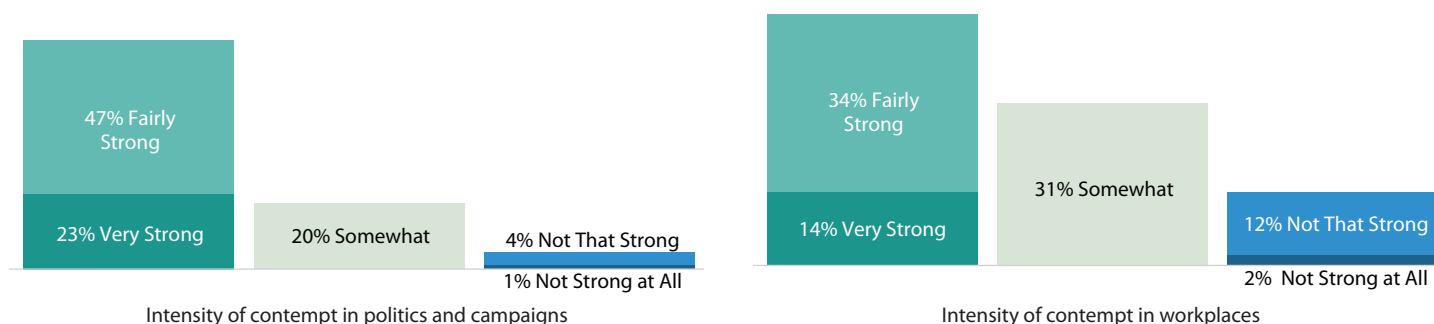


Figure 6. Q22b: For the time they spend treating each other with contempt, how strong do you think those feelings are?* Q23b: For the time they spend treating each other with contempt, how strong do you think those feelings are?*

or “not strong at all”).* Comparatively, 48% of respondents said the feelings were “very strong” or “fairly strong” in the workplace subculture (15% “not that strong” or “not strong at all”).*

These results show that there are striking differences in the way Americans report treating each other when they interact in different subcultures. UNITE’s work rests on the hypothesis that the dignity and contempt rankings for these people and groups are not tracking an inherent trait of the people in these groups, but rather a set of incentives that tend to operate in these groups. Highlighting the different culture and subculture results suggest a point of leverage for change.

Bias, Blind Spots, and the Gaps

The previous sections outlined a number of steps for achieving the culture change necessary to narrow the gap between the 94% of Americans who say, “all people deserve to be treated with dignity” and the 31% who say people in the US treat each other that way when they disagree.

But what are the obstacles to taking these steps?

While factors such as the 24-hour news cycle, social media, and well-funded political professionals may come to mind, there are psychological culprits as well. Humans’ need to belong, combined with cognitive biases that favor in-group perspectives over those of opponents, are likely magnifying the effect of a polarized national discussion.

Research shows that people have bias and blind spots that make it harder to see shortcomings in their own behavior compared to others’ behavior. A number of studies show that people believe that they “perform socially desirable behaviors more frequently and socially undesirable behaviors less frequently”²² than others, particularly when it comes to moral behaviors.^{23,24,25} People tend to think of themselves as better than the average person—illustrating the “better-than-average effect (or Lake Wobegon effect)”²⁶—and want to maintain a positive moral self-image.²⁶ Additionally, people more easily recognize others’ bias than their own and find it easier to maintain an unrealistically positive view of their moral character than of their intellectual ability.^{27, 28}

* Asked of half of respondents.

Self-Reported Dignity and Contempt Behaviors

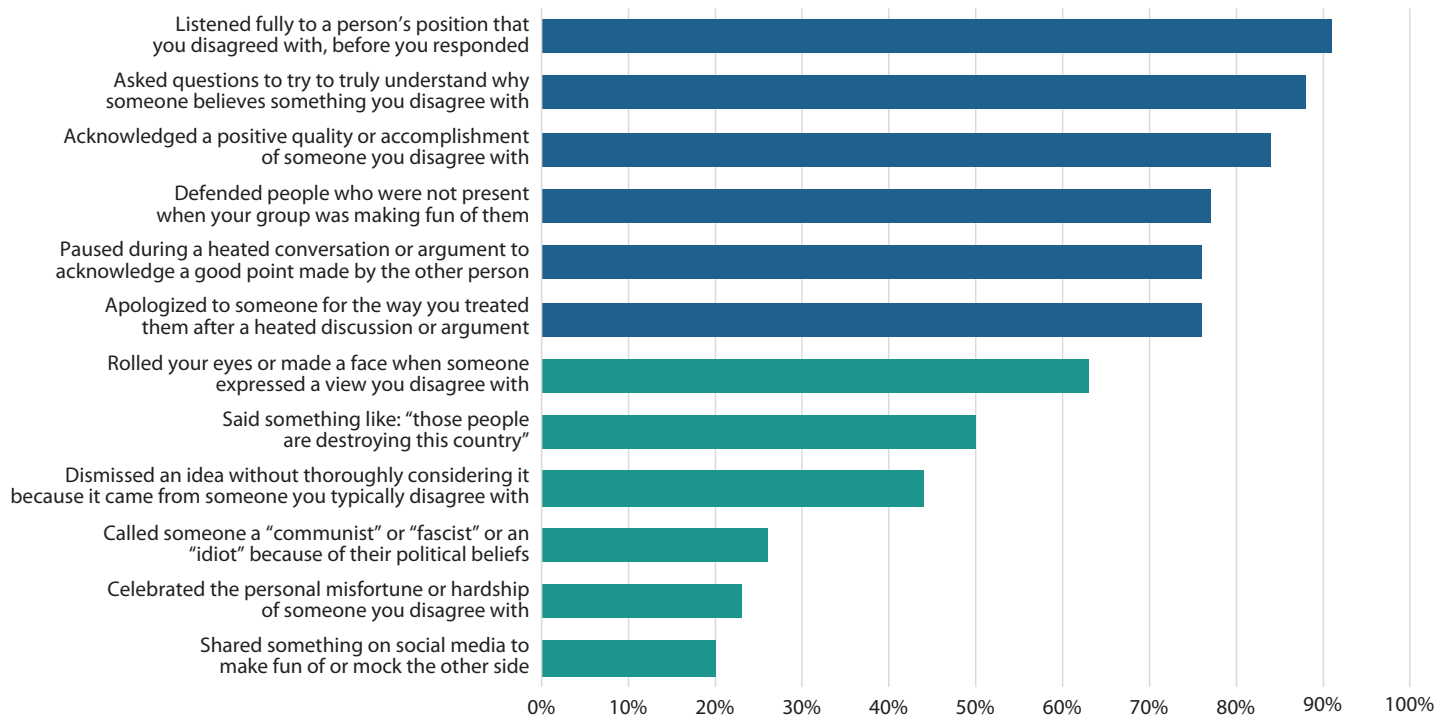


Figure 7. Q26: For each one, please indicate if you've done something like this in the past year or so.*

In line with these expectations is the gap between how Americans view themselves and their own behavior and how they view others and others' behavior. While 77% say they "always" or "most of the time" *treat others* with dignity when they disagree, only 47% say others "always" or "most of the time" *treat them* with dignity when they disagree. This means that a lot of Americans are giving a better assessment of behavior to themselves than they are giving others. Research suggests one reason for this is because people evaluate others' behavior based on their actions while evaluating their own behavior based on a detailed knowledge of their own "circumstances, history, motives, and experience."²⁹ Additionally, the notion of "naïve

realism" suggests that people see their own understanding of interactions as an objective reality based on their own unbiased perspective and factual evidence. They may therefore assume that those who disagree with them are misinformed, lazy, irrational, lack values, or display bias.³⁰ This second Dignity Barometer gap suggests a tendency for respondents to assume good intentions for their own

behavior while evaluating others primarily based on their observable actions, without giving similar consideration to the possibility of good intentions on the part of the other person.

The Dignity Barometer also measured whether the public reported engaging in a list of 12 actions—half of them involved treating others with dignity, and half of them treating others with contempt.

A higher percentage of respondents indicated they had engaged in each of the six dignity-related actions than in any of the actions involving contempt. Although it is possible the dignity behaviors are all more common, it also comports with research that suggests it is more difficult for people to recognize when they use contempt towards others. Based on UNITE's work, the difficulty people have seeing the contempt they show others is a big obstacle for easing divisions in the country.

Sometimes the divide between how people see their own actions and how they see others' actions is even more extreme than this. Research shows that groups in conflict are likely to attribute their own group's aggression to ingroup love and more likely to attribute the outgroup's aggression to outgroup hatred.³¹ The tendency to attribute harmful motives more readily to the other side than to one's own may lead some to see contempt, or even violence, as a morally justified response.^{32,33} A Dignity Barometer respondent illustrated this perspective, saying about their own use of contempt, "I feel fine about it. Contempt is not my automatic response, so it was earned."

UNITE's work has shown that using a Dignity Lens to think about contempt during times of disagreement can prompt an awareness of the discrepancy between personal values and actions.

* See Appendix for the complete question wording.

The third and final dignity gap strikes a contrast with the charitably biased self-assessment of the second gap. It shows an awareness of falling short of personal values. This gap highlights the discrepancy between 76% of respondents who said they “strongly agreed” that all people deserve to be treated with dignity and the 23% who said they always treat others with dignity. Social psychologist Tory Higgins’ Self-Discrepancy Theory explains how a discrepancy between one’s actual self and ideal self can create discomfort that varies based on the magnitude of the discrepancy and the accessibility or awareness of the discrepancy.³⁴

UNITE’s work has shown that using a Dignity Lens to think about contempt during times of disagreement can prompt an awareness of the discrepancy between personal values and actions. After participating in programs that encourage viewing disagreement through a Dignity Lens, many people experience something UNITE has termed the Mirror Effect, which can provide an impetus for a change in behavior. During trainings on building a foundation of dignity in workplaces, schools, and political settings, some participants described “seeing their own contempt” in their language or behavior, which was at odds with their personal value of treating people with dignity. This discrepancy created discomfort and frequently prompted actions, including some who resolved to use more dignity, or reduce their implicit or explicit support of contempt. In some ways, it seems as if a blind spot or bias had been at least partially lifted by the Mirror Effect.

Additionally, qualitative responses in the Dignity Barometer suggest that even reflecting on the state of American culture through a Dignity Lens for a 23-minute survey can provide the opportunity for a Mirror Effect for some respondents. One stated it “Made me more aware of the language I use and the behavior I exhibit – especially around my son.”

Identifying Advocates for Dignity

Along with drawing on Dignity Barometer data for insight into what contributes to the dignity gaps and what might reduce them, UNITE also examined survey results to identify the characteristics of a dignity advocate—someone likely to speak and act with dignity during disagreement and encourage others to do the same. Such advocates could give more visibility to Americans’ shared value of dignity and contribute to bringing behavior and discussion into closer alignment with this value and fostering a culture in which treating others with dignity becomes the expected norm. Analysis of a variety of

demographic characteristics and Dignity Barometer responses suggests that the potential for being a dignity advocate is not limited to particular demographic or political groups.

Possible Profiles

Several answers to specific barometer questions appear to point to an inclination for advocating and practicing dignity.

For instance, 74% of Americans feel exhausted by the level of division in society today—with 39% saying that describes them **very** well. Is a higher level of exhaustion related to optimism about addressing division? In fact, those 39% who expressed a greater level of exhaustion were slightly more likely to 1) think easing and healing division was possible; 2) think they could have a “fairly big” or “big” impact on helping to ease divisions in their community and our country; and 3) say they would “definitely” talk to family and friends about encouraging more dignity and less contempt in their community and our country.* These Americans were likely to be younger, but about equally likely to be any gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, income, and area type (urban/suburban/small town/rural).

Based on national dialogue, many Americans might expect that people who engage with those they strongly disagree with politically would be the least optimistic about easing division. But Dignity Barometer findings suggest the opposite. Americans who have conversations or interactions with people they strongly disagree with politically are *more* optimistic that the United States can ease and heal divisions within our country than people who do not (78% vs 64%). Could Americans who engage with those they disagree with have both more opportunity and more reason to treat others with dignity? Perhaps the fact that they have real people to consider when they think about those who hold opposing views, rather than the caricatures highlighted by many elected leaders and media sources, provides room for more optimism. An analysis of Americans who interact more with people they disagree with politically shows they are more likely to be men, younger, higher income, and employed or students. If these

The Vast Majority are Exhausted by Our Divisions

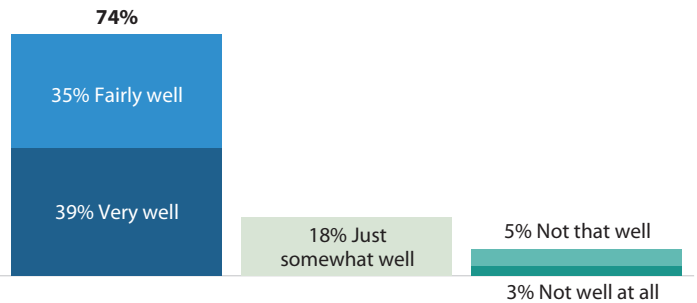


Figure 8. Q8: How well does “I’m exhausted by the level of division in our society today” describe you?†

* Asked of half of respondents.
† See Appendix for the complete question wording.

Those Who Engage Across Political Differences Express Greater Optimism

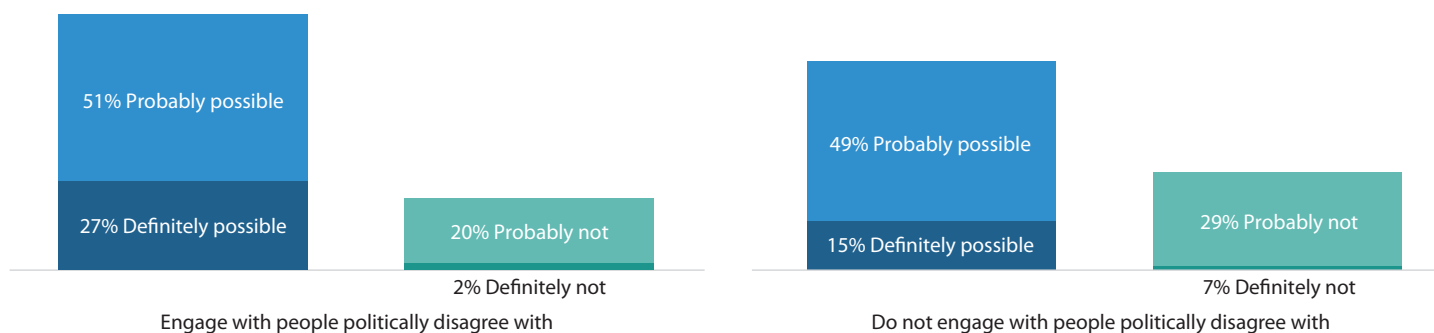


Figure 9. Q12a: Do you think it's possible to ease and heal divisions in our country today?[†] Q11: How often do you have conversations or interactions with people who you strongly disagree with politically?

are likely characteristics of a dignity advocate, one possibility is that the workplace is providing an important opportunity for Americans to interact with people with different political views. Men, younger people, and those with higher incomes are more likely to be in the workforce. Older Americans are more likely to be retired, and less likely to think they can have an impact on helping to ease divisions in their community and our country. These relationships likely suggest a need for more opportunities besides work for people to interact with those of differing political views rather than suggesting that certain groups are more optimistic about easing and healing divisions.

UNITE also examined the possibility of a dignity advocate profile built on a combined set of Dignity Barometer answers:

- Those who believe there is a problem with division (indicating that “I am exhausted by the level of division in our society” described them “very well”)
- Those who thought that both sides contribute to division (ranking “all of us” as “highly responsible” for the division in our country)
- Those who thought dignity can bring people together (agreeing that “where contempt tears us apart, dignity can bring us together”)
- Those who believe they can have a personal impact (saying they could make a “very” or “fairly” big impact on helping ease the divisions in their community and our country)

Although the respondents who gave these answers were younger, and more likely to be students or to be employed, than others, they did not fall into any specific category in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, income, political party, political ideology, or region. They were more likely to answer some questions in a more emphatic manner in both directions (more likely to be “highly” satisfied or dissatisfied with how we treat each other and to think things are

getting “much” better or worse) and have a greater likelihood of interacting with people that they disagreed with politically. But the respondents with similar answers to these questions had no shared demographic profile.

UNITE also examined the possibility that another group might fit a profile for dignity advocates—those who provided optional open-ended comments at the end of the Dignity Barometer survey indicating positive personal reflection, insight, or a renewed or new commitment to action. Analysis of the respondents who provided these types of comments showed that they did not fall into any demographic categories in terms of age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, income, region, population density, political party, political ideology, or employment status. However, they did show a higher potential for growth in their belief in their personal ability to ease the divisions in their community and country than other respondents.

Although these analyses did not identify a demographic profile of a likely dignity advocate, they yielded a more encouraging finding: the possibility that *anyone* has the potential to become a dignity advocate.

Universal Opportunity

Ultimately, the following points are two of the most important findings from the 2026 Dignity Barometer: The majority of Americans, regardless of political party, are dissatisfied with how we treat each other (78%) and they share the belief that even those they disagree with should be treated with dignity (88%).*

In a culture where contempt is expected and often rewarded, many will use contempt even when it goes against their own values.

* Asked of half of respondents.

† See Appendix for the complete question wording.

Why are these findings so important? These shared sentiments and values are not highlighted in most media coverage of our national conversation. Based on what is typically discussed in the media, Americans may sincerely wonder if the other side—or even members of their own group—are unhappy with how people are treating each other and if they value dignity. The Barometer results make these attitudes visible, potentially giving people an opportunity to reconsider their assumptions of others and act differently. In a culture where contempt is expected and often rewarded, many will use contempt even when it goes against their own values. But if expectations and incentives change—and people see that *expectations and incentives have changed*—many will feel a new freedom to treat others with dignity in accordance with their underlying value of dignity, and in doing so help ease tensions and change the culture.

One reason to be optimistic is that Dignity Barometer findings suggest many Americans recognize the outsized contempt both sides are attributing to the other. When asked what level of responsibility different groups and organizations had for the political division in our country, the top three groups were elected leaders and people running for office, media, and social media.* The next group? “all of us.” In fact, “all of us” received higher responsibility ratings than either Democrats or Republicans. The recognition of shared responsibility was reported fairly evenly across respondent partisan affiliations—with 46% of Republicans, 43% of Democrats and 54% of Independents rating “all of us” as highly responsible. The vast majority of the remainder think “all of us” bear at least some responsibility, with only 3% indicating “all of us” have no responsibility. This data shows that the statement message “we all have work to do” is a message that would resonate with a sizable portion of Americans, regardless of political affiliation.

Although the 2026 Dignity Barometer asked many questions about division and contempt in America, the findings revealed important areas of shared experience and values among Americans. Most are exhausted by political division, dissatisfied with how we treat each other, and think things are getting worse. Nearly all Americans agree that every person should be treated with dignity, yet they also appear to share a common human tendency to view their own actions more generously than the actions of others. Looking at the Barometer data, there is no profile of a dignity advocate—any American can be one.

Conclusion

The findings in this report provide reason for optimism that a stronger culture of dignity in America is possible through changes in both public perception and personal reflection.

At a societal level, increasing Americans’ awareness of their shared values could serve as a catalyst for change. Most Americans will recognize themselves in the dissatisfaction and concern indicated by the Dignity Barometer, and many may be pleasantly surprised to hear that Americans share a near universal agreement with the foundational value of treating others with dignity. By making these shared values more visible, the Dignity Barometer findings have the potential to change expectations about how others will respond during disagreement. Research on social norms suggests that if expectations change, behavior often follows. Americans who expect more dignity from others may be more likely to engage others with dignity during times of conflict, openly expressing their values and opinions both in the public square and in personal and professional settings, thus providing a foundation for dignified free speech that can help ease divisions, prevent violence, and solve problems in our society.

At the individual level, UNITE’s work in building and supporting dignity cultures in different settings offers opportunities for personal reflection, including a Mirror Effect experience that can reduce the biases and blind spots that prevent open and productive exchange. Knowing that others share their dissatisfaction with the way we treat each other, their exhaustion over our divisions, and their cautious optimism that things can improve, Americans may see their disagreements through a Dignity Lens and choose to interact with others in a way that honors their inherent worth. Ultimately, a greater awareness of our shared human experience and values, and a greater willingness to examine our own potential bias, offer a pathway toward building and strengthening a culture of dignity across the country.

* See Appendix for the complete question wording.

Appendix: Complete Survey Question Wording for Figures

The following survey questions correspond to the figures presented in this report. Question wording is reproduced as presented to survey respondents.

Figure 1. Gap 1: Value vs. National Reality

Q17. Based on this definition of dignity: Treating someone with dignity means treating them in a way that honors their inherent worth as a human being.

Do you agree or disagree that all people deserve to be treated with dignity?

Response Options: Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree, Neither agree nor disagree

Q20a. Thinking now about the past year here in the United States, use this 0 to 10 scale to rate how you think most people in the United States tend to treat each other when they disagree.

If you think contempt better describes how people tend to treat each other when they disagree, pick a number closer to the lower end of the scale. If you think dignity better describes how people tend to treat each other when they disagree, pick a number closer to the higher end of the scale. You can use any number from 0 to 10.

Response Options: 0-10 number line

Figure 2. Gap 2: Own Behavior vs. Others' Behavior

Q25b. Honestly speaking, how often do you treat people that you disagree with, with dignity rather than contempt?

Response Options: Always, Most of the time, About half of the time, Rarely, Never

Q25a. How often do people you disagree with treat you with dignity rather than contempt?

Response Options: Always, Most of the time, About half of the time, Rarely, Never

Figure 3. Gap 3: Self-Perception vs. Personal Experience

Q17. Based on this definition of dignity: Treating someone with dignity means treating them in a way that honors their inherent worth as a human being.

Do you agree or disagree that all people deserve to be treated with dignity?

Response Options: Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree, Neither agree nor disagree

Action Options: Listened fully to a person's position that you disagreed with, before you responded; Asked questions to try to truly understand why someone believes something you disagree with; Acknowledged a positive quality or accomplishment of someone you disagree with; Defended people who were not present when your group was making fun of them; Paused during a heated conversation or argument to acknowledge a good point made by the other person; Apologized to someone for the way you treated them after a heated discussion or argument; Rolled your eyes or made a face when someone expressed a view you disagree with; Said something like: "those people are destroying this country"; Dismissed an idea without thoroughly considering it because it came from someone you typically disagree with; Called someone a "communist" or "fascist" or an "idiot" because of their political beliefs; Celebrated the personal misfortune or hardship of someone you disagree with; Shared something on social media to make fun of or mock the other side

Q25b. Honestly speaking, how often do you treat people that you disagree with, with dignity rather than contempt?

Response Options: Always, Most of the time, About half of the time, Rarely, Never

Figure 4. Differing Perceptions of Dignity by Subculture

Q21. Listed here are different places, groups, and institutions within our society. For each one, indicate the degree to which you think of it as a place where, generally, people treat each other with dignity or contempt when they disagree.

Use the 0 to 10 scale again. If you think contempt better describes how people tend to treat each other when they disagree, pick a number closer to the lower end of the scale. If you think dignity better describes how people tend to treat each other when they disagree, pick a number closer to the higher end of the scale. You can use any number from 0 to 10. Even if you've never personally experienced some of these, please answer based on your impressions or what you've seen.

Response Options: 0-10 number line

Subculture Options: Immediate family, Volunteer organizations, Religious or other faith-based groups, K-12 schools, Colleges and universities, Workplaces, Local government, Cable news networks, Federal government, Politics and campaigns, Online social media platforms.

Figure 5. Frequency of Contempt: Politics/Campaigns vs. Workplace Subcultures

Q22a. In politics and campaigns, when two sides that disagree on an issue engage with each other on that issue, which of the following do you think generally describes those interactions? (Asked of one-half the respondents)

Response Options: They almost always treat each other with contempt, More often than not they treat each other with contempt, It's about an even mix of contempt and dignity, More often than not they treat each other with dignity, They almost always treat each other with dignity, I'm not sure

Q23a. In workplace interactions, when two sides that disagree on a work-related issue engage with each other on that issue, which of the following do you think generally describes those interactions? (Asked of one-half the respondents)

Response Options: They almost always treat each other with contempt, More often than not they treat each other with contempt, It's about an even mix of contempt and dignity, More often than not they treat each other with dignity, They almost always treat each other with dignity, I'm not sure

Figure 6. Intensity of Contempt: Politics/Campaigns vs. Workplace Subcultures

22b. For the time they spend treating each other with contempt, how strong do you think those feelings are? (Asked of one-half the respondents)

Response Options: Very strong, Fairly strong, Just somewhat strong, Not that strong, Not strong at all, I'm not sure

23b. For the time they spend treating each other with contempt, how strong do you think those feelings are? (Asked of one-half the respondents)

Response Options: Very strong, Fairly strong, Just somewhat strong, Not that strong, Not strong at all, I'm not sure

Figure 7. Self-Reported Dignity and Contempt Behaviors

Q26. Next you will see a list of things people sometimes say or do when they disagree with someone. For each one, please indicate if you've done something like this in the past year or so. Again, please try to be as honest as possible in sharing your answers.

Response Options: Yes, I've done this, No, I've not done this

Figure 8. The Vast Majority are Exhausted by Our Divisions

Q8. How well does the following statement describe you? I am exhausted by the level of division in our society today.

Response Options: Very well, Fairly well, Just somewhat well, Not that well, Not well at all

Figure 9. Those Who Engage Across Political Differences Express Greater Optimism

Q12a. Do you think it is possible to ease and heal the divisions in our country, or do you think it is not realistic that the divisions in our country can be eased or healed?

Response Options: Think it is definitely possible, Think it is probably possible, Think it is probably not realistic, Think it is definitely not realistic

Q11. How often do you have conversations or interactions with people who you strongly disagree with politically?

Response Options: Very often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never

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