

Connectivity (We Don't Mean Wi-Fi)

A Dialogue on Whether the Social Cohesiveness of Communities Has Been Weakened by Changing Times, Technology, and Values.

Judge Michael Scudder of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit and Professor Charles Franklin, director of the Marquette Law School Poll, are both observers of the dynamics of American civic life. Put them together for a dialogue conducted both in person and by email, growing out of Judge Scudder's Hallows Lecture, and you have a lively discussion on how Americans are and are not connected when it comes to their communities, how things have changed, and where involvement in community life is headed. This is an edited text of their exchange in July 2025.

Judge Scudder: So many people today observe that we are living in divided times. It is hard to disagree, especially if we limit our focus to our nation's greatest challenges. But these times are not America's first experience with division and controversy. Your national polling data show that 40 percent of people polled identified as neither liberal nor conservative, considering themselves, rather, to be "independent," or "other," or to have "no preference." Do the data suggest that we may perceive more division than exists? Is there a way to capture with more granularity where people perceive or experience division? What kinds of issues are ones on which people are less likely to engage with others to hear new ideas or to remain open to compromise?

Professor Franklin: By some measures, we are more polarized over politics than in the second half of the 20th century. Voting patterns, for example, show much less crossover or split-ticket voting than there was 50 or 75 years ago. But by other measures, there is less division than one might think. In 2024, for example, 37 percent of people we surveyed in a national sample described themselves as politically moderate, with a total of only 22 percent describing themselves as either very conservative or very liberal.

But people see the opposite party as far more extreme than they see themselves: Among Democrats, only 13 percent describe their party as very liberal, but 69 percent of Republicans see the Democratic Party that way. Likewise, 27 percent of Republicans see the Republican party as very conservative, whereas 65 percent of Democrats see the GOP that way. Our division is partly perception.

There are still an awful lot of people toward the middle, rather than a society divided into polar opposites. But what has changed pretty clearly over the last 20 or 25 years is that the parties are a bit more homogeneous. So if you're looking at Democrats, you're going to find that a lot of liberals have now sorted themselves into the Democratic Party. Conservatives are sorted into the Republican Party.

So it's a sort of paradox that we're socially more divided but that, in terms of opinions on specific issues or even broad ideology, we do still have a pretty centrist country that leans a bit to the left or a bit to the right. It's a minority, on just about every issue, in which you see people genuinely at polar extremes.

When new policies emerge, or issues have not been topics of intense public debate, voters often show less division, but once party leaders divide on the issue, and communicate those divisions to voters, then polarization increases. In our recent polls of Wisconsin, we found bipartisan support and less partisan division on funding for special education, cell phones in the classroom, allowing citizens to place initiatives on the ballot, election (rather than appointment) of state Supreme Court justices, legalization of marijuana, mental health services in schools, and education standards in the state. Of course, there are other issues for which the partisan divide is deep, such as taxes for schools and expanded Medicaid benefits for new mothers. And partisan divisions are enormous when it comes to feelings about the president or the governor or issues most closely associated with those political leaders.

Scudder: Some of my family members think of themselves as fairly centrist. And I think of them as fairly centrist. But I'm also highly confident that they would tell you that these are the most divisive times ever in the history of the United States. And even if they may tack only a little bit right or a little bit left, I also think that they would say, "I think the other side's crazy. There's no way ever that I'm going to go to some meeting to talk to those people."

Franklin: That perception that the other side is so far away from you makes compromising much less possible. I do think we see this greater polarization in Congress in particular, but you see it in most state legislatures as well, where those legislative bodies don't seem to engage in the same level of bargaining, compromise, horse trading that we saw in the 1950s, '60s, '70s, '80s. It wasn't that we didn't have intense partisan disagreements then. I mean, certainly look at the civil rights and anti-war movements of the '60s—that was a lot more violent than our basic situation today. But if legislative parties can't bargain with each other and instead it's simply a matter of who can get the 51st vote, the one-vote majority, then we are seeing less of the classic deciding how to cut the cake and more of a divide over even what kind of cake to bake. And that, I think, does discourage people from participation, it does discourage them from thinking that Congress or their legislature can work.

SPEECH IN DIVIDED TIMES

Scudder: Drawing on the work of John Stuart Mill and others, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes invited us to see the exchange of ideas in a democratic society as a marketplace where speech comes together in ways that allow facts to disprove lies, good ideas to win out over bad ones, understanding to clarify confusion, and tolerance to defeat intolerance. Justice Holmes viewed speech as occurring within settings—be they the community square, meeting hall, local diner, or a neighbor's living room—where bridging social capital, as Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam would put it, was being built and deposited.

Don't get me wrong: I want to see speech in those terms. But I'm doubtful the marketplace of ideas metaphor has much reality in today's socially isolated times, especially where so much communication occurs online within self-selected echo chambers. What can you tell me from the polling data?

Franklin: In our personal lives, there remains considerable conversation about political matters.

Among family and friends, 66 percent say they talk about politics once a week or more often. But this drops to 38 percent who talk that often with coworkers, a rate that seems to have declined in recent years. That's important for the notion of bridging social capital because the workplace brings people of more divergent views together in a way that family and friendship groups seldom do. Avoiding potential conflict at work may be good office policy, but it reduces exposure to a range of views among people who have other things, such as occupations, in common.

In our Wisconsin polling, we have found 32 percent who have said, in one of our surveys or another, they have stopped talking about politics with someone because of disagreements. When conversation does occur, 47 percent say that they encounter about an equal mix of liberal and conservative views, while only 16 percent say their conversations are almost all liberal or all conservative.

SEEKING ALL OR NOTHING

Franklin: Of course, disagreement is endemic to the human condition. So we shouldn't have a Pollyannish view about this. But when we have disagreements that could involve some compromises and trade-offs, I think elected bodies—whether you think of it as a city council or a school board or a legislature—have, at least in principle, the ability to make the trade-offs between the sides. You know, you want this sidewalk widened, but how about if we widen it to 12 feet instead of 15 feet? Or what do we do about this neighborhood and how to improve the sidewalks there? There are things where you could imagine negotiations leading to something that leaves everybody at least partially satisfied. But where is the incentive to do that? Those sorts of trade-offs become less attractive if we think we can just get everything we want.

Scudder: Do you think that, as people, we are less understanding, less tolerant of, less willing to embrace just the inherent messiness of democracy? Do you view us as embracing less that some issues are just messy and that, to find the right sum of compromises, there is going to be some anxiety? You know—that there's going to be some emotional toil, it's going to be hard work. I think the low level of willingness to do this hard work is especially discouraging.

Franklin: If I'm absolutely convinced that my opponent is dug in and will never agree to a good-



Judge Michael Scudder (left) and Professor Charles Franklin.

faith compromise on something, that drives a lack of willingness to see if we might together find something that we hadn't seen before.

Scudder: Do you think we're at risk of younger generations just having not even experienced the willingness to do that?

Franklin: Yes.

INCIVILITY

Scudder: For all its promise and value, today's internet age seems to be a major contributor to the observation that we have lost some of our civility in relationships with others. Too many people write things in a text message or post that they would never say to someone in person. Dialogue on issues like gender identity, library collections, and public school course offerings leads to dead ends, stalemates, if not shouting matches—often electronically—between mutually exclusive perspectives. We are having a hard time living by the age-old truth that it's often better to bite your tongue than to deliver a sharp-edged message. And it sure seems that the degree and prevalence of incivility contribute to our unwillingness to engage with others on controversial, divisive subjects.

Franklin: "Flame wars" are as old as the internet. In emails even from the 1970s to community bulletin boards in the 1980s to Twitter in the 2000s, electronic communications have shown a remarkable ability to bring out our worst. The modern performance art of trolling others on social media and organized campaigns to push a point of view and attack other views have made lack of civility a serious issue and help drive people further into polarized views. I think the best we can say is, "Go back and read the newspapers of earlier ages." The papers of the 1850s, or for that matter of the 1780s, contain a tremendous amount of partisan vitriol. Robust debate now isn't always as

high-minded as the Lincoln–Douglas debates, but it pretty well never has been.

TRUST

Scudder: Your survey question that asked whether, generally speaking, the polled person believes that most people can be trusted reveals one of the biggest gaps between young people and older people, with only 40 percent of those ages 18–29 stating that most people can be trusted, compared to 75 percent of those 60 and older. I wonder if part of this is a result of less coming together in public spaces, less opportunity for bridging divides. The same question divided other demographics as well: 49 percent of those making less than \$30k think most people can be trusted, compared to 70 percent of those making \$100k or more; 45 percent of those with less than high school education believe most people can be trusted, compared to 66 percent of those with a post-grad/professional degree.

Your observation that individuals under 45 who are constantly online are a bit more trusting than their counterparts who are online less frequently might be a source of hope for the future. While the internet is often understood as a place of great division and disunity, it does hold the capacity to bring individuals together who may be very unlikely to interact face-to-face—so long as we break out of our fishbowls (or echo chambers) and stay open to hearing other perspectives.

Franklin: It's a worrisome finding that the young are much more likely to say that people can't be trusted—a finding with ramifications for possible social engagement and organization. As you say, but to state it "in reverse," from the distrust angle, among adults under 30, 60 percent say most people cannot be trusted, compared to 25 percent of those 60 or over.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Scudder: How does today's younger generation define civic engagement? When I think of my own adult children, I am far from sure they would identify with, or know anything about, many of the organizations often mentioned in *Bowling Alone* and similar scholarship. Might a biking or swimming group, a morning coffee group, or a book club qualify as a new form of civic association where, as Dr. Putnam would put it, bridging social capital is being built?

Franklin: To be sure, there are newer social activities that have some of the bridging qualities that Putnam discusses. Some of these lack the formal organizational characteristics of Putnam's past groups, but may nonetheless provide opportunities for developing connections among heterogeneous individuals. The bad news is that studies of time use over recent decades show we are spending more time at home and less time in the community with others outside our families. Face-to-face connections are crucial, and they cannot be easily replaced by social media connections.

Scudder: It concerns me that the idea of actually meeting to resolve a culture-war issue almost seems a fictional option—one from the town of Mayberry in the TV show from the 1960s, but not today's America. My concern is the product of my own experience: In-person discussion, especially when dedicated to resolving a challenge or offering a perspective on a difficult issue, seems much more fruitful and effective. But I am not sure that today's younger generation would agree, as face-to-face meetings and dialogue are not their norm.

I've thought, on balance, the internet age has added much more value to our individual and collective life than its added burden or cost. So in no way would I want to turn the clock back. What I do perceive is that the internet is like an ocean of information, and it's relentless. And that the way that you avoid drowning is to self-select into your own fishbowl, into some little corner, and, as a result, you don't get exposed to a lot of diverse information and diverse perspectives. There's more speech than ever, but the marketplace is so flooded.

Franklin: I think that that element of self-selection in what we read, what we watch, is a big driver of separation, or can be, whether it's polarization or simply not being exposed to arguments on other sides. I think the beauty is that if you're interested in something, even an esoteric

something, there are almost certainly some places out there where people are doing relatively serious writing and thinking and talking about that. But it competes in this huge cacophony.

I think the best thing about the modern electronic media is that it has opened opportunities for vigorous debate, not in 140 or 280-character tweets but in the new longer-form opportunities, initially blogs and now Substack. That short bursts on social media offer less reasoned argument should not distract us from the abundance of far more serious discussion and argument on these long-form opinion websites.

That we have those places for debate does not mean we are likely to resolve differences there. At best, the marketplace provides a range of competing ideas. Resolution, I think, requires institutions that can hear debates and have some ability to make authoritative decisions—school boards, city councils, legislatures, even courts. Representative elected bodies have the ability to create compromises and provide trade-offs that may not make any side entirely happy but that give some incentive for solutions that take seriously the various sides of an issue.

Remember the old line from then Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill in the '80s: "All politics is local." Now it seems like all politics is national. And the national divisions are sharper and more ideological and certainly more partisan.

Scudder: So many younger people don't have a baseline for having face-to-face social relationships. Their baseline is virtual. And I think we've yet to see any strong evidence that virtual relationships can replace face-to-face relationships.

Franklin: They tend to be tenuous. They tend to be easily broken. Ghosting is an example of how you can just cut people off. That's much harder to do in face-to-face relationships. It's not that these social media don't provide some ways to connect. But it tends to create these very weak links between people rather than links that help them overcome conflict or help them connect to do something more substantial, whether that's fundraising for a charity or actually taking some sort of social action.

Scudder: If you go back to the *Bowling Alone* book and Dr. Putnam's scholarship, he talks so much about "bridging social capital." There is a limitation in a virtual environment about the capability of *bridging* social capital. The Rotary Club and the Kiwanis Club and all of that are ways of coming together around a common cause,

and there's a social element to it. And the social element is what is facilitating the development of the bridging social capital. You might not even be conscious of it. There is just a distance, if you will, an impersonalization, a lack of personalization, in the virtual environment.

THE LOSS OF LOCAL NEWS SOURCES

Scudder: The Marquette Law School Poll data show that 72 percent of adults say they would work with neighbors to keep a local elementary school open, and 83 percent say they would work to keep a fire station open. I love this finding, but it raises a concern about the effects of a troubling trend. So many of us have moved away from consuming information in the first instance at the local level. In her recent book *Ghosting the News*, journalist Margaret Sullivan reported that more than 2,000 local American newspapers have shuttered since 2004, leaving scores of communities with no local news outlet—creating what she and others have aptly termed “news deserts.”

I witnessed a form of this two years or so ago, when my hometown newspaper, *The Journal Gazette*, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, announced it would no longer publish a Sunday paper. This bothered me and left me feeling a sense of loss. I had read the *Sunday Journal Gazette* for years; doing so kept me informed of what's happening in a community I still identify with as home. And I very much believe that consuming all variety of news through local, trusted lenses and from regional perspectives has a way of unifying and engaging people within communities. Local newspapers create common information ground. Sullivan captured the point well by observing that, “when local news fails, the foundations of democracy weaken.” Isn't local news the medium through which neighbors would learn about the pros, cons, and considerations informing the proposed closing of a local school or fire station?

Franklin: I share your sense of being sorry over the loss of local newspapers. In our Wisconsin poll, we find that 50 percent say local news outlets are very important to the well-being of their community. However, only 28 percent say they follow local news very closely. And for newspapers, a grim 23 percent say they subscribe either in print or online. This is not to say people lack sources of local news. Local TV is the source of most news for 30 percent, and newspapers are the main source for 28 percent. Increasingly people turn to social media for local news, 22 percent, which is perhaps filling a void left by the decline of newspapers, though

without the professional news gathering and editing of traditional media.

We find that those who pay more attention to local news are more likely to know if reading test scores are rising or falling in their community, how school enrollments are changing, and that they're more aware of water-quality issues involving PFAS, or “forever chemicals,” in their town.

On our neighborhood Facebook page, I hear of things that are going on, the annual tulip festival or the annual play that the neighborhood puts on. But what it doesn't do is provide the systematic coverage of your community that newspapers do, with a state or city government reporter or a city education reporter or a city business reporter.

Scudder: Do you think there's anything to fill that gap?

Franklin: I don't see it on the horizon yet.

DECLINING CIVICS EDUCATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Scudder: My impression is that our country's education system has shifted away from meaningful instruction on civics, choosing to instead place the emphasis on math and literacy curriculum. Pew Research Center, for example, reported in 2023 that fewer than 60 percent of Americans could name a right guaranteed by the First Amendment. I wonder if the decline in civics education has any relationship to the decline we see in civic engagement. A person who does not appreciate how our democracy is supposed to function, one might think, is less likely to see the value in attending a city council meeting or voting in a local election—resorting, instead, to shouting matches on social media platforms. Democracy can be messy and frustrating, all the more so when we are uninformed. What, if any, connection do you see between civic education and civic participation?

Franklin: Education is strongly related to civic participation, but it isn't clear that this is because of civic education per se in the curriculum. National polls that ask “civics test” questions often find large majorities getting it right on broad constitutional questions, but this percentage drops considerably on more specific details. So “freedom of speech” is very widely known as a constitutional principle, but which amendment says so is less familiar—similarly with a number of other legal principles. I will say that, since the Founding, citizens have been less than perfectly informed, with limited time for politics and participation. Yet for 250 years, we've managed to muddle through. I expect we will continue to do so. ■