

Episode 3: How well do you know what most Americans think?

Welcome to Philosophy for the Real World. I'm Professor Thomas White.

I explained in my first podcast that sometimes we'd be looking at topics that challenge conventional wisdom. This is one of those times. However, if I do too much of an introduction to today's topic, it will contain spoilers. So we're just going to jump right into things. A word of warning, however. You're going to be tempted to think I'm talking about an issue related to *politics*. I'm not. Keep that in mind and see if you can figure out what I *am* talking about.

First, I'm going to read two statements. Which comes closer to your view?

Americans are united and in agreement about the most important values, (or Americans are greatly divided when it comes to the most important values)?

Next, true or false? Most Americans identify as either Republican or Democrat.

Now, I'm going to read you a series of statements. Your job is to decide *when all of them* were true at the same time regarding what most Americans thought?

79% thought that immigration is a good thing for the country.<sup>1</sup>

76% had a great deal or fair amount of confidence in scientists to act in the public's best interests.<sup>2</sup>

75% of voters thought that undocumented immigrants fill jobs Americans don't want.<sup>3</sup>

69% thought marriage between same sex couples should be legal.<sup>4</sup>

64% thought that same-sex relations are morally acceptable.<sup>5</sup>

64% had a favorable view of Obamacare.<sup>6</sup>

64% would be willing to have solar panel fields in their community to combat climate change.<sup>7</sup>

63% thought abortion should be legal in all or most cases.<sup>8</sup>

60% would be willing to have wind turbines in their community to combat climate change.<sup>9</sup>

58% thought openly transgender men and women should be allowed to serve in the military.<sup>10</sup>

58% of Americans (64% of women) want stricter gun laws.<sup>11</sup>

When were all of those statements [regarding majority approval on issues related to immigration, abortion, marriage equality, trust in science, stricter gun laws, addressing climate change, and Obamacare] true at the same time regarding what *most* Americans thought?

Odds are you'd say the last time we saw such agreement was before 2016. Maybe you think these numbers are from during the Biden Administration. But you'd be wrong. *Those numbers are from the last couple of years. In essence, today.* And those numbers come from reputable, objective sources like Gallup and Pew Research, so don't think they're from ideological sources with an agenda.

Listen to the figures again, in case you weren't paying close enough attention.

79% thought that immigration is a good thing for the country.<sup>12</sup> (2025)

76% had a great deal or fair amount of confidence in scientists to act in the public's best interests.<sup>13</sup> (2024)

75% of voters thought that undocumented immigrants fill jobs Americans don't want.<sup>14</sup> (2024)

69% thought marriage between same sex couples should be legal.<sup>15</sup> (2024)

64% thought that same-sex relations are morally acceptable.<sup>16</sup> (2024)

64% had a favorable view of Obamacare.<sup>17</sup> (2025)

64% would be willing to have solar panel fields in their community to combat climate change.<sup>18</sup> (2024)

63% thought abortion should be legal in all or most cases.<sup>19</sup> (2024)

60% would be willing to have wind turbines in their community to combat climate change.<sup>20</sup> (2024)

58% thought openly transgender men and women should be allowed to serve in the military.<sup>21</sup> (2025)

58% of Americans (64% of women) want stricter gun laws.<sup>22</sup> (2024)

So, on immigration, abortion, marriage equality, trust in science, stricter gun laws, addressing climate change, Obamacare—*today, a majority of Americans agree*. Let me repeat that. On immigration, abortion, marriage equality, trust in science, stricter gun laws, addressing climate change, Obamacare—*today, a majority of Americans agree*. And we aren't talking about a razor thin majority. We're talking about roughly 60 to 80%—60 to 80% of Americans who support what can reasonably be labeled liberal or progressive attitudes.

Now, let's go back to the question we started with—whether Americans are unified or divided on our most important values. 80% of Americans said we are

*greatly divided*.<sup>23</sup> You probably said that too. However, as you gather, that's at best misleading.

Unquestionably, Americans disagree on values. And whether the voices are from the left or right, the disagreement is loud and angry.

For example, those Americans who want to ban all abortions are passionate, vocal, and very active politically. However, they represent only about 10% of the population, versus the more than 60% who think abortion should be legal in all or most cases.<sup>24</sup> Now it's true that the people who represent the extremes at each end of the spectrum concerning abortion are "greatly divided." But is that really an accurate description of *the nation as a whole*? I don't think so. The *majority* of Americans agree.

And this is the case with any so-called 'divisive issue' we would look at. The fact is that the majority of Americans (60-80%) support center-left values.

And now let's go back to our political party, true/false statement: "Virtually all Americans identify as either Republican or Democrat." Every poll I see about where Americans stand on issues is reported as Republican/Democrat—Red/Blue. Sometimes the breakdown is Republican and Republican-leaning//Democrat and Democrat-leaning. But still: two groups: red/ blue.

The problem, however, is that this too is *misleading*.

Because the truth is that less than a third of Americans (about 27%) identify as Republican, and about same—about 27%—identify as Democrat, while the rest (45%) identify as Independent. Also, over the last 15 years, the percentage of Americans who identify as Independent has increased—45% is a new high.<sup>25</sup> So, the single biggest group in terms of how Americans identify themselves politically is Independents—just shy of 50% of the population. Each of the two parties can claim

only about half of that. We aren't really a red/blue country, then. It's more like red/purple/blue—with the nearly 50% purple being the largest single group. Let me repeat that. We are not a red/blue country. We're a red/*purple*/blue country—with the nearly 50% purple being the largest single group.

So, what have we seen so far today? It seems to me that the evidence suggests the following. Most Americans are non-ideological pragmatists who have a live-and-let-live attitude. Most of us are willing to tolerate significant differences on important social, political, and ethical issues. Almost half of us prefer to identify as politically Independent, far more than those who align with one party of the other. Every day, average Americans help strangers in trouble—even risking their lives to do so—without worrying about their politics. *However*, the dominant narrative in our culture is that we're two diametrically opposed tribes locked in an ideological struggle with the aim of destroying each other.

Why, then, do we think we're in the middle of a fierce culture war? Isn't a more accurate account that the United States is a *majority* moderate/liberal country—a country that was consistently moving in that direction from about 1960 until about 10 years ago—but with a very vocal and politically active *minority* trying to steer the country in a more conservative direction and impose their views on the majority?

There are a number of reasons about why and how this is done. Today I'm going to identify just *one*. I'll get into others in later episodes.

Here it is. No matter where we get our news and information—ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, CNN, MSNOW, the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, X, Facebook, 'influencers,' other internet sites—we are given the same picture. We're a nation sharply, perhaps fatally divided in two. And it's not as

though we're having polite, mutually respectful disagreements while trying to find a way to live with each other as neighbors who just see things differently. No. We're told we're enemies. We're at each other's throats. We don't want to live and let live, we want to destroy each other.

But as we've seen, that's not true. The majority of Americans *agree* on the so-called divisive issues.

Why, then, is the story that the entire information/opinion industry tells us is that we're two tribes at each other's throats? Why isn't the picture we're given at least something more nuanced and accurate? The answer: because all those sources of information and opinion are businesses. They're businesses. They aren't public service organizations whose primary mission is to inform the public. They're *businesses* whose *legally mandated* objective is to maximize profits for their owners. And, in the last 20 years, this industry discovered that even if the *two angry tribes at each other's throats* narrative is false, it is more profitable than something more accurate but less dramatic.

And be sure to understand that any "influencer" or "internet personality" is also a *business*. Whether we're talking about a large corporation or a single influencer monetizing a website, Facebook, Instagram, X, Spotify or anything similar, it's a *business*. And *two warring tribes* is the most profitable narrative for all those businesses.

Now remember what I said at the beginning of this podcast. I'm not talking about politics here—although there are obviously political implications from what's going on. I'm talking about *business*. And what a *philosophical* perspective shows us is that we have a significant *ethical* issue here. In fact, I see this as the most overlooked

*business ethics* issue today. Every day, an entire industry (from large corporations to individual columnists and influencers) gives us a largely false view of the state of the country because it is *more profitable* than a more accurate picture. And this isn't an accident based just on what's "newsworthy." Companies and individuals in this industry do this because that's *the business plan*—to put it as plainly as possible, to maximize profits by getting and keeping people's attention by lying to them in a way that makes them *afraid* of each other.

And when I look at this as a philosopher, I see a problem about businesses trying to manipulate us for profit, rather than respecting people's freedom to make their own decisions. And they're doing that by *compromising the truth*—whether it be lies, half-truths, or exaggerations. Remember, the *decisions* we make about what we do and think are based on what we *know to be true* or *to believe is true*. If someone's telling us lies, half-truths, or exaggerations, it's to get us to do something we probably wouldn't do if we knew the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Now, ask yourself if you've made decisions based on the two warring tribes narrative. If so, were your decisions based on what was actually *true*—or what you were *told* is true? Is there any chance you were manipulated? Think about it. Because questions about *truth* and *knowledge* aren't theoretical and speculative, they're very, very *practical*.

A claim like this—that we're being lied to, turned against each other, and manipulated for profit—is obviously going to take some explaining, and I'll go into detail about different aspects of this issue in future episodes. In the meantime, I just want you to think about it. But to the extent that we can identify some practical take-away, it's probably that *we're all being played*.

Thanks for listening. I'm Professor Thomas White, and this has been philosophy for the real world.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692522/surge-concern-immigration-abated.aspx> Surge in U.S. Concern About Immigration Has Abated

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2024/11/14/public-trust-in-scientists-and-views-on-their-role-in-policymaking/> Americans' trust in scientists in 2024 | Pew Research Center

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/10/21/most-us-voters-say-immigrants-no-matter-their-legal-status-mostly-take-jobs-citizens-dont-want/> Trump, Harris voters mostly say immigrants fill jobs US citizens don't want | Pew Research Center

<sup>4</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/646202/sex-relations-marriage-supported.aspx> Same-Sex Relations, Marriage Still Supported by Most in U.S.

<sup>5</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/646202/sex-relations-marriage-supported.aspx> Same-Sex Relations, Marriage Still Supported by Most in U.S.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.kff.org/affordable-care-act/5-charts-about-public-opinion-on-the-affordable-care-act/> 5 Charts About Public Opinion on the Affordable Care Act | KFF

<sup>7</sup> <https://epic.uchicago.edu/insights/2024-poll-americans-views-on-climate-change-and-policy-in-12-charts/> 2024 Poll: Americans' Views on Climate Change and Policy in 12 Charts - EPIC

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/05/13/broad-public-support-for-legal-abortion-persists-2-years-after-dobbs/> Most Americans Support Legal Abortion 2 Years After Roe Was Overturned | Pew Research Center

<sup>9</sup> <https://epic.uchicago.edu/insights/2024-poll-americans-views-on-climate-change-and-policy-in-12-charts/> 2024 Poll: Americans' Views on Climate Change and Policy in 12 Charts - EPIC

<sup>10</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/656534/openly-transgender-troops-backed-reduced-majority.aspx> Openly Transgender Troops Backed by Reduced Majority in U.S.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/24/key-facts-about-americans-and-guns/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692522/surge-concern-immigration-abated.aspx> Surge in U.S. Concern About Immigration Has Abated

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2024/11/14/public-trust-in-scientists-and-views-on-their-role-in-policymaking/> Americans' trust in scientists in 2024 | Pew Research Center

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/10/21/most-us-voters-say-immigrants-no-matter-their-legal-status-mostly-take-jobs-citizens-dont-want/> Trump, Harris voters mostly say immigrants fill jobs US citizens don't want | Pew Research Center

<sup>15</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/646202/sex-relations-marriage-supported.aspx> Same-Sex Relations, Marriage Still Supported by Most in U.S.

<sup>16</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/646202/sex-relations-marriage-supported.aspx> Same-Sex Relations, Marriage Still Supported by Most in U.S.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.kff.org/affordable-care-act/5-charts-about-public-opinion-on-the-affordable-care-act/> 5 Charts About Public Opinion on the Affordable Care Act | KFF

<sup>18</sup> <https://epic.uchicago.edu/insights/2024-poll-americans-views-on-climate-change-and-policy-in-12-charts/> 2024 Poll: Americans' Views on Climate Change and Policy in 12 Charts - EPIC

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<sup>20</sup> <https://epic.uchicago.edu/insights/2024-poll-americans-views-on-climate-change-and-policy-in-12-charts/> 2024 Poll: Americans' Views on Climate Change and Policy in 12 Charts - EPIC

<sup>21</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/656534/openly-transgender-troops-backed-reduced-majority.aspx> Openly Transgender Troops Backed by Reduced Majority in U.S.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/24/key-facts-about-americans-and-guns/>

<sup>23</sup> [Americans Agree Nation Is Divided on Key Values](https://news.gallup.com/poll/650828/americans-agree-nation-divided-key-values.aspx) <https://news.gallup.com/poll/650828/americans-agree-nation-divided-key-values.aspx>

<sup>24</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/321143/americans-stand-abortion.aspx>

<sup>25</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/700499/new-high-identify-political-independents.aspx>