

| The world

Religion, jobs or a new common history - should it be able to heal a divided United States?

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Cleaners dust off the statues in the Capitol the morning after the chaos when protesters stormed the building. Photo: Shawn Thew

WASHINGTON. Joe Biden has promised to be "the president of every American" - but thousands of Trump supporters have resorted to violence to stop him.

In the divided United States, perceptions differ not only about what is the right path for the country, but also about what is true.

Can the United States become whole again? DN's Sanna Torén Björling asked the question to a number of Americans.

The storming of the Capitol was extraordinary, but Washington has become an increasingly common scene of confrontation. The city is a symbol of power, and some small protest is always going

on outside the White House. But violence has been quite rare in the past.

The last few months have been different. This summer's Black Lives Matter protests did not want to end. After the presidential election, thousands of Trump supporters have demonstrated on several occasions, in support of the president. They culminated in Wednesday's violence, when hundreds of people entered the convention building.

Trump supporters have no confidence in the incoming president.

Joe Biden hopes to change that.



Trump supporters demonstrate against election results at Freedom Plaza in November 2020. Photo: Chris Tuite / TT

In his first speech as a recognized winner on November 7, he said: "It is time to put aside the harsh rhetoric. Lower the temperature. See each other again. Listen to each other again. To succeed, we must stop treating our opponents as enemies. We are not enemies. We are Americans. "

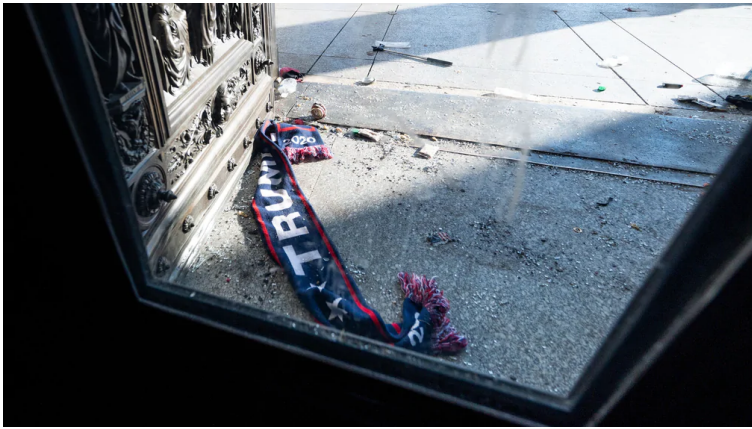
The message is one he has emphasized throughout the campaign: give me your trust, and I will be everyone's president.

It is possible?

Political polarization in the United States has increased for over 40 years. It is now in many ways the most extreme since the years before the Civil War, in the middle of the 19th century. The contradictions are felt in Congress, in election campaigns, in personal relationships.

The situation is thus not new, but if anything, the [polarization has intensified](#) . It is no longer just about political issues, but about different worldviews.

Eighty percent of voters believe that the other side's sympathizers have a completely different view of what constitutes American core values, [according to Pew Research](#) . Nine out of ten stated before the election that a victory for the opposing candidate risked serious damage to the United States.



A Trump scarf left in the entrance after the storming of the Capitol. Photo: Michael Brochstein / SOPA Images / Shutterstock

In a remarkably symmetrical way, the voters thus agree that they strongly disagree.

Can the new president of the United States heal the ideologically torn country?

Peter Coleman, a professor of psychology at Columbia, is highly skeptical of what Joe Biden can accomplish.

- The conflicts are so recent that everything that comes from him risks provoking, and sounding arrogant, he says.

In a new book entitled "The Way Out", which will be published in June, Coleman uses research on how long-lasting international conflicts arise and are resolved. We will return to that.

Facts. The polarization in the United States

* Political polarization has increased for several decades. To a large extent, it takes place today [along party political lines](#), where Republicans and Democrats are on a collision course. Particularly charged are the view of value-heavy issues such as abortion and weapons, but also the view of the United States.

* The parties' sympathizers have become increasingly clear demographically. The Republican Party is today dominated by white, Christian Americans who live outside the big cities. Democrat voters are urban, younger, have a higher education and often belong to minorities.

* A large number of studies, including from the [Pew Research Institute](#), show how the gaps between people have been strengthened, including the view of the economy, climate change, the police, racial justice, pandemics, the health of democracy and the role of the United States in the world.

Among Republicans, there is widespread distrust of science and democratic institutions.

* A majority of American voters saw the storming of the Capitol as a threat to democracy, but 45 percent of Republican voters believe it was right, [according to Yougov](#).

What can unite you? For a few weeks in the United States, I ask that question to almost every American I interview. Highly and

low-educated, unemployed, pensioners, students and professors, from different parts of the country.

The answers I get are very different.

- Hard question. We do not have the same opinion about what the United States is or should be, says Dominique di Marco, a 23-year-old man in jeans and a black hoodie.

He grew up outside Reading, Pennsylvania, where Trump is holding one of his last campaign rallies before the election.

- I think we have to find a new common history. In the past, religion was probably something that kept people together, but that is no longer the case, says Dominique Di Marco and takes a puff on her cigarette.

He wants to watch Trump mostly for fun. He believes that people are more in agreement than what appears in the media, but that the sharp political lines also destroy.

After the election, a woman in a worn jacket, too thin for the weather, says in answer to my question:

- If people are only allowed to work! Job. Job. Job!



A cleaner cleans the floor where the protesters entered the Capitol the day before.
Photo: Ken Cedeno / UPI / Shutterstock

For now, they see Joe Biden as a socialist danger. They think Trump is being unfairly attacked by the media and political opponents. To the audience at the campaign meeting, the president is uncorrupted.

"I've been thinking a lot about what the whole United States can do, what the issue is," said William Antholis, director of [the Miller Center](#) for [Presidential](#) Research in Charlottesville.

He is concerned that a majority of Republican voters do not consider the election result legitimate, and that up to a third of the population does not see Joe Biden as the rightful president. These are voters who are difficult to reach, as they are in a media bubble where conspiracy theories are gaining ground.

- If Biden instead chooses to target those who accept that Trump lost, jobs are the only issue that makes sense to talk about. And

it's both about what messages you get out - and about actually creating more jobs.

Many Trump voters blame the contradictions on the media, which they believe are driving a left-wing agenda. They have stopped following established news media in favor of narrower sites and channels.

Cynthia Idriss Miller, one of America's leading researchers on right-wing extremism in the United States, warns that no unification is possible if Biden does not put the issue of disinformation at the top of the agenda. She calls it a challenge of rank.

- We must also know that law enforcement treats people equally. The last few days have clearly shown that the police view the risk of violence differently, depending on who is protesting. Before we deal with it, I do not think the country can heal.

The American electoral system does not make it easier to find a common course. Political scientists usually address the two-party system, which drives people into an either or; the system of primary elections, as well as the extensive inflow of money into politics, which often favors more extreme candidates.

But in Buchanan County, a poor area of southwest Virginia, Vernon Presley points out something else. He is in his fifties and has been the local chairman of the Democrats in the county for several years. There, more than eight out of ten voted for Trump.



Vernon Presley Photo: Beatrice Lundborg

- We have just gone through a presidential election. In 2021, there will be state elections here in Virginia, with gubernatorial elections and legislative elections here. We are in the starting blocks for a campaign this January. The following year is the mid-year election, and the year after further local elections. Then we arrive at 2024, and a new presidential election. People are so divided, but they are set against each other all the time. We need a break.

Vernon Presley thinks that the distance between people has increased in recent years. As a local leader for the Democrats, he engages in some self-criticism, but mainly blames the

Republicans' hard focus on social conservative issues, such as abortion.

The single most common objection I hear to a possible reconciliation is the racism that has existed since the country was founded. The wave of protests against racism within the police has not died out. Almost everyone who immediately raises the issue is African American.

Lauri Jones, a young woman working in a bank in New York, says:

- If the USA is to heal, we must start from scratch. I do not see that happening. We are not born racists, but as long as racist ideas are taught, it is not possible to agree.



People celebrate Joe Biden's election victory at Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington DC. Photo: Alex Brandon / AP

An elderly black lady celebrating Biden's election victory at Black Lives Matter Plaza a stone's throw from the White House, in a folding chair, says she misses Barack Obama. When I wonder what she thinks Joe Biden can do for the United States, the answer is short:

- God! Only God and Jesus Christ can save us.

Although Americans are less and less religious, the United States remains a religious country. "God", "Christ" and "the gospel" recur in response to my persistent questions, and not only from pastors and worshipers.

Micah Manningham, a pilot from Peoria, Illinois, says the United States has a long Christian tradition, but risks losing it.

- Either we move towards a more godless society, or we get a spiritual awakening. It is not a choice between political parties, it is a biblical, moral choice.





Micah Manningham with her children Janie, Judson, and Annabel. Photo: Evelyn Hockstein

He is currently laid off from the airline he works for and takes the opportunity to be more with his five children on the family farm. I meet them at the Lincoln Monument in Washington, where Americans from all over the United States are strolling.

The same spirit grinds in almost all interviews: Americans have completely different ideas about what the United States should be.

Jeff, a middle-aged man from Georgia, has traveled to Washington to show Trump his support. He has given up hope that anyone can be convinced:

- Since we do not agree on what the United States should be, we must defeat the other side. It may take time.

Jeff has minimal trust in the state. The problem is that the authorities, as he sees it, are populated by officials who vote left and who pursue their own agenda. For that reason, he no longer trusts the electoral system either.

Confidence in Biden's ability to unite is, unsurprisingly, greater among democratic voters. But even among liberals there are critical voices:





Maria and Rachel McCoy from California. Photo: Evelyn Hockstein

"Biden has already marked distance from the party's progressives, and will not do anything about either the student loan system or climate change," said Rachel McCoy, a young lawyer from Los Angeles.

Although Americans are more divided than in many years - or because of it - there may be a way forward. Psychology professor Peter Coleman believes that right now there is a golden opportunity to break the trend. In his studies of protracted conflicts locked in civil war or the status quo, he has found several common factors.

- Such wars are usually preceded by a dramatic event, which often takes place about ten years before the conflict flares up. The Arab Spring, for example, occurred about ten years after the September 11 attacks, he says.

The same thing happens at the Atonement. The beginning to the end of a tough conflict can often be traced to an acute event. There is an opportunity here, Peter Coleman, with the pandemic, the economic crisis and the protests against structural racism.

- But it's not enough. For two sides to come together, two things are required. One: exhaustion. You can no longer bear it, and you know that the other side also feels bad. Two: you see a way out.

He believes that both of these requirements are met, but there are no guarantees: an external threat that the pandemic should have been able to unite people, but became a political pawn.





Congressman Andy Kim helps clean up the Capitol the morning after protesters entered the building. Photo: Andrew Harnik / AP

What changed with the storming of the Capitol?

- It can lead to more center-right voters distancing themselves from Trump, and that events in this way accelerate development. Maybe the Republican Party will split.

Perhaps, Coleman believes, Biden, if he handles the cards right, can show that cross-border cooperation and reforms are possible.

He returns to the fact that the movement must come from below.

The work begins in the own neighborhood. That's what Mariselis Vasquez says, while she shows the family from Puerto Rico around Washington. She thinks the conflicts are exaggerated.

- Of course people think differently, but inflating disagreements only suits the media. When it really comes down to it, people like neighbors. Most people can talk like sensible people to each other, she says.

TEXT



Sanna Torén Björling

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