

THE MOOD OF AMERICA

Maybe we agree about more than we recognize

By **Connie Cass**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Can we agree on this? Americans still think alike much of the time even if our politicians don't.

To get heads nodding, just say something worrisome about the economy or dismissive of Washington. Almost all Americans consider themselves very patriotic, believe in God, value higher education and admire those who get rich through hard work.

Not much argument there.

But here's the oft-overlooked truth: Even some issues that are highly contentious in the partisan capital have solid public support across the country.

National polls show that 7 out of 10 people want to raise the minimum wage. Similar numbers want term limits for Congress, support building the Keystone XL pipeline to bring oil from Canada and back using government money to make preschool available to every child.

There are toeholds of agreement on big, divisive issues such as immigration, abortion and guns. If those slivers of consensus were the starting point in debates, political compromise might just be possible.

Instead, drama and conflict are what feed this country's party-driven politics, media, the bloggers and tweeters, even the pollsters who measure opinion. The 24-hour, left vs. right cacophony coming out of Washington tends to drown out any notes of national harmony.

Maybe the great division in politics these days lies between Washington and the rest of the nation.

Bonny Paulson thinks so.

A retired flight attendant in Huntly, Va., she rents a Shenandoah Valley log cabin to travelers. Paulson gets an earful of people grumbling about politicians, but she doesn't hear much disagreement about the issues.

"Washington is more polarized than the rest of the nation," she says.

Judy Hokse, visiting Washington with a group of volunteers serving meals to the homeless, says ordinary people are more entrenched in their political views than they were when she was a teenager in the 1970s. But the political standoff in Washington, she said, "is just way out there."

The notion of a divided country even divides the academics.

Some political scientists bemoan a disappearing ideological center, reflected in the



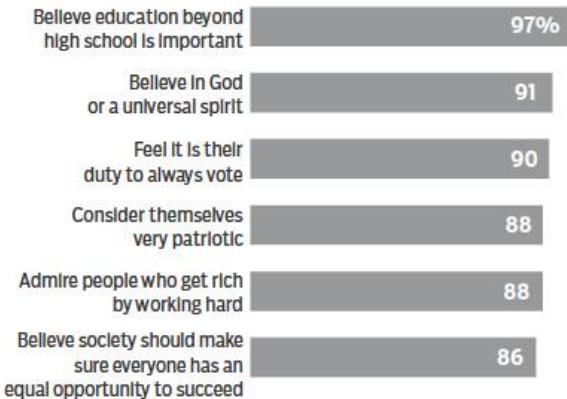
MINIMUM WAGE
Barbara Johnson of Winthrop, Minn., speaks in support of a bill to raise Minnesota's minimum wage in April in St. Paul. Polls show 70 percent of Americans support an increase in the minimum wage. JIM MONE / ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE



EDUCATION
Angle Clark reads to 4- and 5-year-olds in preschool at a Des Moines, Iowa, elementary school in 2011. Polls show 7 of 10 Americans support government making preschool available to every child. STEVE POPE / ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE

Americans in agreement

Despite polarization on many political and cultural issues, Americans do agree on some things. According to national polls, a broad majority of Americans say they:



Sources: Pew Research Center, Gallup

polarization consuming politics. Others dismiss the idea of a balkanized nation of Republican- or Democratic-leaning states. They see instead a laid-back land of mostly moderate, pragmatic voters remote from their highly partisan leaders.

Certainly there's plenty for people to argue about.

Last year's presidential race fanned long-standing debates over the size of government, the social safety net and taxes.

Some states have begun recognizing gay marriage; many have imposed constitutional bans. Some are tightening gun laws, while others are looking to loosen them.

Democrat Barack Obama is on track to become the most polarizing president in nearly seven decades of Gallup records. His predecessor, Republican George W. Bush, held the distinction previously.

Gallup says that 7 out of 10 people say Ameri-

cans are greatly divided when it comes to the most important values. Yet with a few exceptions such as issues of race and gender and views of government, opinions haven't changed much in a quarter-century of Pew polls on political values.

"That's a really critical point that often gets overlooked," said Michael Dimock, director of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. "It's easy to assume when we see more partisan polarization that somehow American values are shifting. In most dimensions the way Americans overall look at things is very consistent over time."

While U.S. opinion overall stuck to the middle of the road, the politically engaged became better at sorting themselves into like-minded camps. Voters changed views or changed parties, and increasing numbers left the parties

to become independents. Rockefeller Republicans and Reagan Democrats disappeared.

The remaining party faithful are more ideologically distilled.

Two decades ago, Republican support for stricter environmental rules was at 86 percent, almost as high as for Democrats. Last year only 47 percent of Republicans wanted tougher environmental rules, Pew found. Democratic support remained high.

On family values, it was Democrats who changed.

Over 25 years, the numbers of Democrats saying they had "old-fashioned values" about family and marriage dropped from 86 percent to 60 percent, while Republicans held steady.

Despite the party shifts, stricter environmental rules and old-fashioned values are still endorsed by 7 out of 10 people.

Likewise, the abortion debate divides the political parties and fervent activists. Yet most people stand somewhere in the middle.

They overwhelmingly say abortion should be legal under some circumstances, especially in cases of rape, incest or to save the mother's life. At the same time, large majorities support some restrictions, such as a 24-hour waiting period and parental consent for minors.

Gun control and illegal immigration? U.S. opinion is torn.

Yet some ideas are getting support from 4 out of 5 people polled: extending federal background checks to all gun buyers, tightening security at the nation's borders, and providing a path to citizenship for some workers who are in the country illegally, if they meet requirements such as paying back taxes.

So there's common ground.

Of course, consensus of opinion doesn't guarantee action. Nine out of 10 people tell Pew it's their duty to always vote, but fewer than 6 in 10 of those who were eligible voted in the 2012 presidential election.

Nor does harmony equal tranquility.

Times of crisis create a rallying effect, epitomized by the 9/11 attacks. Bush's presidential approval rating jumped to 90 percent, the highest in Gallup's history. Approval of Congress hit 84 percent.

In ordinary times, unity of opinion might be the wrong goal.

"If everybody agreed, there would be no debate," said Gallup editor-in-chief Frank Newport. "There's an argument to be made that from debate and disagreement comes truth."