



**BREAK  
THROUGH  
PARADOX**

WITH  SHAPIRO+RAJ

HEALING THE NATION.  
BRIDGING THE DIVIDES.  
**PAVING THE PATH FORWARD.**

An in-depth look at the key tensions facing our society and the deeper human values underneath them all—in order to inform and inspire impactful solutions.



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## FOREWORD

The US is unique in so many ways. As the recent *Freakonomics* podcast titled [\*“The US Is Just Different—So Let’s Stop Pretending We Are Not”\*](#) has put it, *“culturally unusual and supremely weird.”* Rather than looking to import solutions that work in other countries, most impactful solutions facing our nation must start with an in-depth understanding of the root causes, many are unique to who we are as a country and the individuals within it.

Over the last few years, especially the last year and a half, many societal tensions in the US have risen to the surface, dominated the news cycle, and shaped social discourse as well as our own individual lives. Long-term friendships abruptly ended; political topics were “banned” in family gatherings; couples parted ways over intense differences on societal topics. At times, we may feel as if we can’t even understand our close friends and loved ones anymore—much less our own country.

The grand experiment called “democracy” in our nation is rapidly changing and reshaping, significantly accelerated by the once-in-a-generation pandemic, the murder of George Floyd last summer, and the recent presidential election with the unprecedented Capitol riot in the aftermath. As the nation is heading toward the “new normal,” how do we best reset? How can we best heal the tensions in our social fabric? What have the recent upheaval and seismic changes taught us about who we really are, both as a country and as individuals? What is the role of the public sector, the private sector, and each of us, as citizens, in shaping the solutions?

At Shapiro+Raj, we feel a sense of urgency to tackle these tensions head on and contribute to shaping the path forward for our country. We strongly believe that effective solutions require each of us to seek out an understanding of the deeper human values that lie beneath the paradoxical truths and tensions existing on the surface. Our signature series—**Breakthrough Paradox**—was born earlier this year out of this conviction. We designed this initiative with a multi-lens approach, leveraging our core strengths in social sciences, innovative research methods, advanced analytics, and strategic planning. The resulting insights go deep into the root causes of the surface “symptoms,” providing a holistic diagnosis of America as a patient in order to find the best course for healing.

What you are about to read, or at least some of it, may make you feel uncomfortable; you may even disagree completely. That’s ok. As human beings, we are prone to biases and influenced by our unique lived experience. As bestselling nonfiction author, Stephen R. Covey, has wisely put it:

“*We see the world not as it is but as we are.*”

While disagreement is part of life, being stuck in our own view of the world to the point of not seeing the other side’s worldview doesn’t have to be. If we can help bring the various viewpoints to the surface, uncover shared values that lie beneath, and, from this, inspire new thinking and novel solutions to promote the healing of our country, we will have done what we set out to do.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite various bright spots and upbeat news as the US entered the post-pandemic “great reset,” the holistic well-being of our nation remains uncertain at best and concerning at worst. **Forty percent of survey participants reported feeling mostly anxious while 34% expressed concerns over their most basic needs** (adequate food, shelter, safety, and security)—a surprisingly high number for the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth! The future outlook is not much better—with **32% feeling unsure of whether their life will get better or worse; another 15% expecting that it will, in fact, get worse.** This collective sentiment is closely reflected in the two dominant emotions—**anxious or sad**—for 36% of survey participants, as shown in the data from Phebi® (an emotion-detecting analytical tool). Interestingly, the most meaningful differences in current wellbeing and future outlook can be seen along the life stage/age dimension (more notable than income or racial comparisons). Young adults’ trepidation is palpable, with **53% of young adults reporting the highest level of stress and 18% believing their lives will get worse in the next 12 months.**

Against this backdrop, it is of little surprise that, amongst all the tensions we evaluated in the survey, *Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits* rose to the top (chosen by 41%) as the most important conflict to resolve. Most Americans (83%) value individual freedom. However, a slight majority (54%) also value collective benefit, perhaps reflecting a gradual shift in the recognition or reality of so many Americans falling behind. Using Luminoso™—Shapiro+Raj’s advanced linguistics analytical tool powered by artificial intelligence—to dig deeper into all the open-end responses, our analysis shows very meaningful differences between those **Critically Concerned** (reporting that their greatest concerns are at the basic survival needs of food, water, shelter, and safety) and those **Unconcerned** (reporting that they have no concerns related to any of Maslow’s five tiers of needs). Critically Concerned respondents were more likely to use specific language, calling out issues such as wealth disparity and racial inequality; Unconcerned respondents, on the other hand, used more general terms. References to *Democrats, Republicans* and *lies* were also more prevalent in the Unconcerned group, while references to the need to *listen, understand, and educate* were more prevalent in the Critically Concerned group. This is where both intrinsic cognitive biases that we all have as human beings and the extrinsic superficial soundbites in our 24/7 news cycle seem to have a combined effect in widening the division, with one side seeing real issues to resolve versus the other side (the Unconcerned) viewing the tension more as lies and political maneuvering.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, cont.



The solution to the top tension—*Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits*—is not obvious for many. Fifty percent couldn't provide a suggestion or indicated that they had no idea as to which sector or entity is best suited to resolve the tension. Phebi® voice coding revealed much higher intensity when respondents talked about conflicts; and much less so when they talked about solutions, suggesting a feeling of uncertainty or even hopelessness. However, not all hope is lost. For those who did provide a solution, **collective activism** emerged as the top solution. What might this look like?

The **public sector** is expected to play a key role, with almost one in three Americans believing that government is best suited to resolve the tension, driven mainly by older citizens (51%) vs. young adults (26%). What's startling is that 38% of Democrats looked to the government, with 32% of Republicans sharing the same view. This seems like a strong call from the American people that bipartisan actions by the government are both possible and welcome. Putting aside political ideology to do what is needed for our people and our country will hopefully make the role of government more relevant for the younger generations as well, given the waning relevance of government and political parties in younger generations' proposed solutions (a stark contrast to responses from the Boomer generation).

**Private sector** currently falls far behind, with only 11% mentioning this sector as best suited to resolve the tension. However, there's tremendous potential for businesses and brands to join forces. Seventy-two percent like when the brands they purchase share a similar world view. Forty-two percent prefer it. Seven percent act on it, only buying from brands and companies that publicly support their world view—a number that is likely to grow with time!

The majority (57%) selected **individuals** as best suited to resolve the tension. Solutions start with listening, deep empathy, and a willingness to go beyond our comfort zone to view reality from others' perspectives. Perhaps individual freedom and collective benefits are not diametrically opposed? Perhaps, with empathetic listening, we can see our deeper shared values that can inform the most meaningful solutions? Perhaps this is a key to truly unlock the diverse nature of our nation as a great asset, rather than a point of vulnerability to our social fabric? The answer to these questions is largely up to each of us.



America is hurting. Public unrest has escalated. The gap between the haves and have-nots grew wider during COVID-19. Violent protests and insurrections are the outward expression of internal pain and conflict. Foreign adversaries continue to step up efforts to exploit our cultural tensions. In his New York Times op-ed titled, [\*"The biggest threat to America is America itself,"\*](#) Nicholas Kristof stated that *"Rivals like China may see the fraying of America's social fabric as a sign of strategic weakness."*

## UNITED WE STAND. **OR DO WE?**

With 330 million people representing more than 500 ancestries, our unique views and environments are stretched as wide as our borders. In the last several years, many of these differences have erupted into rising tensions and conflicts. Media soundbites in the 24/7 news cycle, which often stop at the surface level, add fuel to the fire. And "fake news" abounds, sowing conspiracy theories, doubt, and skepticism among the general public. How can anyone be wrong if everyone believes they are right? How do we survive, much less thrive, in this paradoxical view of our universe? We are no longer a melting pot in common pursuit of the American Dream. We've become a nation of disparate, special interest groups hellbent on protecting our individual interests, often to the detriment of others.

While differences are a part of life, constant conflict and tension don't have to be. How do we embrace and amplify, rather than resist and divide, the many unique perspectives and personalities that are woven into the multi-textured fabric of our society? What if, by looking at the shared human truths beneath the surface tensions, we as a nation can find our collective path forward?

Shapiro+Raj explored these differences and conflicts in the inaugural wave of **Breakthrough Paradox Survey** conducted with 1,300 US adults to enhance our understanding of the views that shape our collective consciousness. The survey measured the holistic "health" of our nation—overall wellbeing, future outlook, level of unmet needs along the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, satisfaction across different categories in the Wheel of Life, and more in order to deeply understand the tension from a holistic lens.

# WHERE WE STAND



While our country is experiencing a flurry of upbeat news regarding the suppression of COVID-19 and the reopening of our economy, 40% of survey participants expressed that they were more stressed than calm during the previous two weeks. There is also a sizable percentage of the population who believe the American Dream is well beyond their reach.

- **34%** shared concern about meeting their basic needs (food, shelter, safety, and security) (see also *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*), p21
- **42%** shared concern about their physical or financial health (see also *Wheel of Life*), p21
- **9%** stated they are living their worst possible life right now
- **9%** reported they believe their life will likely worsen over the next 12 months

Are you one of these individuals who is more anxious than content right now? If you are comfortable with your current state, can you relate to individuals who are on the opposite spectrum of personal wellbeing, struggling to make ends meet?

Digging deeper, the most meaningful difference between **stress and calm** and **optimism and pessimism** emerges not from socioeconomic factors such as income or race, but rather from generational differences. Alarming, it's young adults (i.e., Gen Z) who face the future with the greatest degree of trepidation. They report the highest levels of stress in past two weeks (53%) and the most frustration regarding their outlook for the future (18% believe their lives will get worse in the next 12 months). In April 2021, the Pew Research Center reported that the unemployment rate of young adults under the age of 24 was double that of any other age group. Many have moved back with parents while they contemplate next steps and wait for economic recovery. Their outlook is peppered with pessimism and concern. Without adequate action, we may soon experience yet another American generation, trailing Millennials, who may not be better off than their parents.

To assess the intensity of their emotions, we asked survey participants to voice-record their responses to several questions throughout the survey. We utilized Phebi®, an emotion-detecting analytical tool, to assess and code voice recordings along a range of emotions including descriptors such as **anxious, sad, calm,**

and **happy** (see also Methodology, p9, for more information). With 36% of Phebi®-enabled survey responses coded as either **anxious** or **sad**, the emotional barometer closely reflects the data from approximately 40% of total survey respondents who reported feeling mostly anxious in the past two weeks, as well as the 34% concerned with meeting basic needs of food, shelter, safety, and security. **A third of our population appears to be living in a state of angst**, unable to feel the sense of security and contentment that others experience when basic needs are met. The land of prosperity? It appears that a least a third of our population would not make this claim.

On the other end of the spectrum, the **41% of survey participants who indicated that they are living their best possible life** right now hold a completely different world view. They are at the top of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, no longer concerned about the basics, but focused on enjoying (and keeping) what they have. Fifty-two percent of seniors aged 65+ were most likely to place themselves in this life stage of actualization and optimism.

Have these numbers surprised you? More importantly, can you understand and empathize with those who may be in either a better or worse state of wellbeing than you are? Imagine, for a moment, you're speaking with your closest friend, a trusted family member, your next-door neighbor... they open up about some of the challenges they're facing:

“It's a struggle every month, nothing left over, nothing going into my retirement account. I can only take out enough money to pay half of one month's bills.”

“It's just one of those things where COVID really hit us hard in 2020, and we don't have the savings or the budget to really keep the house afloat without work.”

“I have saved some money, but I realized it is not enough for retirement. So I need to figure out how to make more money each month so that I will feel comfortable once I decide to retire.”

In reality, these quotes came directly from our survey participants. Did you feel the intensity of the anxiety these individuals are feeling? **If you live in the US, one in three of you are all too familiar.**

# THE TOP TENSIONS OUR NATION IS GRAPPLING WITH



This inaugural Shapiro+Raj **Breakthrough Paradox** online survey was conducted between May 7-14, 2021 among a random sample of 1,305 US adults aged 18 and older. For results based on the total adult population, the margin of sampling error is +/- 2.7% at a 95% confidence level.

The **Breakthrough Paradox** Survey will be conducted a few times a year. Subsequent surveys will compare the emotional state of participants to that of this initial wave. In addition to the data being analyzed by S+R data analysts and social scientists, we also utilized Luminoso™ artificial intelligence linguistic analytics and Phebi® voice coding to deepen the understanding of the research findings:

- **Luminoso™** utilizes advanced linguistic analytics and artificial intelligence to provide an in-depth understanding of natural human language. The software allows us to identify connections within the transcripts of open-ended questions and interviews, allowing us to explore further than initial reviews and provide objective insights into the responses.

- **Phebi®** is an analytic software that provides insight into both the emotions and sentiment of vocal responses. A subsample of our survey (n=135) provided spoken instead of written responses to our open-ended questions, allowing us to examine their nonconscious emotional states.

Among the near dozen cultural tensions that we tested (see also *Exploring the Tensions*, p22), three of them surfaced as top conflicts to resolve:

Conflict	% of respondents selecting it as a top-three conflict to resolve
<b>Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits:</b> I don't want to be told what to do vs. A society needs rules and cooperation to support everyone	<b>41%</b>
<b>Personal Protection vs. Public Safety:</b> I should be able to arm myself with whatever weapon I want vs. It is too dangerous to our society when everyone has access to all weapons	<b>38%</b>
<b>Haves vs. Have-Nots:</b> It's inevitable that some have more and others have less vs. Closing the economic gap between Haves and Have-Nots is necessary.	<b>32%</b>

American ingenuity and fortitude once made us the envy of the world. Today, we've become a country where sheer anxiety and hopelessness counterbalance the financially successful, where news regarding the forecasted increase in the number of homeless (currently at 500,000 including 100,000 children) is overshadowed by headlines of billion-dollar divorce settlements. No wonder the *Haves vs. Have-Nots* conflict ranked so highly.

Isn't it ironic that in a country founded on guaranteeing the untethered right to pursue happiness, the top-ranked conflict was *Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits*? Have we gone too far in supporting individual rights? Alternatively, have we not established adequate societal measures to protect collective benefit?

*Personal Protection vs. Public Safety*, not surprisingly, is ranked second, just after *Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits*. Might escalation in gun violence and the intense debate over the Second Amendment contribute to its top-of-mind position?

When asked for suggestions regarding what can be done to resolve the Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits conflict, the majority (55%) mentioned **the need to come together to unite as one**. Imagine that thought for a moment. To preserve our **individual freedom**, we need to **come together as one**. Let's explore that thought in greater depth.

# HARD TO BELIEVE

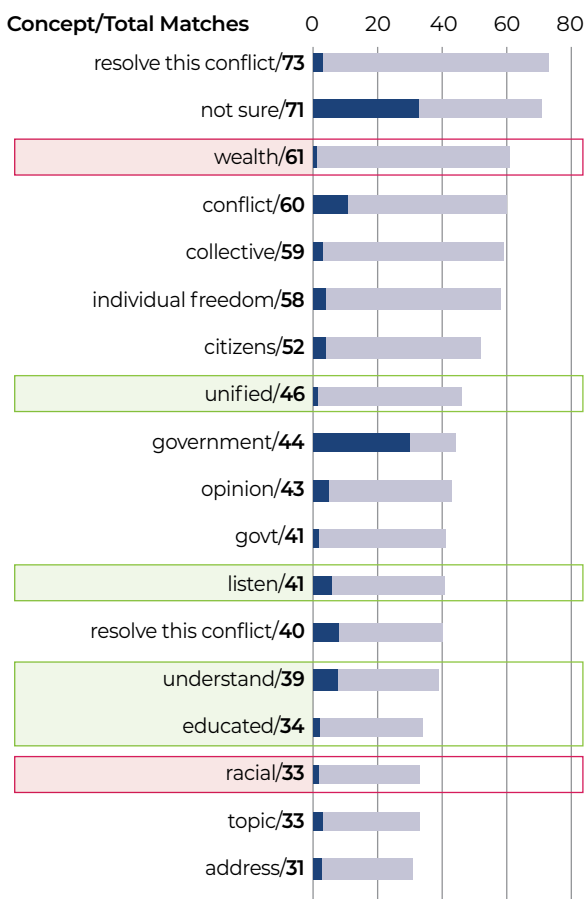
To better understand how our needs influence the solutions we seek for this top-rated conflict—*Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits*—we used Luminoso™, Shapiro+Raj’s advanced linguistics analytical tool powered by artificial intelligence, to compare responses from two groups based on the intensity of the concern over meeting basic needs.

## These two distinct groups of adults we compared were:

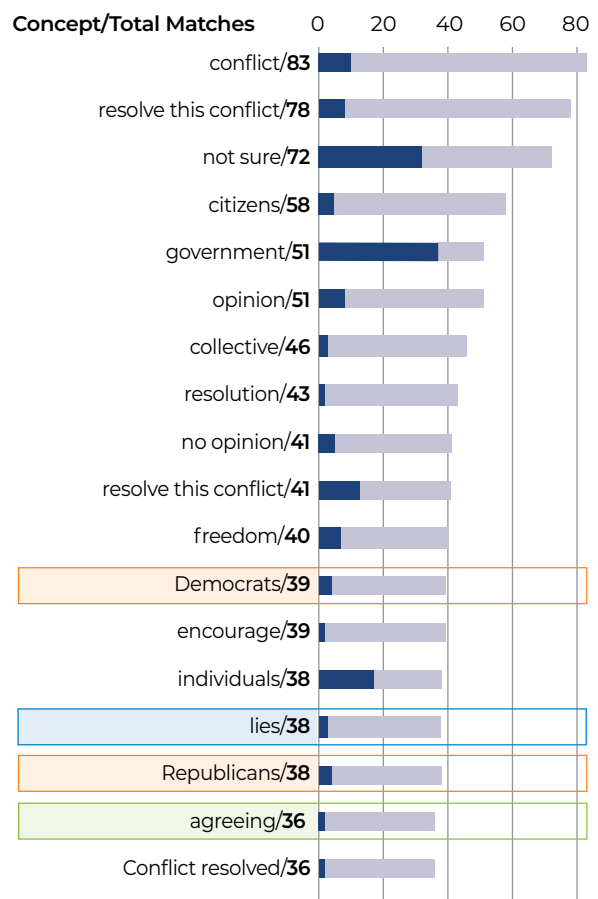
- **Critically Concerned (n=450):** Those who reported that their greatest concerns related to the basic survival needs of food, water, shelter, and safety
- **Unconcerned (n=395):** Those who reported that they have no concerns related to any of Maslow’s five tiers of needs.

### What do you think needs to happen to resolve this conflict?

#### Critically Concerned Total Respondents: 450



#### Unconcerned Total Respondents: 395



- Exact matches
- Conceptual matches
- Comments related to specific, political parties
- Ideas around information sharing and alignment
- Current, prevalent, and specifically stated issues in the U.S.
- Comments speaking to misinformation and feelings of distrust



The deep dive leveraging Luminoso™ reveals three important insights:

## Intense Specificity vs. Passive Awareness

The **Critically Concerned** were more likely to **directly reference** the need to address specific, complex and emotionally charged issues such as **wealth disparity and racial inequality**. Perhaps these same participants face more frequent reminders of these barriers to success (and survival).

In contrast, **Unconcerned** individuals **largely referenced generalities** when asked to think about solutions instead of pinpointing specific issues. Is this group less aware or less concerned with how to resolve the *Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits* tension? If they have no concerns whatsoever at any level along the hierarchy of needs, would we expect them to have a wealth of deep thought regarding resolution? Or would it be fair to say that they perhaps believe that no such conflict exists, or if it does, it simply doesn't impact them as directly and intensely?

Additional analysis comparing other groups reveals this **proximity-comprehension relationship** may be a larger trend:

- Despite a general consensus that racial issues are, indeed, a top conflict in the US. **Black respondents** use **visceral and specific language** (e.g., “killing/killing blacks,” “police/police brutality”), speaking more to the seriousness of the issue and suggesting a stronger sense of personal distress. In contrast, **white respondents** avoid painting a vivid picture; instead, they **speak more abstractly**, focusing on politics and policy (notably, the term “whitewashing” has been used for decades to reference the tendency for white individuals to minimize or gloss over the specifics of racial discrimination).
- Further, findings from our voice coding analysis (Phebi®) reveal the **greatest emotional negativity** can be found in the voices of our most vulnerable (i.e., those most concerned about making ends meet).

This collection of findings begs the question: do we **fully** grasp the danger faced by those who can't escape it?

## To Listen or Not to Listen

When compared to their **Unconcerned** counterparts, the **Critically Concerned** are also much more likely to reference a need for unifying, listening, understanding, and educating. Interestingly, they speak to the very solution that could help bridge the gap between those who lack understanding and/or empathy and those unable to effectively meet basic needs. Note the intense desire for change—based on listening first, then acting:

“**Start listening to one another, listen to understand and not listen just to react. Get lifelong politicians out of office and bring in new blood.**”

Responses from **Unconcerned** individuals do not reference specific hardships or cultural disparities. Instead, they appear hyper-focused on the perceived prevalence of lies (from the media, politicians). The **Unconcerned** individuals focus much more heavily on misinformation and political divisiveness over more concrete, tangible issues such as racial conflicts and wealth gaps.

Perhaps the divide in perceptions as to how best to resolve this top tension facing our nation—*Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits*—has less to do with misalignment on the best ways to resolve conflicts, but rather, misalignment on the very existence or severity of the issues, themselves. The less that individuals have to worry about survival, the less it becomes an issue to resolve. Why focus on collective benefits if you, personally, don't have to rely on them to survive? Why assume that government, for example, is the solution when so many individuals proudly claim that they have succeeded on their own, without societal guard rails and financial support?



## Elusive Truths

In the context of these survey insights, it's important to consider not just the differing perspectives, but also the distortions caused by our biases—the undercurrents that hinder our ability to truly listen to one another.

A passage from *The Unpersuadables: Adventures with the Enemies of Science*, written by award-winning author Will Storr helps to illustrate the elusive, seductive, and deeply rooted nature of human bias:

“By the time you have reached adulthood, your brain has decided how the world works—how a table looks and feels, how liquids and authority figures behave, how scary are rats. It has made countless billions of little insights and decisions. It has made its mind up. From then on in, its treatment of any new information that runs counter to those views can sometimes be brutal. Your brain is surprisingly reluctant to change its mind. Rather than going through the difficulties involved in rearranging itself to reflect the truth, it often prefers to fool you. So it distorts. It forgets. It projects. It lies.



While we like to believe that others are more susceptible to cognitive biases than ourselves, the truth is, we're all prone to believing in our immunity to bias, regardless of the accuracy of our perception.

**We're prone to believing that what we see is true<sup>1</sup>:** Our findings clearly emphasize how dissimilar our realities really are. If one in every three survey participants are struggling to meet their most basic needs, might this naïve realism bias cause the other two-thirds to underestimate the prevalence and severity of the issue? How might this play out at the ballot box? How can this majority make the best decisions for the country if their perception of reality clouds their ability to see the problems that desperately need solving?

**When information challenges our personal expectations or beliefs, we doubt it<sup>2</sup>:** Consider the juxtaposition of **Critically Concerned** individuals who believe the path to conflict resolution starts with listening, while the **Unconcerned** are likely to believe that much of what they hear is deceitful. How can this profound disconnect act as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue?

**We like to believe the world is fair and rewards those who deserve it<sup>3</sup>:** This belief goes hand in hand with the vision that the American Dream is achievable through perseverance and hard work. This belief and vision present a much more palatable view of reality:

<sup>1</sup>**Naïve realism bias:** the belief or assumption that one's sense perceptions provide direct knowledge of external reality, unconditioned by one's perceptual apparatus or individual perspective. (Source: APA Dictionary of Psychology)

<sup>2</sup>**Personal incredulity bias:** Argument from incredulity, also known as argument from personal incredulity or appeal to common sense, is a fallacy in informal logic. It asserts that a proposition must be false because it contradicts one's personal expectations or beliefs, or is difficult to imagine. (Source: Wikipedia)

<sup>3</sup>**Just world fallacy:** The just-world hypothesis or just-world fallacy is the cognitive bias that assumes that "people get what they deserve"—that actions will have morally fair and fitting consequences for the actor. (Source: Wikipedia)



### Those who struggle deserve it.

Relieves feelings of obligation and guilt to help the less fortunate.

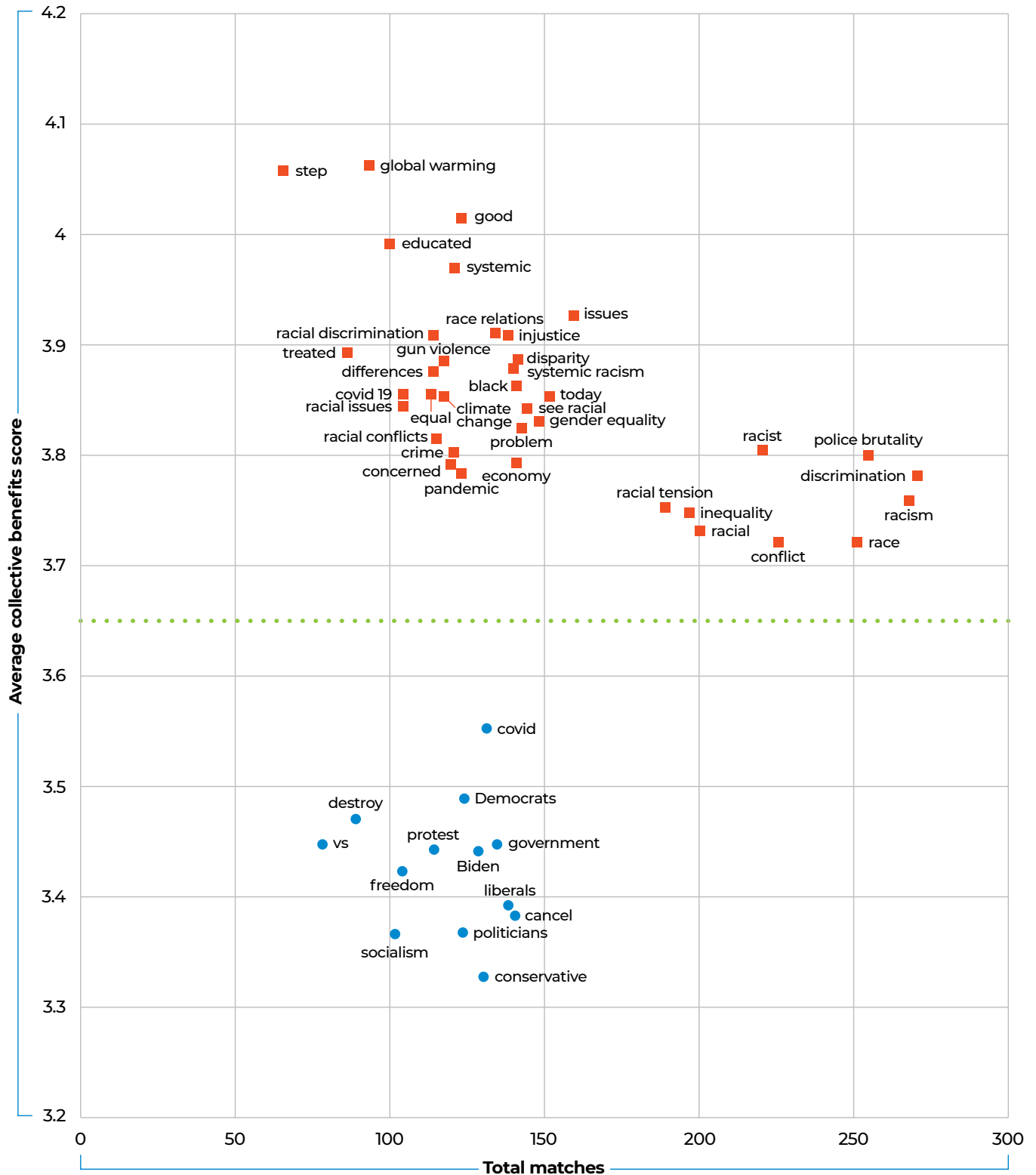


### Those who succeed have earned it.

Provides a sense of control in avoiding challenges and failure.

## Other Conflicts Observed in US Today by Average Collective Benefits Score

Perhaps this explains why those who value collective benefits to a higher degree (those above the dotted line in the Luminoso™ chart) are also more likely to speak about racial injustice. Might their increased awareness, or even personal experience, make them less prone to this bias and more accepting of the uncomfortable realities our nation is facing?





These cognitive biases run on autopilot. Individuals may genuinely believe that they fully hear the other side, that they actively and rationally assess new information, even when they don't want to hear it. The reality? We all struggle to see past our own personal biases. Our subjective reality is our "objective truth." As best selling nonfiction author, Stephen R. Covey, argued:

*“We see the world not as it is but as we are; or as we are conditioned to see it.”*

Making matters much more complicated, **information sticks to us like glue<sup>4</sup>**, including misinformation. *Even after correction*, studies show that false information continues to influence our perceptions and decision-making. Truths are personal, variable, and often unshakeable.

When we consider the relationship between differing perspectives and susceptibility to bias, the many different “American realities” we collectively experience may very well be one of our greatest inherent vulnerabilities—a higher risk of delusion and, as a result, a serious threat to our unity and strength as a nation. Furthermore, this susceptibility increases the risk of individuals voting against their best interests or unknowingly supporting policies that burden or infringe upon the freedoms of others. Author and artist, Jevoid Simmons, eloquently speaks to the gravity of this weakness and the importance of understanding how others’ realities differ from our own in his recent Evanston RoundTable article [“Up From Down Home’: A Family’s Flight to Safety”](#):

*“[There is] a great, great desire, I think, among some levels to keep the people disunited. I think sometimes the powers that be have a vested interest in us not understanding our commonality. And that is how they keep us divided. And I think that people need to talk to understand that we’re all together. That is the message I have as a 70-year-old man hoping to see the real changes that are needed if this experiment we call America is to survive.”*

<sup>4</sup>**Continued influence effect:** The continued influence effect (also known as the continued influence of misinformation) refers to the way that falsehoods persist in our thinking. These false claims, once heard, can continue to influence thoughts and feelings long after they have been proven false (www.alleydog.com)

# HOW BEST MIGHT WE **RESOLVE THE TENSION?**



So, in the face of all our biases that make it challenging to understand others, much less join them in a solution, how do we solve the paradoxical conflicts? What can be done? Who is best suited to take necessary action?

It seems that many Americans are stumped. When asked which sector or entity is **best suited** to resolve the Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefit conflict, **50% couldn't provide a suggestion or indicated that they had no idea**. Phebi® voice coding sheds some light on this result. When **talking about conflicts** that concerned them, their responses were more likely to be coded as intense, a noticeable strong reaction. However, there was less intensity when **asked about potential solutions**, suggesting a feeling of hopelessness, as felt in this quote:

“ *I honestly don't think anything can be done. I mean you can't teach people how to care about society as a whole if they're selfish or only care about themselves.* ”

Among solutions provided, the top response was that we need to come together as one, mentioned by 55% of those who provided a solution (27% of total respondents). **Collective activism is the best solution to resolve the Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits tension?** Now that solution might seem like a paradox in itself.

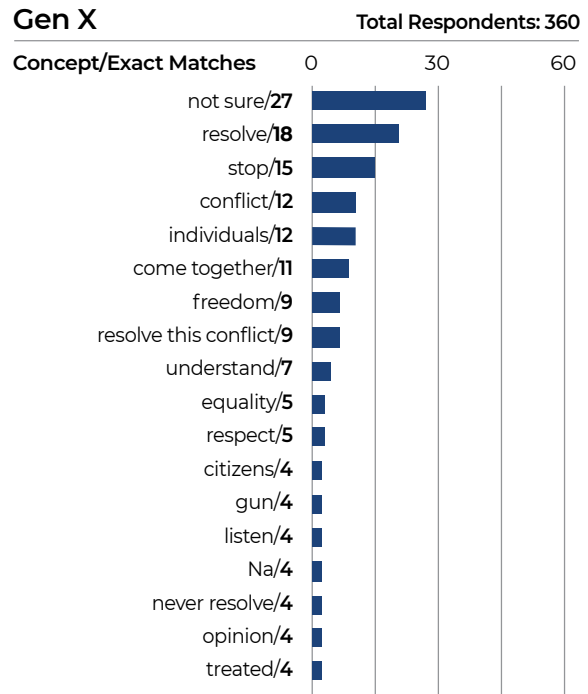
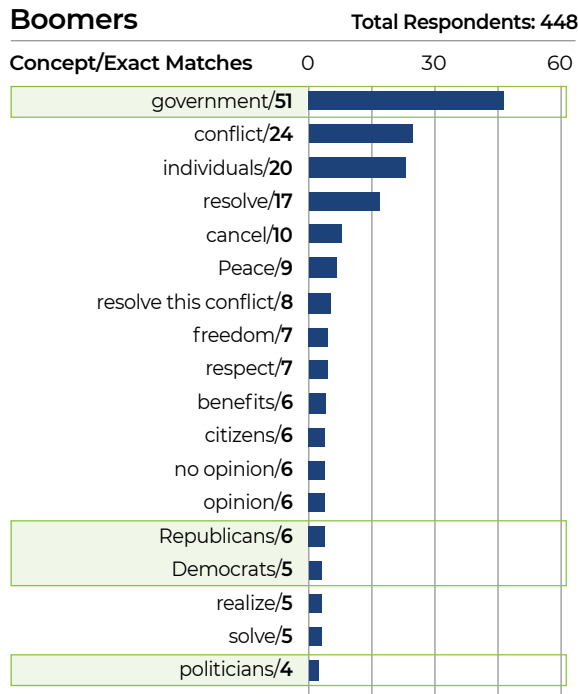
Let's continue to examine the *Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits* conflict with a sharper lens. What's startling is that each side of this conflict was important to a majority of individuals (83% highly value Individual Freedom; 54% highly value Collective Benefit—a smaller majority for sure, yet reflecting a shift in a country that typically prides itself on individual freedom). Societal governance that allows us to exercise that freedom, within reason and not in a way that inflicts pain on others. Perhaps this isn't a conflict that has to be resolved, **but rather, a reflection of deeper shared values** that need to be preserved in appropriate balance. How can we best go about it?



## Government Needs to Step Up

The startling finding? When asked to select among government, private sector, or individuals to resolve the *Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefit* conflict, **one third (32%) believed that government was best suited to resolve it**, confirmation by many that policy makers and representatives are expected to enact appropriate legislation to support a productive and orderly society while also protecting individual freedom. However, **older citizens (51%) were twice as likely as young adults (26%) to believe that government was the solution**. Luminoso™ linguistic analysis supported this finding, as the analysis detected that mentions of government involvement in a solution decreased dramatically among younger generations.

### In your opinion, what else would you like to see happen to resolve this conflict?

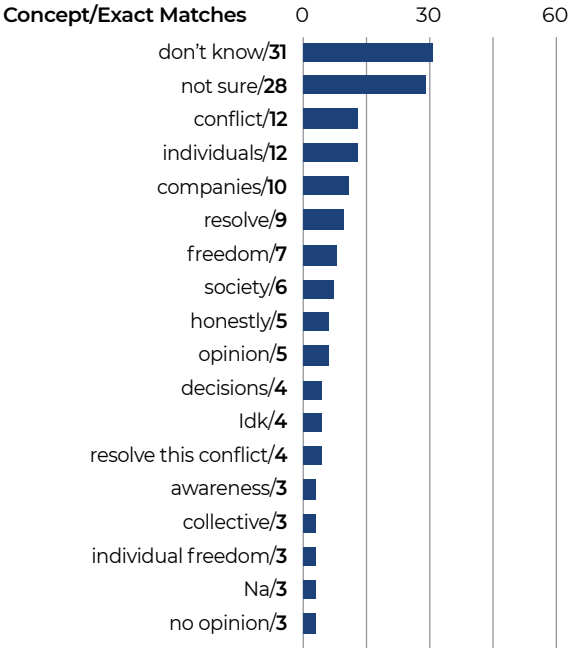




In your opinion, what else would you like to see happen to resolve this conflict? (Continued)

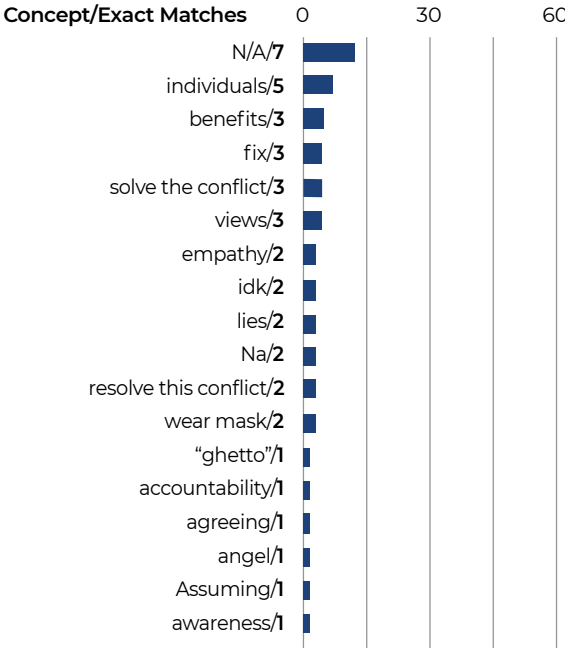
**Millennials**

Total Respondents: 343



**Gen Z**

Total Respondents: 153



Have young adults become skeptical regarding government's ability to effectively resolve societal conflicts? Have they all felt disillusioned with the mayhem of the political theater in recent years? Recall that Gen Z largely found themselves unemployed and living at home during the pandemic. In their worldview, they don't have the same degree of faith in policy makers as their parents and grandparents have.



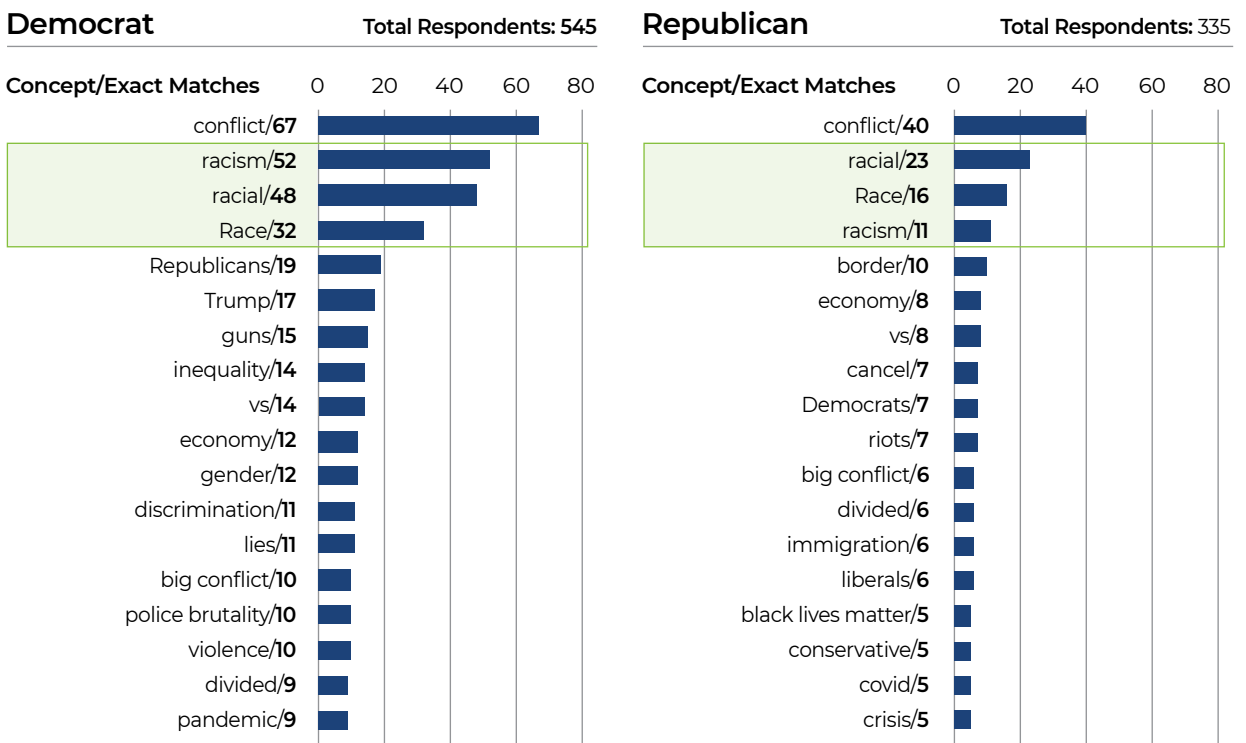
Political affiliation, too, has a material impact. One third of respondents (38% of Democrats and 32% of Republicans) agreed that government is best-suited to resolve the tension. More surprisingly, however: neither segment specifically called out their political party as being uniquely suited to the task. Republicans and Democrats agreeing in similar proportion that government as a whole (and not specific political parties) is best suited to resolve a conflict? That appears to be a strong signal that bipartisan actions are both possible and desired. Will elected representatives reach across the aisle to serve all constituents? As several respondents echoed:

“Right now, I’m not sure what needs to happen to resolve these conflicts. I think that the people in government need to work together and not keep fighting against each other.”

Also worth noting is that survey participants, when asked to list any other conflicts they see in the US today, regardless of political affiliation, mentioned “racism” as the number one conflict of concern—see the Luminoso™ chart below. Doesn’t that send an equally strong signal that hard line political ideology may start losing relevance, and that many individuals are increasingly expecting bipartisan actions?

Please list any other conflicts you see in the US today

In your opinion, what else would you like to see happen to resolve this conflict?



Phebi® voice coding uncovered that individuals who identified as Democrats were relatively happier or calmer (56%) as they answered the conflict question compared to those identifying as Republicans (only 35% happy or calm). Republican responses were coded as more anxious or sad. This likely signals that Democrats have a higher level of hope and optimism than Republicans that the conflict of *Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits* can be effectively addressed.



## Should Private Sector Take a Stand?

Does private sector have a role? While only **11% mentioned private sector as best suited** to resolve this conflict (with technology and telecommunications being the two the most frequently mentioned sectors), what companies and brands say and do on broader cultural tensions like this has real impact on people's attitude and behavior toward them. **Seventy-two percent appreciate** when brands they purchase share a similar world view. **Forty-two percent prefer it. Seven percent act on it**—only buying from brands and companies that publicly support their world view—a number that is likely to grow with time!

What can brands do to help resolve these societal tensions? Taking action, even as simple as communicating a position, could make a difference. Increasingly, consumers expect it. Brands such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Nike were frequently mentioned as being associated with support of both individual freedom and collective benefit. Interestingly, Coke and Walmart stand out as the two brands perceived as supporting collective benefit; while My Pillow and the NRA stand out as the two brands perceived as supporting individual freedom. What brands communicate, how brands act can have immediate and intense impact, as seen with My Pillow where consumer reaction has led to [product removal from the shelves at major retailers](#).

It's clear that brands and companies can have real impact on broad societal issues, for better or worse. There is **significant potential for brands and businesses to align and connect on collective and personal values** with their customers. In other words, brands can step up to articulate a point-of-view or position that could make a difference. Better yet, taking actions to walk the talk. Many consumers will welcome it. Some will expect it.

## Individual Freedom Rings!

More than half (**57%**) believe that the *Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits* conflict is best resolved by individuals. In other words, many survey participants believe that we, as individuals, should take responsibility for our own actions. We should be able to address and resolve the tension as individuals. Think about our engrained biases mentioned earlier; if your basic needs of food, shelter, safety, and security are met, it's much easier to think that we can resolve these tensions on our own, isn't it? But what if you are struggling to make ends meet? Do you have the confidence that more secure individuals are both interested in and capable of resolving the *Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits* conflict? Change starts with listening and understanding the needs of others, then coming together to resolve conflict. Hear what a survey participant said when asked what can be done:

“ *More empathy for fellow human beings. When you can walk a mile in the shoes of a person who has very little, you can understand why collective benefits are so important.* ”

# LET'S BE PRACTICAL

Resolution will not occur in a vacuum. Multiple entities will be required to activate change. We need to **come together to unite as one** to resolve the tension. The challenge is too daunting for any single entity to address it effectively. Multiple entities (government, private sector, community, individuals) working together is the suggested path forward, as illustrated by these suggestions from survey participants:

“ I think we need to start working together as a society to fix these problems and these views because I feel like we shouldn't put one person in charge to solve issues for one assaulted group where we all need to come together to help solve the conflict.

“ I think, in the US, society as a whole needs to kind of band together to understand what they want and what they need from both the government and private businesses.

“ I personally think that, to resolve this conflict, you're going to need education and the government and social media to help resolve the issues that we have.

“ I think that if people are kind and they are not only thinking of themselves, but others, then they can help create laws or practices in our society that will benefit everyone, without sacrificing their own personal freedom to make choices. It really comes down to whether people are moral and live by a set of standards that keep them honest, so I think that more needs to go into building up a moral society that people can be tolerant of others and not feel that they have to fight against the system to be free. The system should support their freedoms, and everyone should be able to work together. If everyone has that desire, if we're all in it together and trying to work for the common good. It goes from the individual out to the society. Both have to be respected.

**In coming together, success hinges on these key questions:**

- Can policy makers and elected representatives recognize the declining relevance of a government mired by in-fighting along the party line and work across the aisle to best serve the people?
- Will the private sector speak up and articulate the values it shares with consumers? Can companies and brands take action where relevant to support those values?
- Can individuals embrace their biases and seek out (or at least be receptive to) a view of American life that significantly differs from their own? Will we be able to exercise individual freedom while being thoughtful, so as not to violate collective benefit?

Resolution of *the Individual Freedom vs. Collective Benefits* conflict will require a paradigm shift. It will require an understanding that many survey participants articulated: *collective benefits do not have to be at odds with individual freedom. One supports the other.* That's how we can aim to breakthrough this most critical paradox currently facing us as a nation.

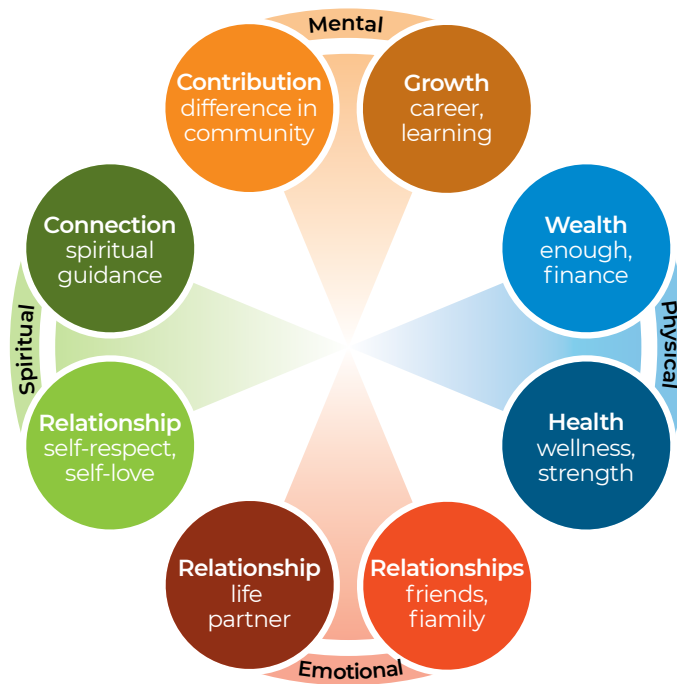


# Appendix A: Reference used in survey design

## Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



## Wheel of Life



## Appendix B: Approach to exploring the tensions

To comprehensively explore the paradoxes plaguing the American people, we needed a prompt (i.e., a list of tensions) to encourage thorough recall. But with such a deeply rooted and elusive topic of exploration, we needed to strike the right balance of sufficiently triggering recall without being so heavy-handed that we inadvertently influenced or limited respondents' thinking.

### To generate this prompt, we considered:

- The many different conflicts discussed on the news the past few years
- The challenges mentioned by our clients and external partners
- The external challenges and internal battles we've seen in our research respondents
- The personal tensions experienced or recognized by members of the Shapiro+Raj team

### To keep this list of tensions to a manageable size, we aimed to:

- Present broader conflict themes rather than specific, individual conflicts
- Limit list to those that are most salient, relevant, or speak to current conflicts
- Focus on tensions that can drive both internal and interpersonal conflict

Our final survey included the following list of tensions (below). Additionally, we provided respondents with the opportunity to share any other conflicts they see in themselves or the world around them; this input will be used to refine our stimuli for future waves of Breakthrough Paradox research.

Objective facts vs. Subjective 'truths':	Facts can be trusted and should be respected vs. Everything is subjective
Personalization vs. Privacy:	I like when products and services are personalized to my needs vs. I don't want products and services to know anything about me
Material pursuit vs. Experience-seeking:	I'd rather spend my money on material goods vs. I'd rather spend my money on experiences
America as a leader vs. America as a follower:	America should lead the way vs. America should take more of a back seat
Speeding up vs. Slowing down:	We should speed up, be more efficient vs. We should slow down, be more present
Taking Control vs. Offloading responsibility:	I want to be in charge / in control of my life vs. I'd rather someone else take the lead
Personal protection vs. Public safety:	I should be able to arm myself with whatever weapon I want vs. It is too dangerous to our society when everyone has access to all weapons
Clearly defined gender vs. Gender as a spectrum:	Humans can either be a man or a woman vs. Humans don't have to limit themselves to two genders
Individual freedom vs. Collective benefit:	I don't want to be told what to do vs. A society needs rules and cooperation to support everyone
Youth vs. Age:	Youth vs. Age: Youth and energy should be valued vs. Age and experience should be valued
Haves vs. Have-Nots:	It's inevitable that some have more and others have less vs. Closing the economic gap between Haves and Have-Nots is necessary.



## About Breakthrough Paradox

**Breakthrough Paradox** is Shapiro+Raj's signature thought leadership series, informed by insights and findings from a robust research study in the US. It aims to tackle these tensions head-on, and seeks to address some of the biggest questions of our time, such as:

- What is the essence of the "American Identity" in today's world? What lies beneath the paradoxical truths on the surface?
- How do these competing forces shape our attitudes and behaviors as consumers?
- How can brands meaningfully connect with and address stakeholders' needs?

This ongoing research also aims to measure and track the holistic "health" of our nation over time, focusing on key indexes such as overall wellbeing, level of unmet needs along Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and satisfaction across different aspects in the Wheel of Life. This gives the broad context and holistic lens to examine deeper tensions.

The ultimate objective is to help spark transformative outcomes for brands and businesses, and for our society at large. Insights and foresights into these paradoxical truths are invaluable in helping companies and brands more meaningfully connect and serve their customers and consumers. They can even help guide broader changes at the national level via collaboration with the public sector.

## ABOUT SHAPIRO+RAJ

Shapiro+Raj is one of the top 10 independent strategic research and insights consultancies in North America. It has been purposefully built to help clients spark transformative outcomes for their brands and businesses. Our mission is to help Fortune 10-500 clients find new and different ways to grow in today's continually reshaping landscape. We have integrated social science principles with behavioral economics capabilities and extensive brand marketing experience to creatively connect the dots between what consumers and customers think, feel, say, and do. The results are commercially viable insights that open new pathways for growth. We are one of the Top 25 Most Innovative Research Companies and a Top Ten Strategic Consultancy, according to Greenbook's 2021 Global GRIT report. We are also a Nationally Certified Minority Business Enterprise. Headquartered in Chicago, the firm has offices in New York, Minneapolis, and Pune, India.

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