

History In A Time of Division

A PATH FORWARD TO DEEPER ENGAGEMENT IN AMERICA'S STORIES

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BRAND FEDERATION

MARCH 11, 2023



How can we better understand the polarization that prevents our fellow citizens from fully engaging with history?

How can we create an environment that leads to the constructive and courageous conversations that move us all forward?

The Research



QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

N=2,407

Age 35+

50% with kids at home/50% without
25% each White, Black, Hispanic, Asian or
other ethnicity
50% Eastern Seaboard/50% other markets

Interested in American History

Fielded July, 2022

The Research



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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Virtual Communities

Group 1: Black/African American
Group 2: Republican/Lean-Republican
Group 3: Democrat/Lean-Democrat

Age 35+

Mix of genders, kids/no kids
Mix of Eastern Seaboard and the rest of the
country

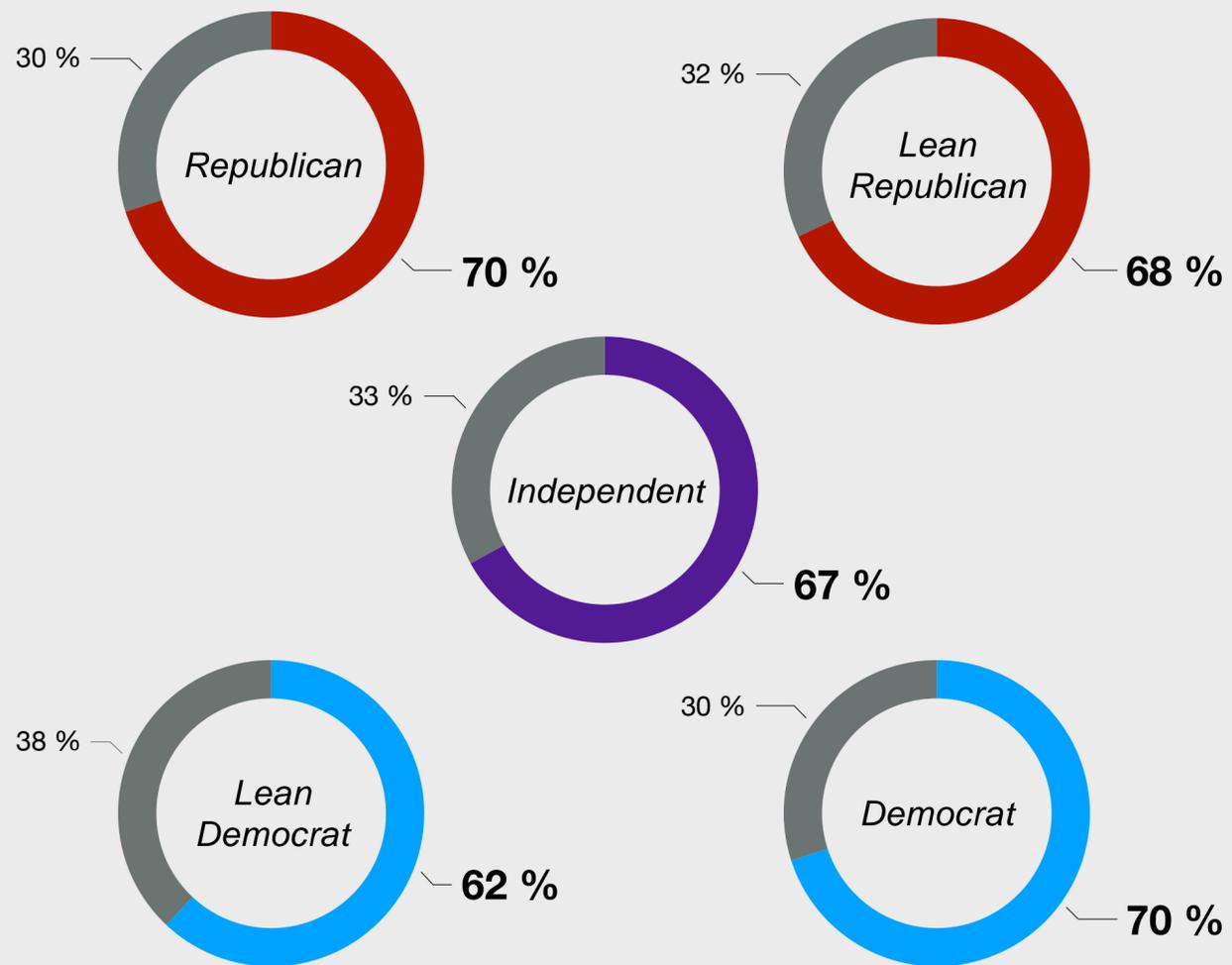
Interested in Colonial America Era
and/or Revolutionary War Era

Conducted August 30-September 1, 2022

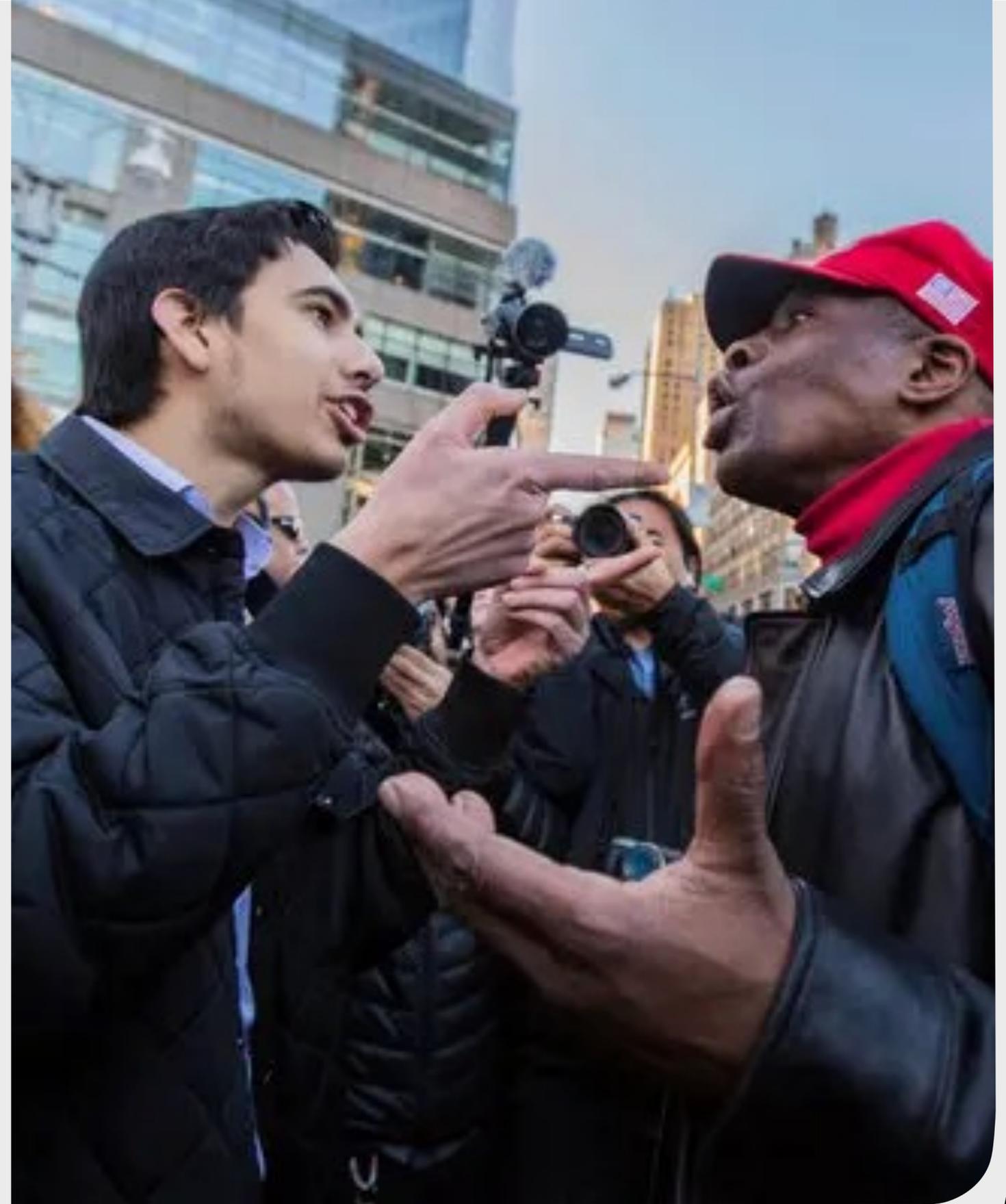
The State of the Conversation

HISTORY HAS BECOME A HOT-BUTTON

“Sometimes the debate around American History makes me feel frustrated or angry.” (% strongly agree/agree)



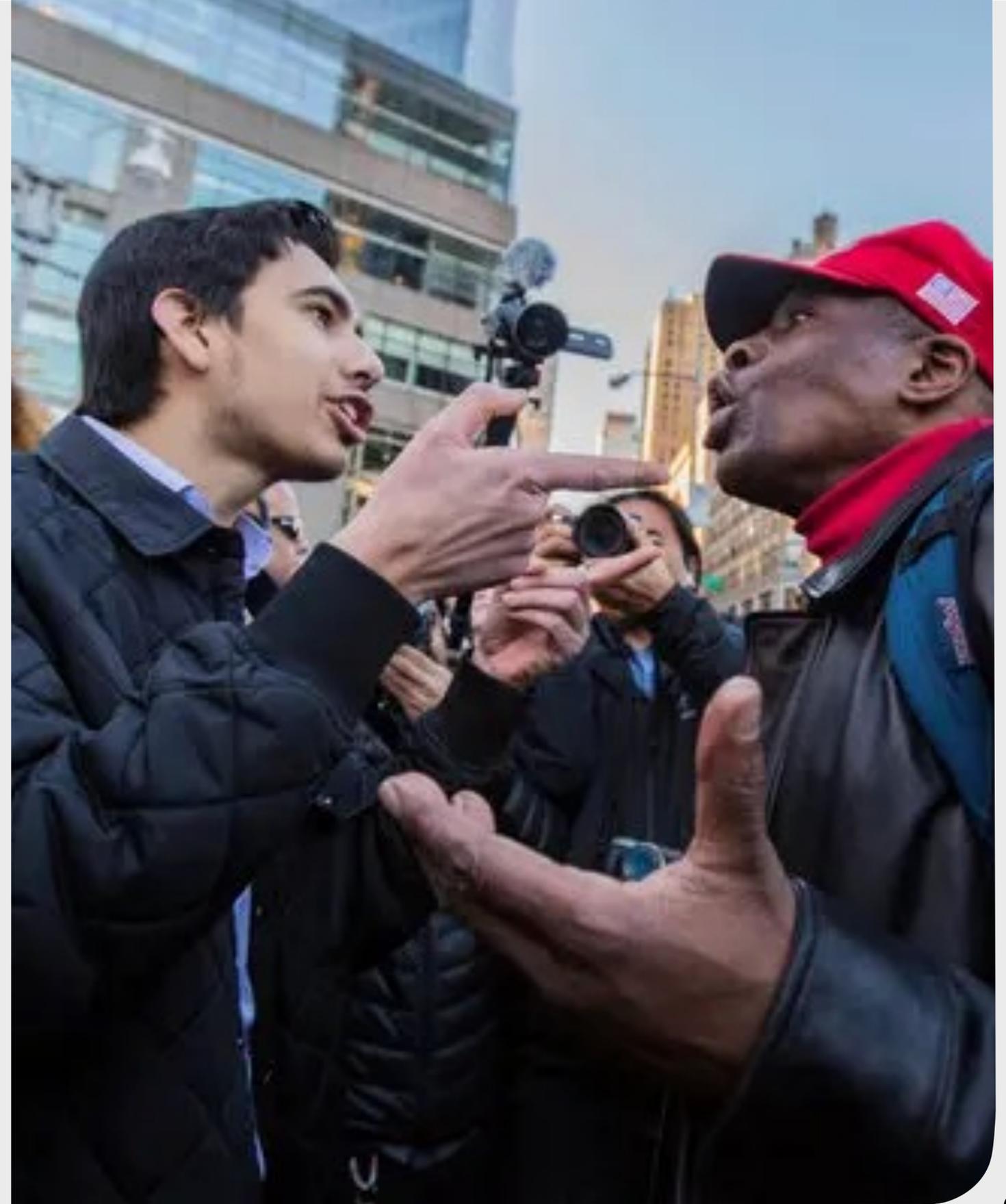
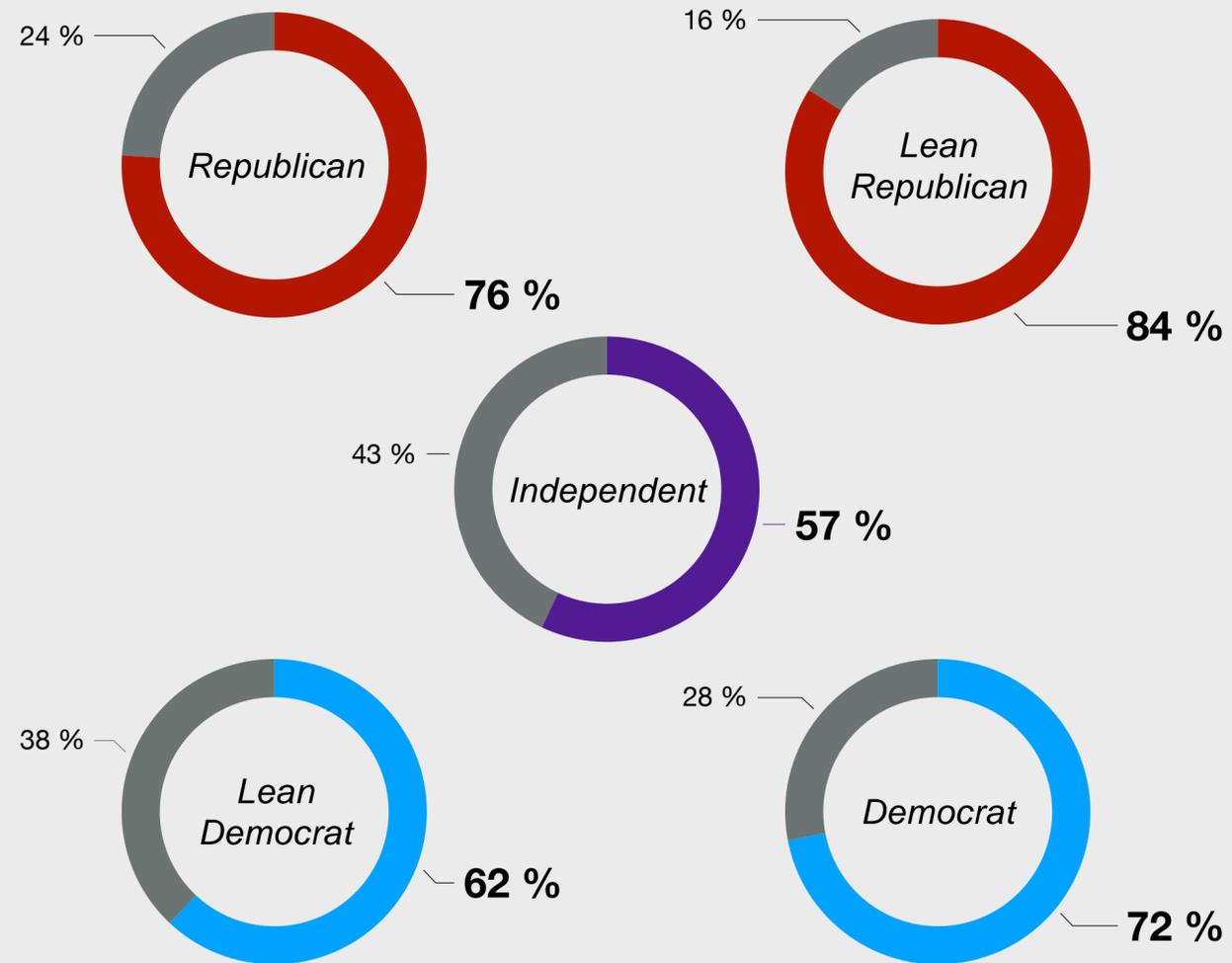
Source: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Study, 2022



The State of the Conversation

HISTORY HAS BECOME A HOT-BUTTON

"I feel afraid for the way questions of American History are dividing our nation." (% strongly agree/agree)



The State of the Conversation

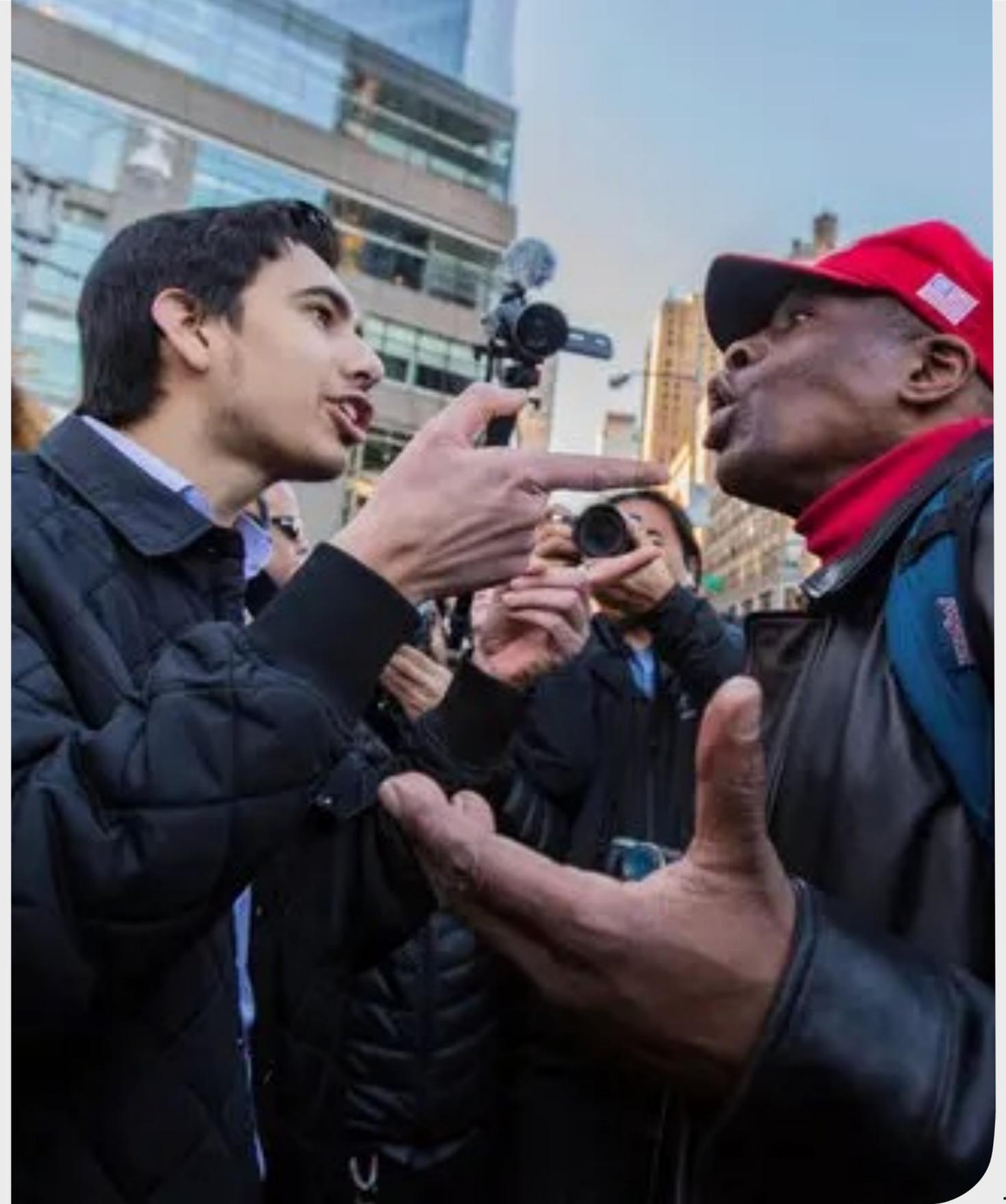
WE'RE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR HIDDEN AGENDAS

“Remember the children’s game where a person whispers something into one person’s ear, and by the time it goes around the room it’s something completely different? That is ***revisionist history – the bastardization of historical facts for social or political agendas.***”

– Group 2, Republican

“I decide whether a source is trustworthy by checking references, resources used, and any opinions expressed.”

– Group 3, Democrat



The State of the Conversation

WE'RE COMFORTABLE IN OUR INFO-BUBBLES

"If it coincides with what I read and believe in, I trust it."

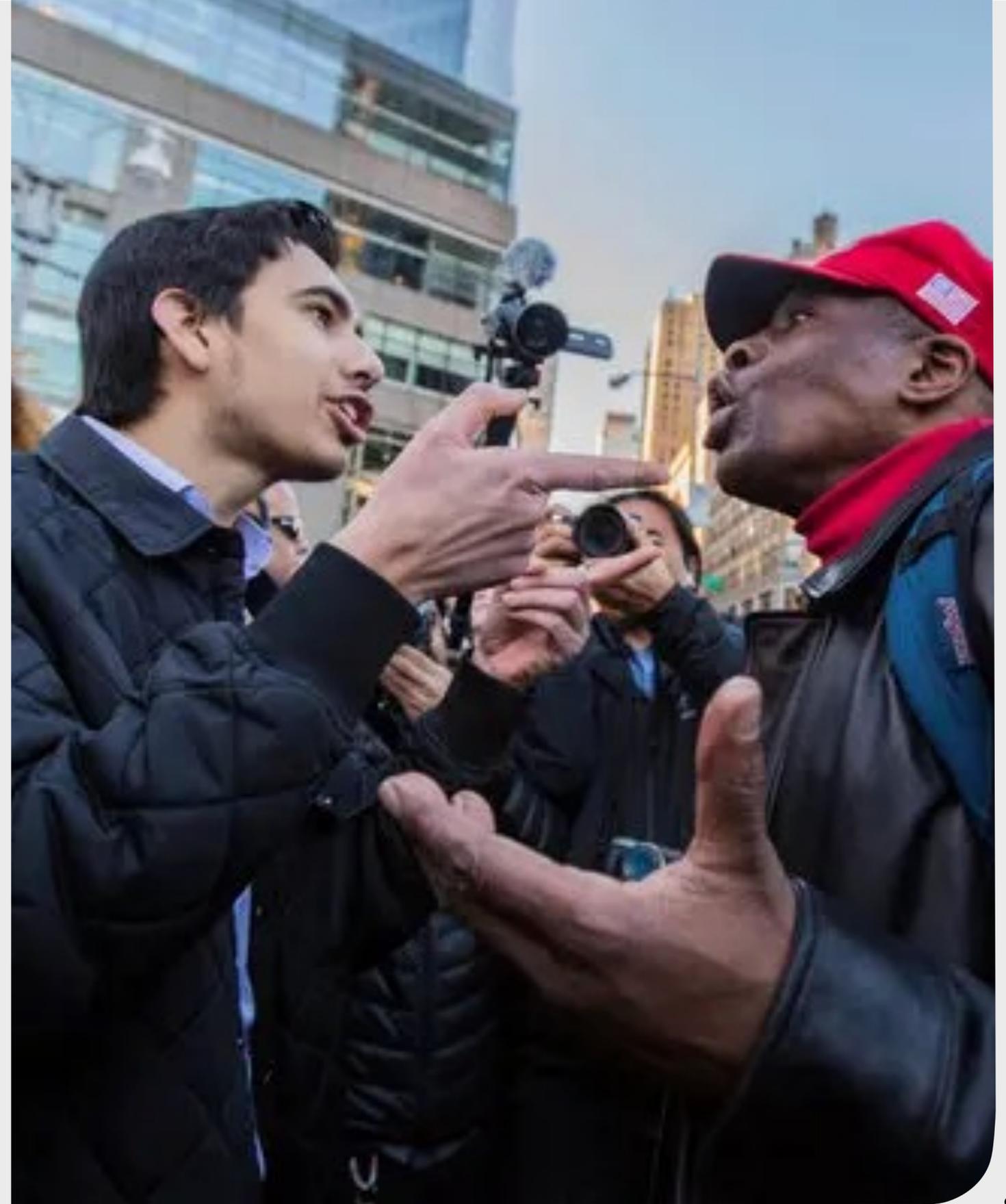
– Group 3, Democrat

*"I trust organizations that are **fair and accurate to my beliefs.**"*

– Group 2, Republican

*"[I don't trust] people who push conspiracy theories and whose **view of the world differs significantly from my own.**"*

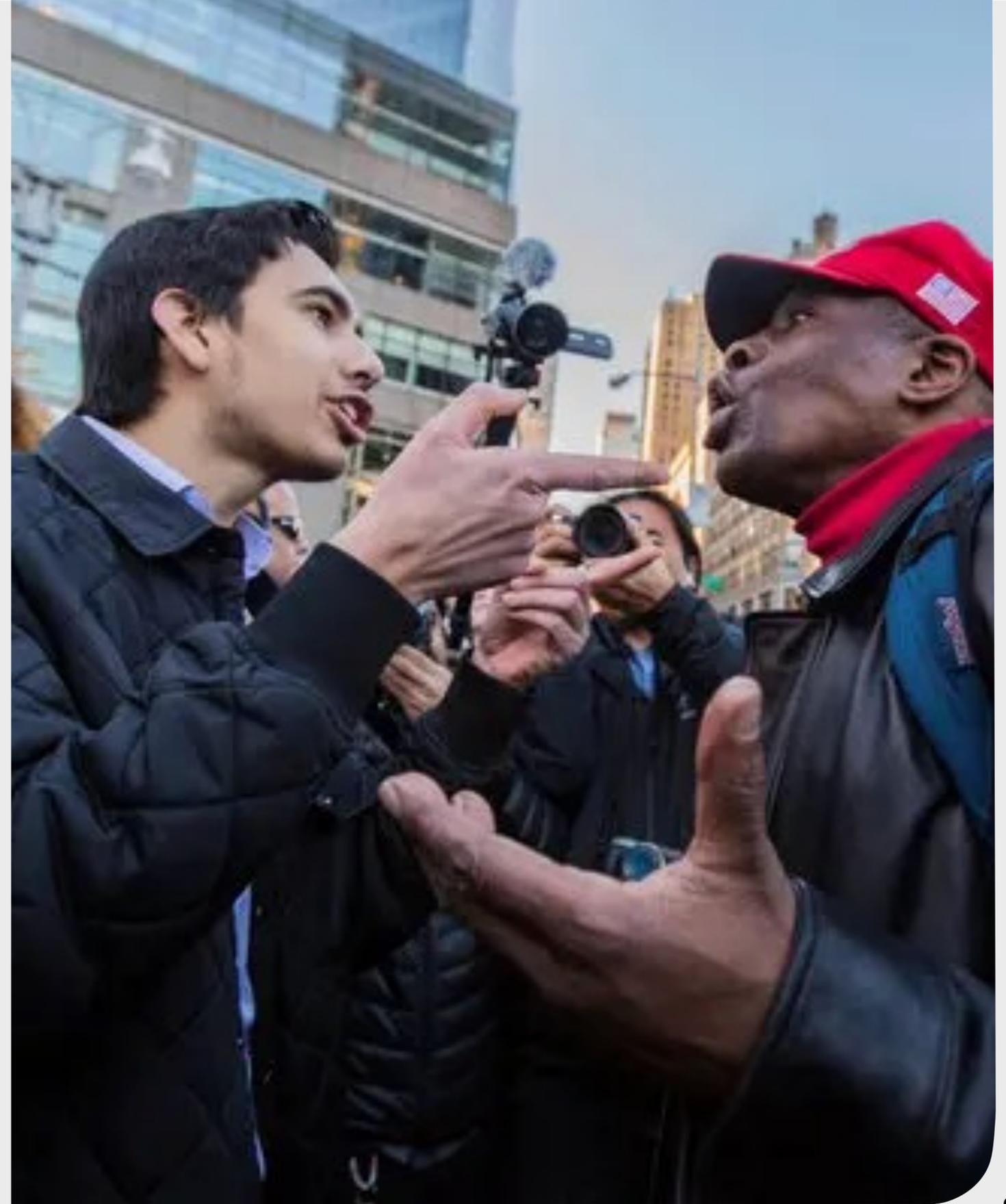
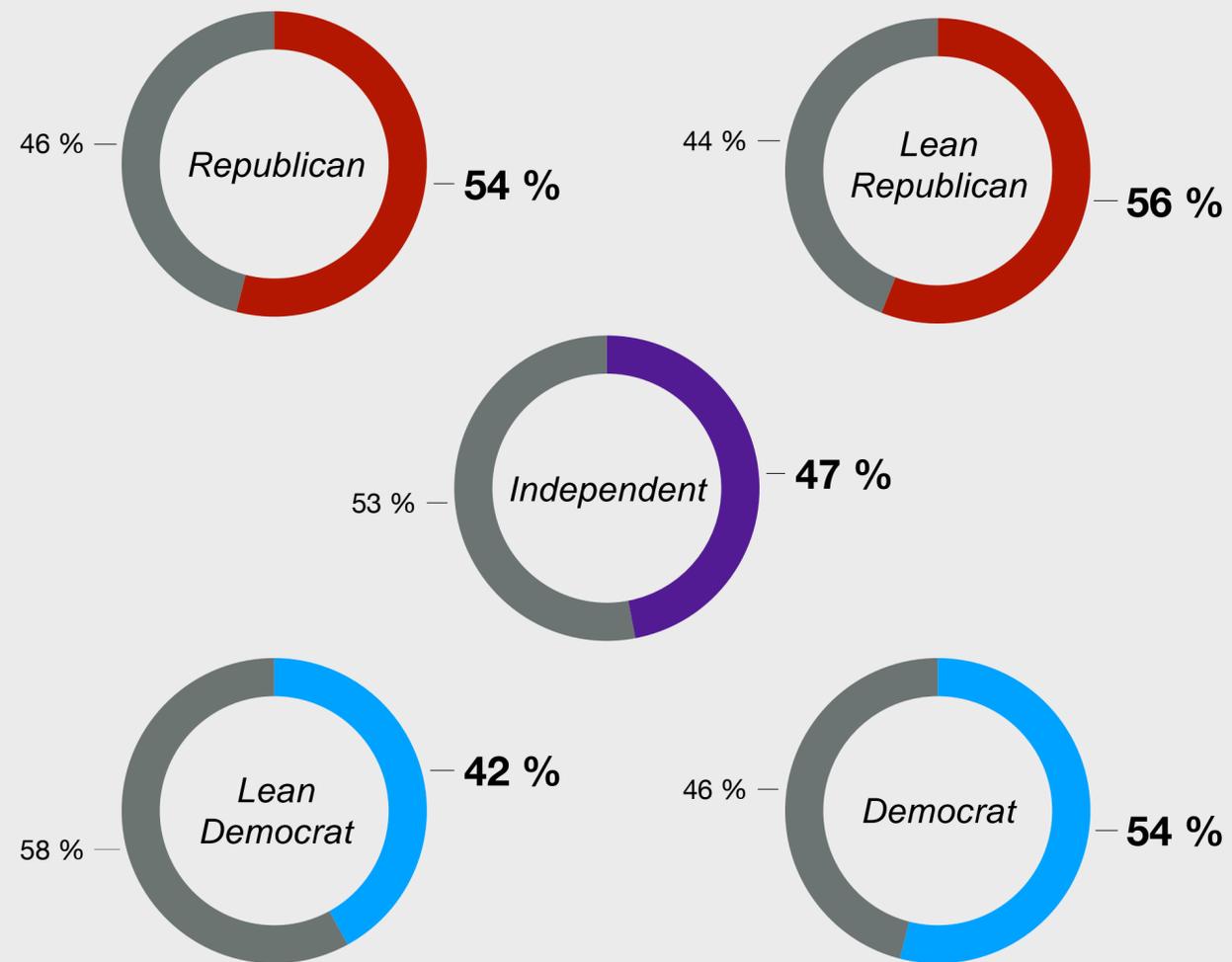
– Group 1, Black/African-American



The State of the Conversation

AND SOME ARE STARTING TO TUNE OUT

"Sometimes I stop listening, watching, or talking about American history out of frustration or fatigue." (% strongly agree/agree)



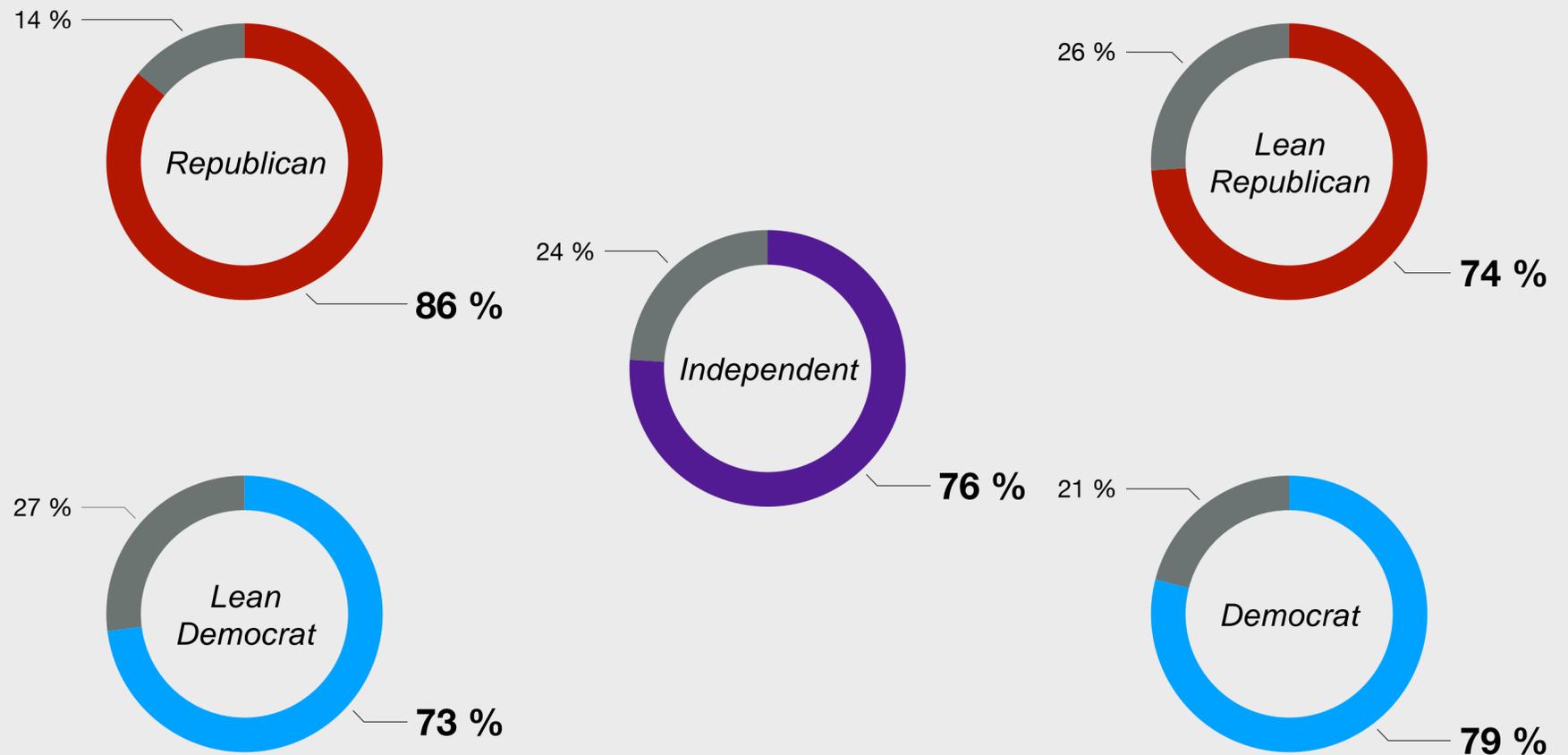
**The good news:
There are shared beliefs we can build on.**

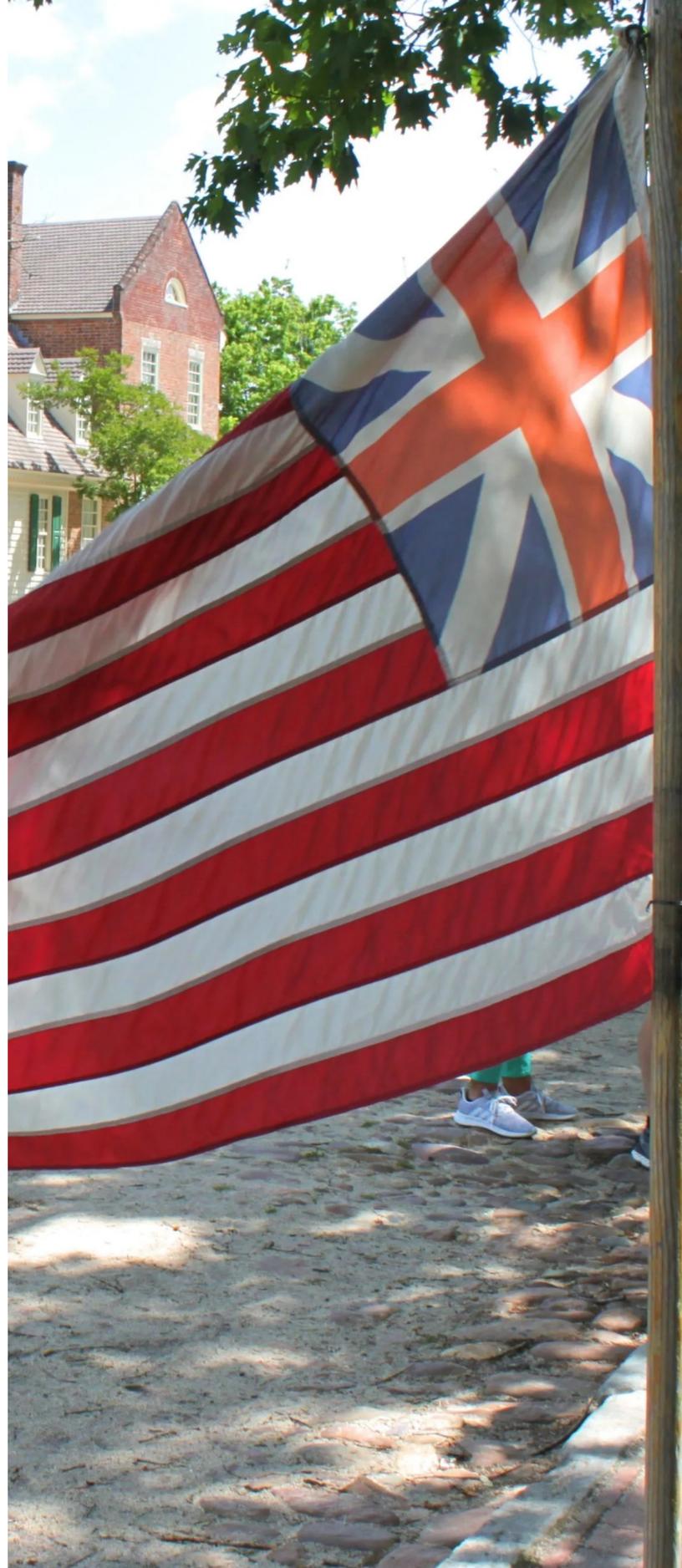




Shared belief... in the power and importance of accuracy.

“I care deeply that an accurate portrayal of the past is told in the mainstream.” (% strongly agree/agree)





Shared belief... in the power and importance of accuracy.

“I like knowing the truth about this country that I live in. I think there is so much untold or misled history about America that we, as Americans, need to know.”

– Group 1, Black/African-American

“We live in an incredibly complex, modern world. It can be very challenging to understand why individuals and groups behave in a certain way. ***Learning about history helps me contextualize the current state of things.***”

– Group 2, Republican

“My father was in the Vietnam war...he used to tell me stories and ***it made me want to know where I came from and why things in America were they way they were.***”

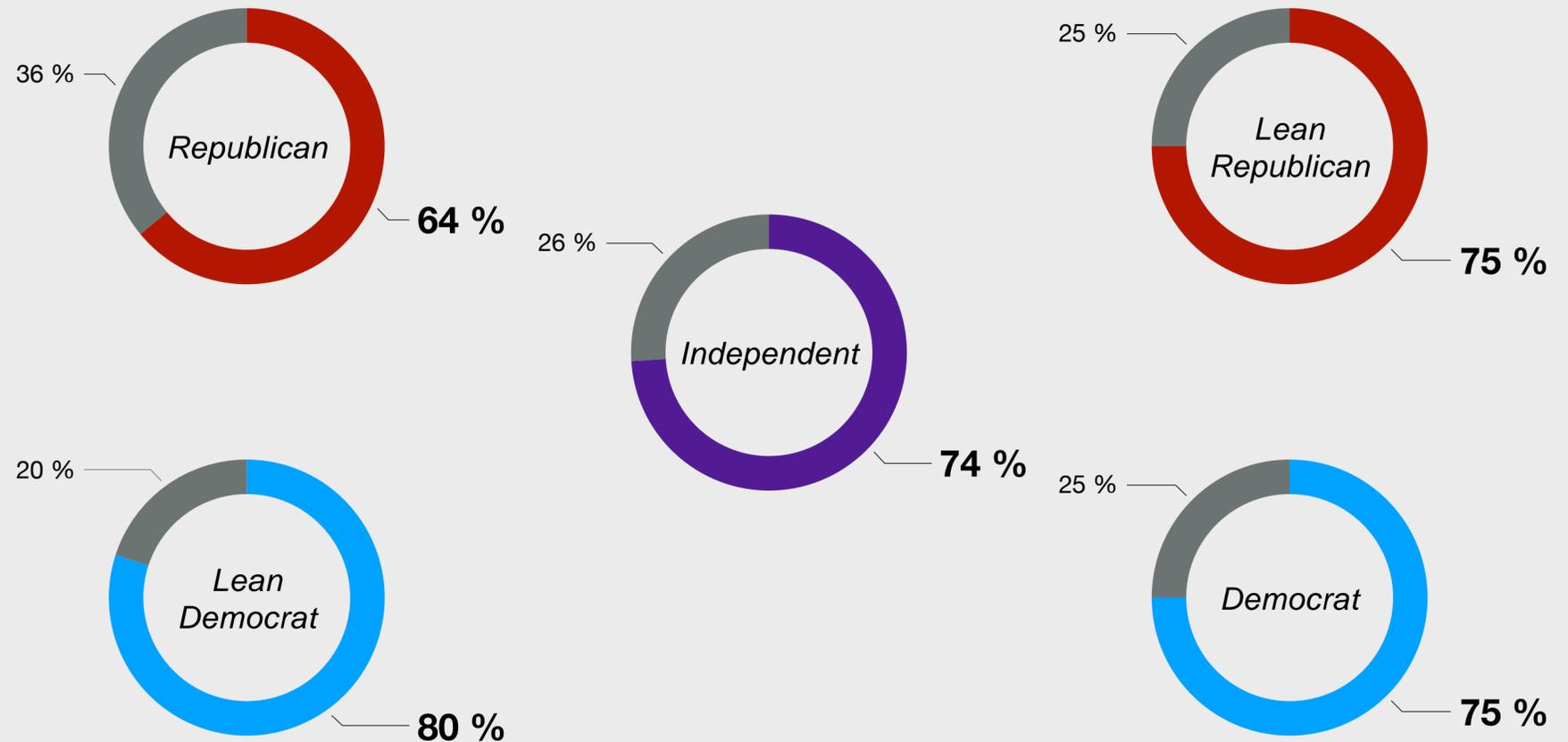
– Group 3, Democrat

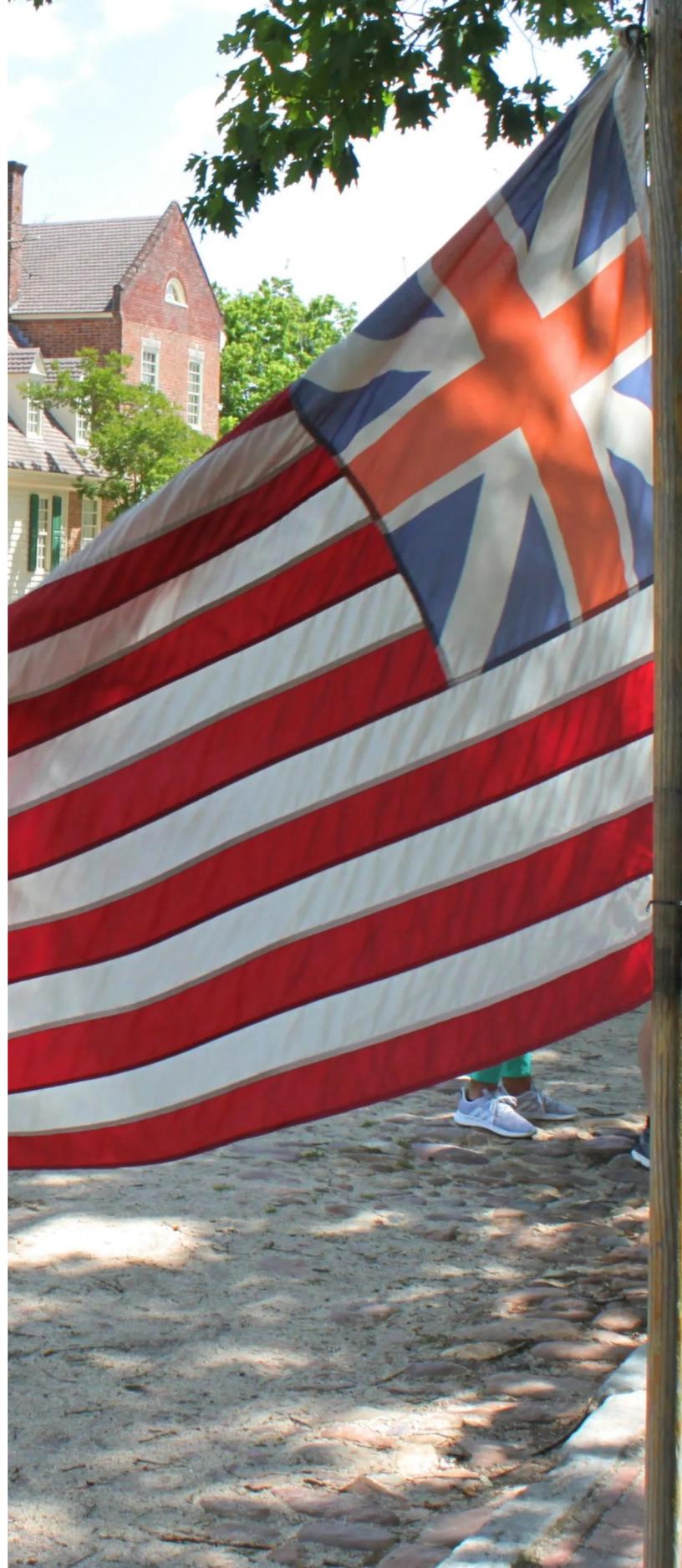




Shared belief... in history's evolving and expanding stories.

“New information becomes available’ is an acceptable reason for our understanding of history to change” (% strongly agree/agree)





Shared belief... in history's evolving and expanding stories.

“We are constantly learning new things based upon new discoveries that upend what we thought we knew about certain times, dates, or events.”

– Group 3, Democrat

“New findings should be thoroughly checked and rechecked before they can be established as a historical narrative.”

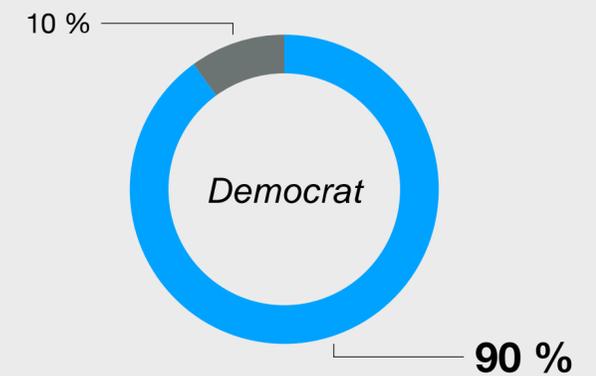
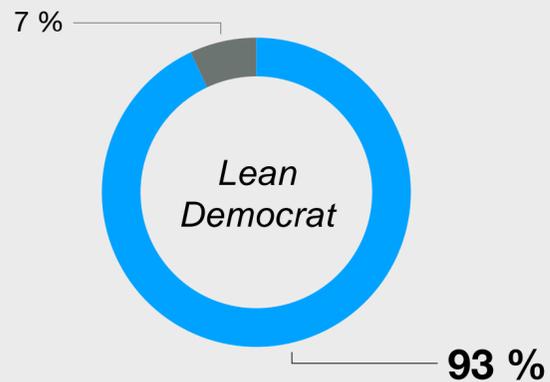
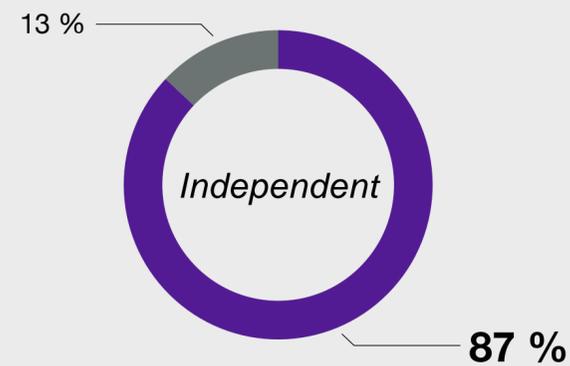
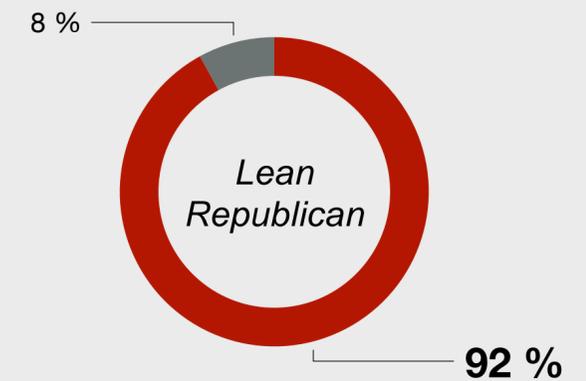
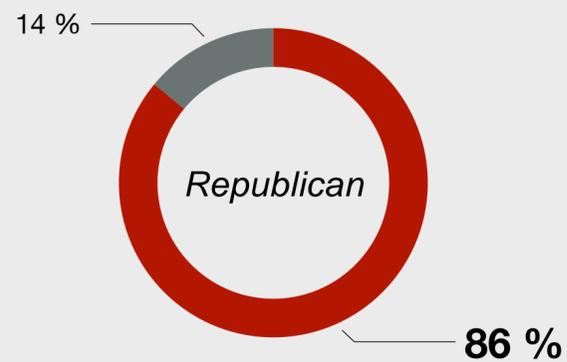
– Group 2, Republican





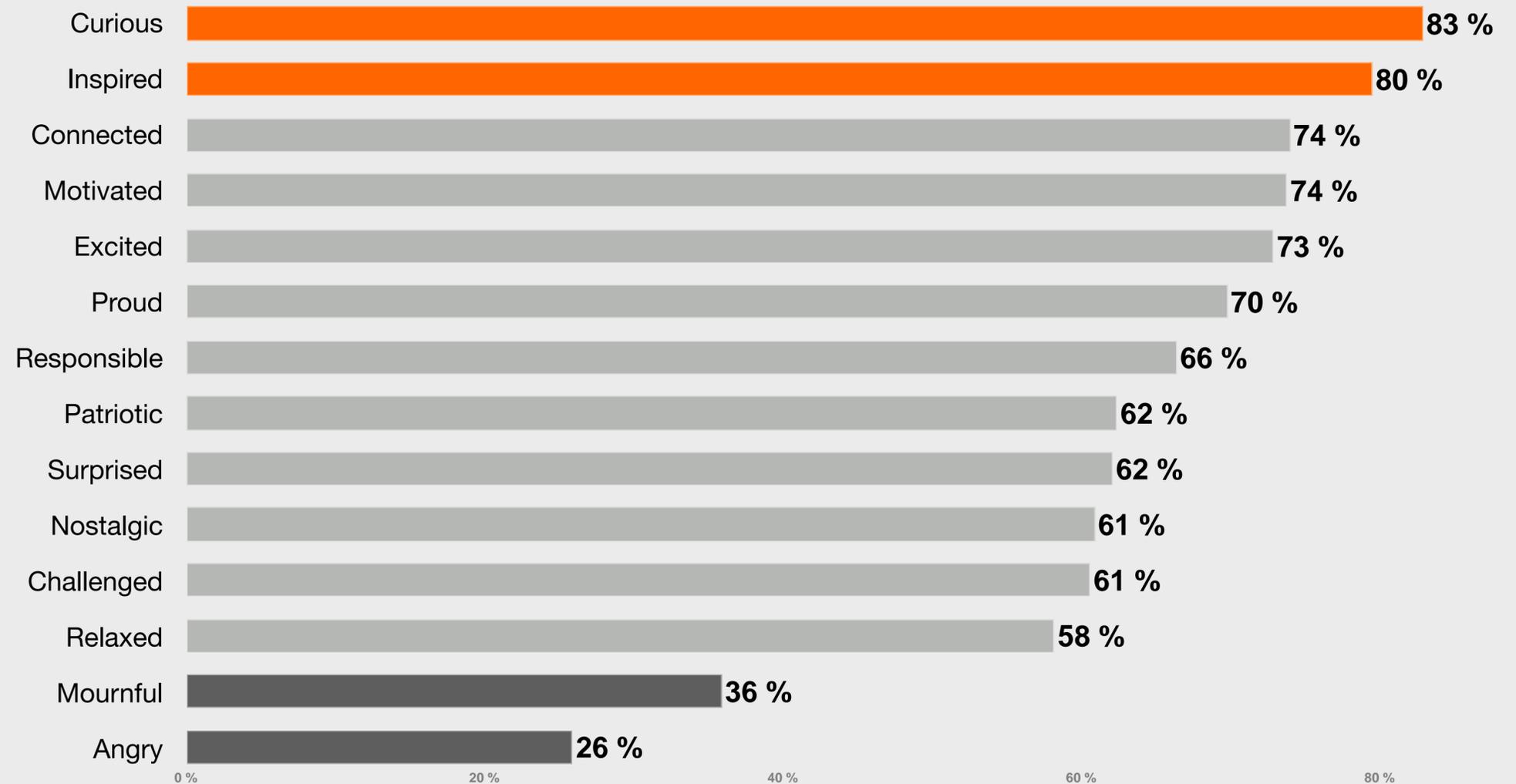
Shared belief... in a complete historical record.

“The most important role of history is to tell the complete truth about the past.” (% strongly agree/agree)

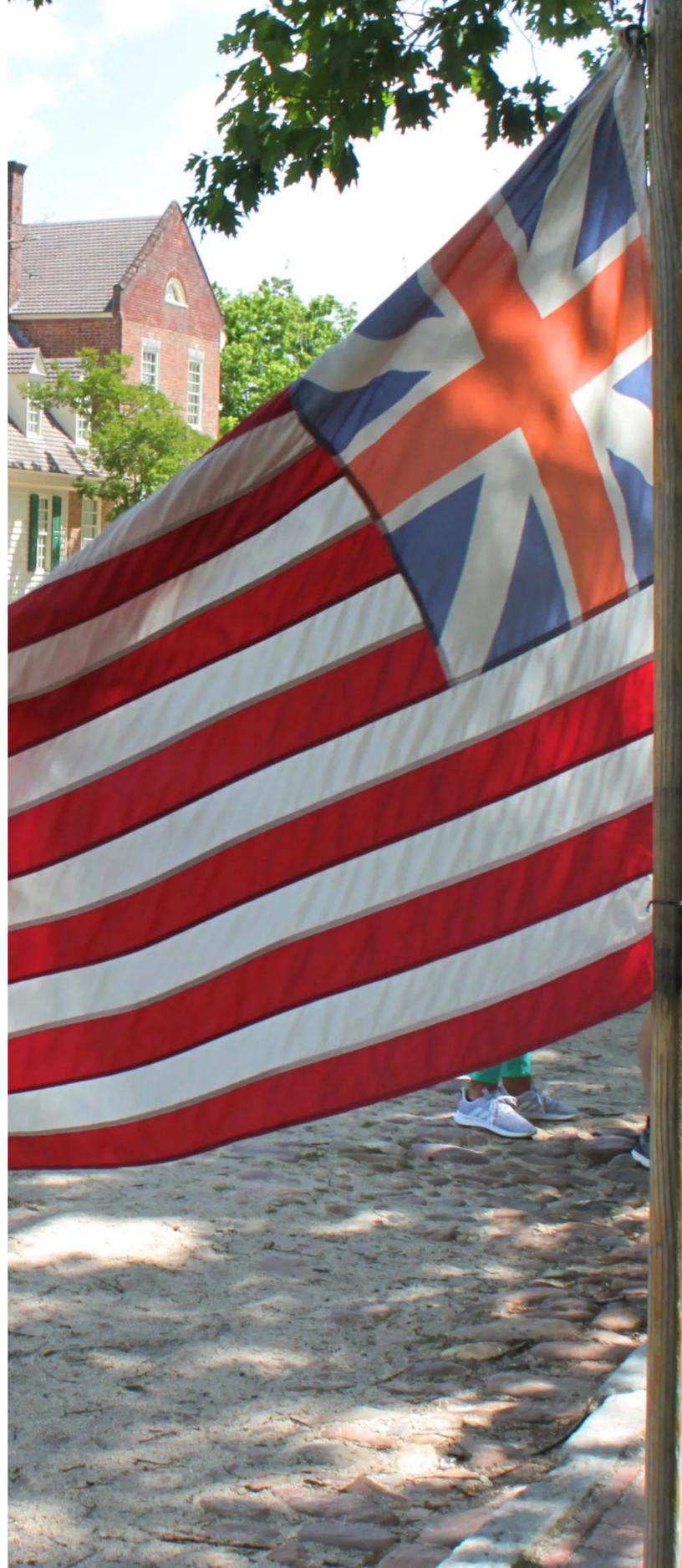


Shared belief... in history's ability to lift us up.

“How important is it that your experience with American history evoke the following feelings?”



Source: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Study, 2022



Shared belief... in history's ability to lift us up.

“The civil rights movement...based on what I’ve read, it seemed to be a time when African Americans were fighting for a common goal and were connected. ***Knowing how everyone dedicated and sacrificed their lives for equal rights inspires me to never miss an election.***”

– Group 1, Black/AA

“The Revolutionary War...I’m both ***fascinated and extremely proud*** every time I picture a group of disparate individuals coming together to fight a greater oppressive force. That we were victorious ***both defies the odds and speaks to the incredible strength and power of the human will....***”

– Group 2, Republican

“I went to the National Archives and read the Declaration of Independence – really read it, not just the first lines like I did in school. ***Wow. I stood there in awe, grateful to those men who had the courage to write it and live their words.***”

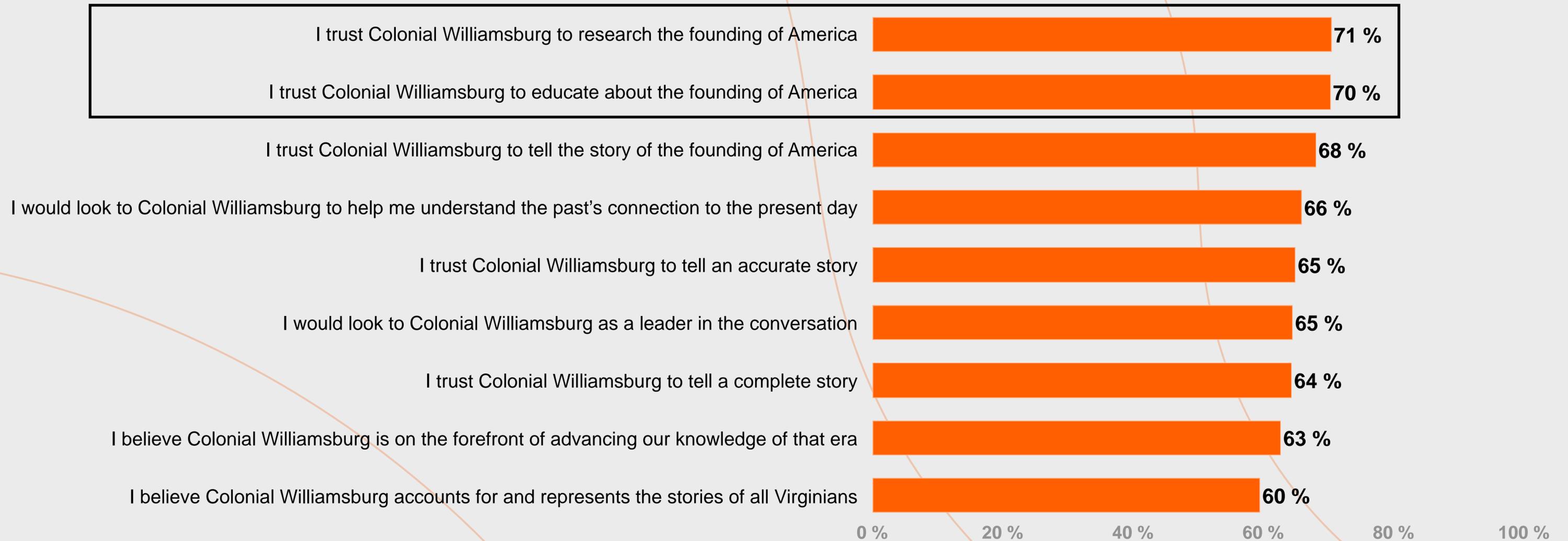
– Group 3, Democrat



So what can we, as historians and storytellers, do to deepen Americans' engagement in our history?



Know where you stand on “Trust”



Know where you stand on “Trust”





Tell the stories behind the stories.

Detail the research process, sources, connections.

Show how our understanding has evolved.

Highlight the credentials of the experts involved in the research and piecing the story together.

Invite visitors to experience the process AND the outcome.





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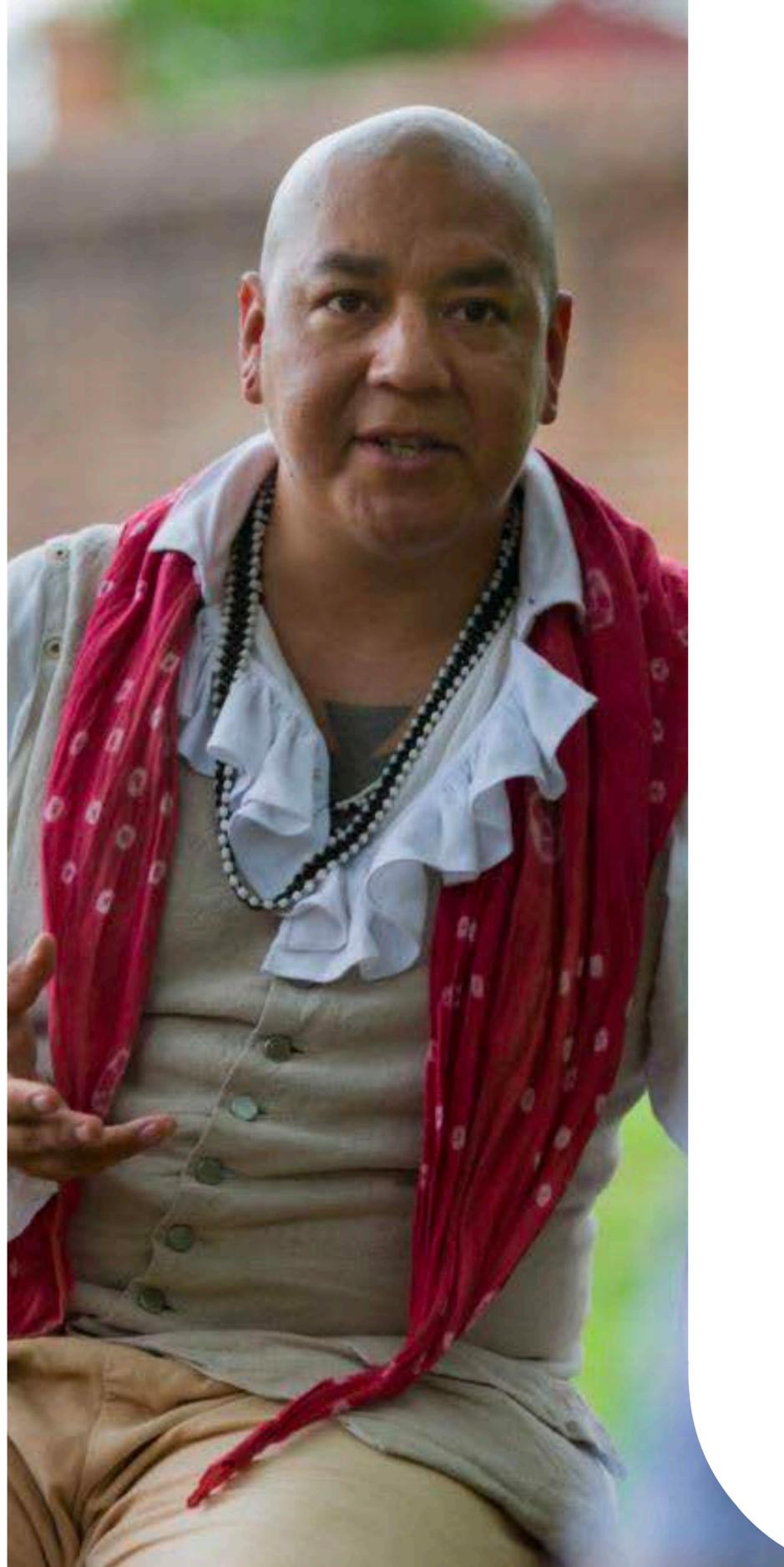
DEEPENING TRUST

- Transparency can serve as a surrogate vetting process.

STRENGTHENING INTEREST

- Deeper understanding draws in new and repeat engagement
- The processes themselves are sources of additional curiosity
- Stories of research and resources underscore the need for financial support





Build on the insights of Active Learning.

Sensory

Allows students to sense what they are studying, which makes it easier to understand and remember.

Game-based

Drives development of strategy skills, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Immersive

Replicates real-life scenarios where new skills and techniques can be practiced and learned in risk-free environments





Leave space for the audience to make up their own minds about meaning.

“I want to learn the ***facts without a spin*** to make my own educated decisions.”

– Group 3, Democrat

“I like to think that I have ***information from both sides of an issue, and I can make my own decision.*** I like investigative reporting.”

– Group 2, Republican

“When a source sticks to the facts and doesn’t introduce opinion at any point, I find them to be impartial...it provides the reader with the factual information and ***gives the reader the room to interpret what they read on their own.***”

– Group 1, Black/AA



Create a Virtuous Cycle of Engagement



Authenticity and Discovery

Curiosity and
Inspiration



Authenticity and Discovery

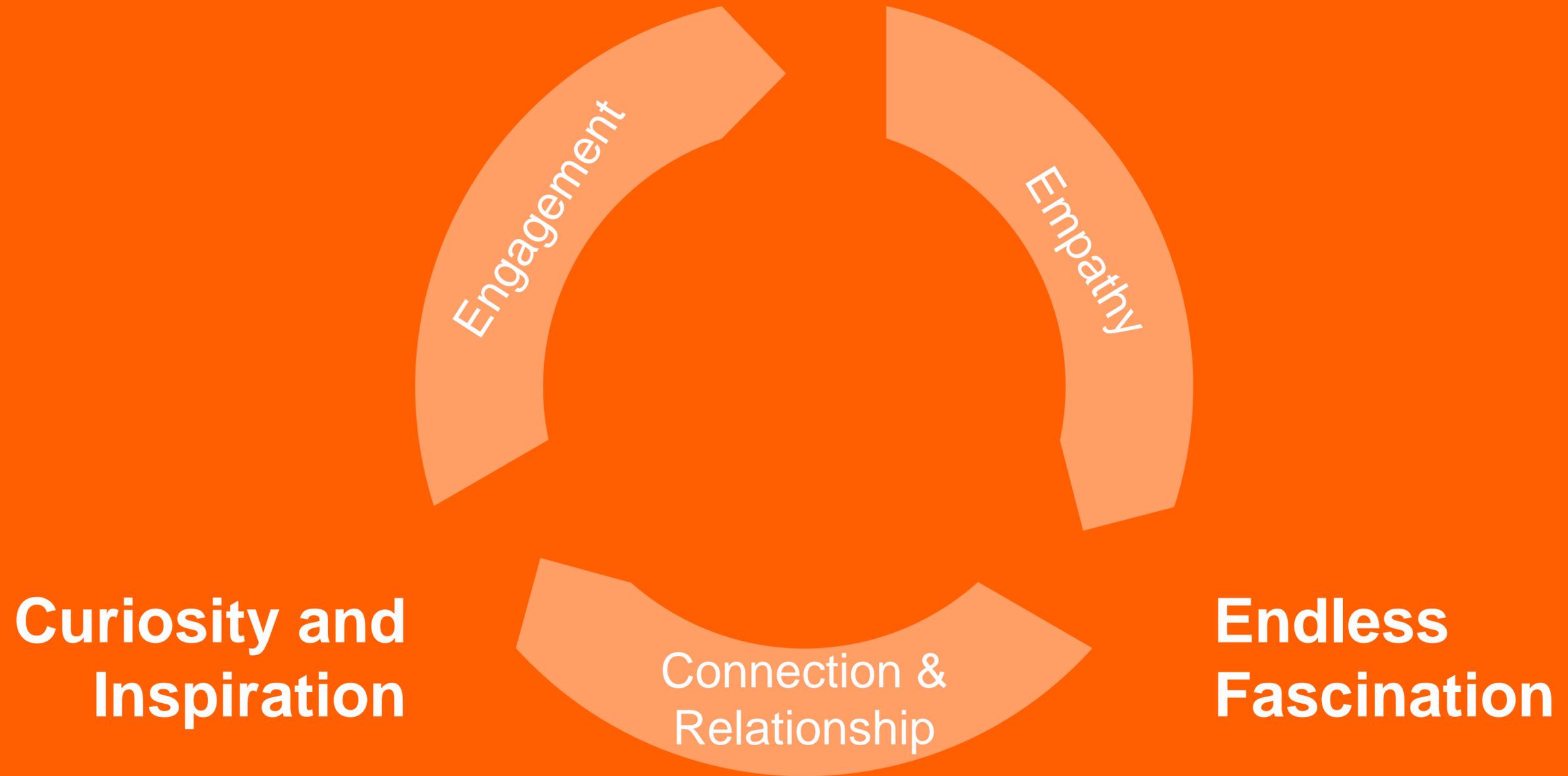


Curiosity and Inspiration

Endless Fascination



Authenticity and Discovery



And how do we avoid the pitfalls?





Please
Stay on
the Path

Watch out for semantic traps.

Terms that have been co-opted by the political dialogue can suggest spin, agendas, or a looseness with the facts.

(e.g. “interpretation,” “narrative”)

Terms that feel exclusive or ignore how some groups weren’t full participants in Colonial democracy.

(e.g. “National DNA,” “collective roots,” “common American story”)

Language that calls the visitor’s understanding of history into question .

(e.g. “You can’t fully understand our history unless...”)

A tone that feels like it’s manufacturing unnecessary drama.



Please
Stay on
the Path

Keep your finger on the pulse.

Field regular research with your audience.

Focus groups, tracking studies, etc. will keep you on top of the rapidly shifting environment.

Create a social listening capability.

The conversation shifts quickly. Social listening will keep you on top of threats and opportunities as they arise.

Engage your staff.

The stakes are high and everyone has to be aware of their role in meeting new challenges and embracing new opportunities.

Be an active participant in the conversation.

Engaging in the conversations in your community can reinforce how history connects us and informs today's issues.

History in a time of division: Our path forward (TLDR):

- 1) Know where you stand on “Trust.”
- 2) Tell the stories behind the stories.
- 3) Build on the insights of active learning.
- 4) Leave space for the audience to make up their own minds about meaning.
- 5) Create a virtuous cycle of engagement.
- 6) Watch out for semantic traps.
- 7) Keep your finger on the pulse.

Thank you.