

**Reframing Civics Education**  
**for the 21st Century:**  
**Leveraging Constructive Intergroup**  
**Dialogue to Combat Polarization**

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**Abstract**

The 21st century is marked by escalating political polarization and a concerning rise in youth disengagement from civic processes, driven by digital divides and an erosion of trust in democratic institutions. While affective polarization fuels intergroup animosity, research reveals a crucial paradox: Americans drastically overestimate actual ideological differences and retain a strong desire for genuine connection. Traditional civics education has largely failed to equip young people with the practical dialogue skills needed for this complex landscape, highlighting an urgent need to reframe civics learning towards experiential, skill-based approaches. This paper argues that effectively combating youth polarization requires a new civics education strategy centered on constructive intergroup dialogue, emphasizing “deep listening” and leveraging the unique efficacy of peer-to-peer facilitation through experiential workshops. “The BridgeUSA Way” exemplifies this solution, utilizing a youth-led, peer-to-peer model in its nationwide chapters and specialized workshops to cultivate essential dialogue skills, reduce affective polarization, and foster a more engaged, inclusive civics culture.

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### **Acknowledgments**

This paper represents one of my final acts as BridgeUSA's inaugural Learning and Development Manager. It is a culmination of my efforts in developing our peer-centric dialogue workshop approach and curriculum, and serves as a final case for the effectiveness of peer-to-peer dialogic skill-building and experiential learning workshops in reducing political polarization among young people. My dedication to youth-led constructive dialogue began with leading a BridgeUSA chapter at the University of Pittsburgh during my undergraduate studies. As I transition out of BridgeUSA, my commitment to championing this vital work will continue. I am profoundly grateful to the entire BridgeUSA team for their unwavering support of me and my work over the years, particularly to Manu Meel and Ross Irwin, the organization's co-founders. My sincere appreciation also extends to all the students and community leaders whose invaluable experiences underpin the reflections presented here.

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## **I. The Plague of Polarization: How It Is Affecting Young People**

### **A Generation of Disengaged and Disaffected Youth**

Despite their potential for unparalleled impact, a generation of young Americans, particularly Generation Z (born 1997-2012), finds itself increasingly disconnected from the foundational civic structures intended to foster their engagement. Disengagement and disaffection now characterize their social landscape. This cohort's formative experiences include navigating a post-9/11 world, the omnipresence of digital and social media, a highly polarized political climate dominated by figures like Barack Obama and Donald Trump, and the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, these youth navigate a landscape where partisan rhetoric and online echo chambers stifle nuanced discussion, exacerbating societal polarization and discouraging cross-ideological dialogue. This environment fosters a growing sense of disillusionment with traditional civic engagement, as meaningful participation is often perceived as futile or even hostile, leading to further detachment from the political process.

The younger generations of American society have been burdened by a succession of unprecedented events. These formative experiences and resultant shifts in interaction styles have significantly reduced opportunities for meaningful in-person engagement, diminishing social capital as Gen Z increasingly builds connections through social media. Despite declining voter and civic participation, a silver lining is that Gen Z demonstrates a keen awareness of their disaffection and largely believes the world ought to change (Twenge, 2023).

### **Affective Polarization: A Cause for Civic Apathy**

Fundamentally, a thriving democracy hinges on an informed populace capable of robust debate and discussion on matters impacting their lives. Democracy is an inherently deliberative

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process, and assuring its strength requires continuous responsible discourse taking place among citizens and government representatives. While this is intuitive, we also are keenly aware that there is growing partisan polarization occurring that is pervading all aspects of American society. These ideological rifts have created a “middle-way vacuum,” where differences in belief are increasingly swept to either side of the ideological spectrum. This trend is largely driven by *affective polarization*; citizens increasingly hold animosity and distrust toward the opposing party, resulting in an unwillingness to socialize across ideological lines (Iyengar et al., 2019).

A 2020 Pew Research Survey vividly illustrates this polarization: both Biden and Trump supporters (89% and 90% respectively) believed that the opposing candidate's election would cause irreparable harm to the country. Yet, paradoxically, an overwhelming majority of these same respondents (86% of Trump/lean Trump; 89% of Biden/lean Biden) agreed that their preferred candidate should prioritize the concerns of “all Americans, even if it means disappointing some of his supporters” (Dimock & Wike, 2020). This highlights that despite increasing negative views of the opposing party, Americans still substantially seek common ground.

Public trust in American governmental institutions has recently hit record lows, with only 24% of Americans holding overall trust in government. This decline is starkly partisan: among Democrats, trust rose to 36% (+24) in 2021 from 12% in 2020 under President Trump, while among Republicans, it fell to just 9% (-27) from 36% in 2020. Gen Z shows the least trust, at 17% (Pew Research Center, 2021). Thus, while public trust is universally low, partisanship and strict party loyalty severely exacerbate its erosion. This environment fosters growing civic apathy, particularly among Gen Z, who feel disengaged and disaffected by a political process marked by historic polarization. Consequently, youth generations largely neglect or unwillingly

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participate in civic life, further hindered by a lack of meaningful in-person opportunities for constructive engagement across differences.

### **An Exaggeration of Differences**

While political partisanship and polarization are undoubtedly on the rise, there's a significant misperception regarding the actual level of division in American politics. Research from 2020 indicates that Democrats and Republicans harbor considerable dislike and dehumanization toward the opposing party. However, both sides drastically overestimate the extent to which the other group dislikes and dehumanizes them, with these overestimations being about double the reality (Moore-Berg et al., 2020). Researchers also found in the same study that the perceived differences on a single issue are also exaggerated by Americans by a factor of two (Moore-Berg & Pasek, 2020), contributing to the overestimation of real division.

Despite the apparent “middle-way vacuum,” Americans actually hold more nuanced positions than often assumed. We share more political common ground than we realize. The root of our pervasive tribalistic partisanship lies in our struggle to reconcile and appreciate our differences. While reconciliation seems impossible when citizens perceive outgroup members as dehumanizing and distrustful, a clear sign of affective polarization, this overestimation of differences offers hope. Affective polarization may be less entrenched than perceived, potentially reversible through open dialogue that uncovers shared values and reveals fewer actual differences, fostering genuine understanding of cross-difference viewpoints. This presents a pivotal opportunity to address polarization at its root; it underscores the need for a new civics education strategy that leverages dialogue to reduce both perceived and real affective polarization.

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## II. The Need to Reframe Civics Education: Novel Approaches

### Civic Engagement Deserts

With polarization at near all-time highs and public trust in government at all-time lows, civics education emerges as both a potential solution and a contributing factor due to its antiquated state. Civics education in public schools currently has little federal involvement, while many researchers describe “civic deserts” appearing in the United States, where some schools and teachers are abandoning civics education in favor of more seemingly practical curricula when it comes to mandated testing, such as math and reading (Winthrop, 2020). This parallels a steady decline in civic connectedness and social capital since the 1970s, evidenced by decreasing involvement in various community organizations (Putnam, 1995). Recent data indicates that “civic deserts,” characterized by minimal opportunities for community dialogue, impact a significant portion of youth, with an estimated 60% of rural youth and 30% of urban/suburban youth residing in such areas (Atwell et al., 2017).

A review of civics education literature from the past ten years revealed a significant disparity. Out of 648 studies, 68% examined civic learning curriculum and institutional practices. However, only 19% concentrated on developing civic skills and capacity. This discrepancy highlights differing approaches to civics education and an overall neglect in fostering civic capabilities. The study also found that only 2.9% of the studies focused on marginalized youth, who are increasingly found in these civics education deserts and largely disaffected by society. This lack of research on marginalized youth, coupled with their concerning low civic engagement (Levinson, 2012), underscores a systemic issue, particularly as most civics education curricula typically avoid critical and inclusive lenses (Fitzgerald et al., 2021).



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Additionally, a study by the Center for American Progress reveals a critical gap in state civics education. While nearly all states cover fundamental aspects of American government and politics, none mandate experiential learning or civic problem-solving activities within their curricula (Shapiro & Brown, 2017). This omission is concerning, particularly given the substantial body of research that emphasizes the effectiveness of experiential learning in civics education

Significant psychological and political science research supports civics education as an effective vehicle for building civic capacity and increasing civic awareness and understanding, with substantial evidence linking it to reduced affective polarization (Clark, 2023). However, this link may be muted as individuals age and develop stronger partisan social identities, necessitating a new type of civics education. Targeting civics education with a skill-building curriculum and intergroup dialogue experiences, particularly for adolescents and young adults, can effectively mitigate rising affective polarization and foster more complex civic attitudes that promote cross-partisan interaction.

Alarmingly low youth voter turnout, declining civic engagement, and widespread distrust in government signal a growing disaffection with American politics among young people. This trend coincides with rising affective polarization and a diminished focus on civics education in schools. Bolstering civic capacity in today's youth is therefore crucial to mitigating future polarization.

### **Proposed Alternatives to Civics Education**

Numerous “re-imaginings” of civics education have been proposed. Civics education as a matter of policy faces a critical debate: should it aim to instill a specific civic ideology, or should it simply provide students with the tools to formulate their own perspectives? While both parties

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claim to advocate for the latter, their rhetoric often hints at a preference for the former (Packer, 2021). Partisan approaches are evident: Democrats are inclined to underscore historical injustices such as slavery and the Native American genocide, while Republicans lean towards promoting traditional social values and patriotic policy. Although establishing a national civics education curriculum is politically fraught due to partisan disagreements, a potential solution might involve federal funding for a year-long program, with significant portions of the content tailored to state preferences (Hess & Rice, 2020).

Proposals also exist for reconceptualizing 21st-century civic learning, potentially garnering broader support and widening access to civics education. Action civics, or experiential learning, has gained traction in classrooms as a method for closing the civic engagement gap and providing hands-on learning (Andes et al., 2021). This collaborative approach involves students working within their communities through analysis, issue selection, research, planning, action, and reflection (Fitzgerald & Aloni, 2017). Such hands-on 'issue-ownership' familiarizes students with community challenges beyond theoretical learning; research supports its effectiveness in increasing youth civic capacity and volunteerism (Pope, 2011).

Another proposed pathway for increasing civic engagement in youth has been to reconceptualize the *products* of civic participation and engagement. Often supported by the left, creating protest art and participating in social movements are considered avenues of civic participation that expose youth to political processes beyond simply building civic efficacy. These more complex outcomes of civic participation have also been touted as solutions to engaging with marginalized youth who would otherwise not have access to civics education in their communities (Ballard et al., 2016).

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### **A Better Way to Improve Civics Education**

Many older millennials and preceding generations received civics education, learning what it means to be civically engaged. This solution, therefore, largely focuses on children in their formative, teenage, and early adult years. A new approach to civics education should equip younger generations with tools to engage across differences in a deliberative democracy before forming fixed civic dispositions, thereby promoting understanding and increasing intergroup dialogue—key solutions to affective polarization (Power, 2008).

The primary issue we are seeking to address is the increasing trend of affective polarization within the country which contributes to an antagonistic political culture, segregated communities, a rise of call-out culture, diminished empathy, decreased public trust in government, and reduced civic capacity/social capital. Despite some exposure to civics education (albeit lacking an experiential component), young people have developed an increasing inability to constructively discuss political issues without alienating those with differing views. What is needed is a new type of civics education that instills the civic dispositions and skills necessary to engage across differences, offering opportunities to practice these learned skills in spaces where effective cross-difference dialogue can flourish.

One framework, developed by CivXNow, directly addresses these goals. It guides the creation of new civics education curricula to provide not only knowledge and skills but also the experiential practice necessary for democratic citizenship in the digital age. This research-grounded framework has three components: First, students build civic knowledge by understanding government processes, political institutions, parties, rights, and history. Second, they develop civic values and dispositions by appreciating civil discourse, freedom of expression, and engaging with diverse perspectives. Third, students gain civic agency through

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active behaviors like voting, attending meetings, writing officials, volunteering, and facilitating cross-difference discussions (iCivics, 2021).

Such a revitalized civics education curriculum could effectively achieve its core objectives, ultimately mitigating affective polarization. This would be accomplished by not only imparting the essential skills for civic participation but also by actively engaging in and normalizing such practices within our society. This would foster improved communication through constructive dialogue across diverse perspectives. Crucially, an immediate solution exists without waiting for governmental reforms. We can bridge divides right now through voluntary engagement with students on these civics principles, emphasizing experiential dialogue to foster understanding. The following section will detail this solution.

### **III. An Immediate Solution: Bridging through Experiential Dialogue**

#### **An Undeniable Yearning for Connection**

The plague of polarization presents as a paradox: while the data is undeniable that we are living through the most polarized time in American society and viewpoint diversity is decreasing through ideological sweeping, it is also true that we are greatly overestimating our differences (as shown in Section I). Furthermore, 7 out of 10 American citizens believe they have a responsibility to connect with others across lines of difference, and 2 out of 3 believe they can learn something valuable from such connections. Though divisiveness persists, and we feel more separated than ever, a clear desire for cross-difference connection exists. Surprisingly, the primary obstacle is not unwillingness, but a simple absence of opportunities (More in Common, 2025). We consistently crave these connections, yet struggle to find avenues for them.

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Heterodox Academy's Campus Expression Survey found that while over 60% of students feel campus climates stifle their expression of beliefs, an overwhelming 90% believe colleges should foster respectful interactions between individuals with differing viewpoints (Jones et al., 2024). This reveals a clear dissonance: students desire respectful dialogue but perceive current campus environments as hindering it. This highlights a critical need for facilitated spaces and skill-building initiatives that bridge this gap, empowering students to engage constructively across ideological divides.

### **Leveraging Skill Building and Experiential Dialogue**

While elements like rigid two-party structures, closed primaries, gerrymandering, intense ideologies, and biased media outlets are often cited as fueling the polarization paradox (Iyengar et al., 2019; Fiorina, 2017), this paper focuses on practical strategies to quickly build connections across divides. Given that new approaches to civics education can now address the immediate consequences of polarization, the emphasis here will be on easily adoptable solutions to lessen polarization, particularly among young people.

Cross-difference (inter-group) dialogue has been repeatedly proven effective in reducing affective polarization compared to homogeneous (intra-group) dialogue (Levendusky & Stecula, 2021). Similarly, the Contact Hypothesis, that positive interactions between different groups improve intergroup relations and reduce prejudice, has been affirmed multiple times to reduce affective polarization (Bond et al., 2018; Paluck et al., 2019). It is therefore vital to immediately provide opportunities for positive, cross-difference intergroup dialogue.

Experiential, skill-building workshops effectively cultivate civic dispositions for constructive engagement and offer opportunities for cross-difference interaction. For instance, a study of Braver Angels' Red/Blue Workshops at four U.S. universities, emphasizing skill

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practice and reciprocal group reflection, demonstrated significant reductions in both implicit and explicit affective polarization and increased attitudinal receptiveness for depolarization. This research suggests these immediate interventions enhance empathy and information assimilation about outgroups (Baron et al., 2021). Consequently, skill-building workshops with an experiential component can effectively foster empathy and understanding of those outside one's immediate group.

Effective strategies exist to bridge attitudinal and ideological divides. Notably, deep listening significantly enhances empathy and comprehension of opposing viewpoints (Itzhakov et al., 2024). Often, listeners formulate responses instead of fully absorbing a speaker's message; thus, deep listening, integrated with other constructive dialogue techniques, promotes receptivity to depolarization methods and fosters comfort during disagreements. Workshops focused on developing and practicing these skills through experiential dialogue across differences effectively reduce affective polarization.

Quick intervention workshops have proven effective in reducing the impact of affective polarization, marking a significant shift from traditional civics education programs that often lack experiential dialogue. For these experiential learning workshops to be truly effective, peer-to-peer facilitation is a key pedagogical element, particularly among youth. This bottom-up approach empowers students, fostering agency throughout the process.

### **The Peer-to-Peer Approach**

Peer-to-peer approaches in dialogue workshops and trainings are effective motivators for meaningful participant buy-in and understanding of the material, especially for students in higher education (Stigmar, 2016; Topping, 2005). Employing a “bottom-up” peer facilitator strategy for teaching and practicing dialogue participation and facilitation skills prioritizes learner-driven

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engagement, contrasting with “top-down” methods directed by faculty or administrators. By adopting a peer-to-peer approach, with youth leading workshops, young participants find it easier to connect with the facilitator and the skills being taught. This fosters more meaningful group discussions and active participation through the experiential learning component. One study, analyzing peer-to-peer discussion of test questions in a college-level psychology class, found that questions of all difficulty levels were answered more accurately after peer-to-peer discussion, and the interaction improved confidence and understanding of the material (Tullis & Goldstone, 2020).

Peer-to-peer learning offers several key benefits, primarily through five subprocesses identified by Topping and Ehly (2001). These include: (1) organization and engagement, via immediate and frequent feedback; (2) cognitive conflict, stimulating deeper engagement and collaborative construction; (3) scaffolding and error management, benefiting both learners needing support and those providing it; (4) communication, enabling practice of essential skills like explaining and active listening; and (5) affective components, such as motivation, accountability, modeling, ownership, and self-disclosure, all facilitated in a trusting, non-authoritative peer environment essential for sustained engagement.

To effectively decrease affective polarization in young people, dialogue workshops must employ a peer-to-peer model. This method is crucial for both developing constructive civic dialogue skills and providing practical cross-difference dialogue experiences. By integrating these components, the workshops foster meaningful skill-building and discussion.

### **The BridgeUSA Way - A Story of Success**

Numerous success stories attest to the effectiveness of peer-led dialogue facilitation and skill-building workshop interventions. At BridgeUSA, a nonprofit founded in 2017 where I

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served as Learning and Development Manager, our operations are deeply rooted in a peer-to-peer approach. This is evident in our development of student-led dialogue workshops and through a nationwide network of student-led chapters, where campus leaders regularly facilitate cross-difference dialogues. These discussions adhere to specific norms that encourage deep listening and focus on addressing statements rather than individuals, fostering positive engagement and preventing inattentive listening. This model effectively engages disengaged and disaffected university youth in a dialogic, communicative form of civic engagement that values diverse viewpoints and prioritizes people over partisanship.

BridgeUSA also offers a series of dialogue participation and facilitation workshops to reach students beyond its chapter network. These peer-to-peer activities enhance communication and facilitation skills, fostering civic engagement by embedding practical dialogue into intergroup interaction, applicable both during the workshop and within participants' own campuses and communities. BridgeUSA is unique among major U.S. nonprofits in that it is pioneering well-grounded interventions to reduce polarization, leveraging youth-led, peer-to-peer intergroup dialogue to build essential participatory and facilitatory skills through experiential learning.

Initial quantitative evidence from a BridgeUSA dialogue workshop at St. Olaf College in Minnesota indicates a statistically significant positive change in participants' tendencies toward valuing listening and demonstrating intellectual humility post-workshop. This outcome was assessed using a modified Social Cohesion Impact Measure, which evaluates participant dispositions related to valuing listening, intellectual humility, affective polarization, perceived threat, and respecting conversation norms (Civic Health Project, 2025). Although all five measures showed positive movement, due to the workshop's modest sample size, only the changes in valuing listening and intellectual humility reached statistical significance



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(BridgeUSA, 2025). These patterns are expected to become more pronounced with further data collection.

The “BridgeUSA Way,” with its emphasis on peer-to-peer learning and experiential workshops, is uniquely designed to cultivate the essential dispositions of deep listening. Our workshop interventions actively foster the desire to truly understand others, instill a profound sense of care for diverse perspectives, and create structured environments where participants learn to acknowledge power dynamics and differences that shape communication. Furthermore, by engaging with challenging topics in a facilitated, safe space, students develop the courage necessary to listen even when confronted with difficult or divergent viewpoints. This direct cultivation of deep listening skills through our workshops provides a robust foundation for promoting genuine dialogue, reducing affective polarization, and building sustainable civic engagement.

### **Looking Ahead**

Political polarization, particularly its *affective* type, has taken root not just in American politics but also in society, actively driving a wedge between groups, most notably between liberals and conservatives. Our institutions have largely failed, leaving younger generations to bear the brunt of affective polarization's consequences. Defined by both their resilience and disengagement from civic life, these generations risk complete alienation from the civic and political process, and ultimately, from democracy itself.

For young people, polarization is caused by disengagement and civic apathy, which stem from a lack of civic engagement opportunities and intergroup dialogue. Through such dialogue, they can reduce negative perceptions of the “outgroup” and mitigate the “echo chamber” effect of the “ingroup”.

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Civics education has largely declined in America over recent decades, leading to *civic deserts* where youth have few opportunities for civic engagement or cross-difference conversation. Existing civics education often neglects experiential learning and intergroup dialogue—crucial skills for democratic participation and avoiding partisan “sweeping.” This paper has argued for reframing civics education to fit 21st-century America, a nation where exaggerated divisions persist despite a yearning for connection. This underscores the need for immediate interventions that equip young people with the skills and dispositions for cross-difference dialogue, practiced in experiential learning environments. Finally, a peer-to-peer approach to teaching dialogue participation and facilitation skills is essential for young people, as it instills confidence and evokes more meaningful engagement.

This paper concludes with a description of BridgeUSA's dialogic workshops, an immediate youth-centric intervention that precisely addresses the need to reduce affective polarization among young people and foster a more civically engaged life. The BridgeUSA workshops have shown initial qualitative and quantitative success, a trend expected to continue as more peer-based dialogue workshops are offered nationwide. Until another provider can offer this specific type of workshop, BridgeUSA interventions represent a unique and well-researched remedy to combat youth affective polarization in the United States.

While the stated aim of this paper has been achieved, the path ahead remains uncertain. Affective polarization continues to pervade all aspects of society, leading to divisions between neighbors and within families solely based on political beliefs. This is unsustainable for a strong democracy, especially with public trust in government institutions at an all-time low. Polarization presents two possible futures: a self-reinforcing cycle of increase, or a pendulum that has reached its apex; however, existing data provides no clear indication of either pathway (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). Regardless of this uncertainty, the work to combat polarization is of immediate and

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undeniable importance. As citizens, we bear a collective responsibility to address its root causes and take meaningful action wherever it exists. The most accessible and impactful starting point is to engage in dialogue today with someone you disagree with. Whether it leads to changed minds or new perspectives, such conversations fundamentally deepen our understanding of the world and affirm our shared humanity amidst diverse opinions, forming the bedrock of a more resilient and functional civil society.

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