

HOPE



The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

What, if anything, gives Americans hope as they witness daily events that pull at their heart and make them question the nation's very fabric, such as the Littleton, Colorado shootings, the war in Kosovo, presidential impeachment, the 2000-election money chase?

Not the false hope that candidates, news media, citizens themselves and others peddle daily in our nation. For purveyors of false hope are making politics and public life cartoonish, silly, devoid of meaning — bordering on the ridiculous. As false hope continues to be the coin of the realm, people in America are wondering and worried about what is becoming of this nation.

False hope is a cancerous, perverse, shallow path to pursue for America. According to participants in this study, false hope serves only to deepen people's sense that the nation is stuck, unable to move forward, and further erode the very basis in society for trust and credibility.

Today people seek authentic hope — something genuine, in tune with the reality of their daily lives, that calls forth the best in Americans.

But who will stop long enough, and exhibit the courage, to pursue authentic hope?

Nature of Authentic Hope

Americans find authentic hope in their abiding belief in the very nature and past experience of this nation and its people. It arises from something that is permanent, indelible in people's lives — the tradition of American ideals and their proven steadfastness in one test after another.

But it would be a terrible mistake today to confuse this abiding hope with a kind of boundless American enthusiasm — an abundant, confident hope, overflowing and pervading people's thoughts and mood. It is clear from this study that in these times citizens do not have such enthusiasm for American public life and politics.

Nor is this abiding hope to be confused with a sense of optimism — a kind of cheerful, giddy exuberance. Americans are not in a cheerful mood; nor do they believe that moving forward simply is a matter of electing the right president or inaugurating a new program or masking politics as usual in yet another slick Madison Avenue ad. Much work is in store for the nation, according to participants in this study.

Generating Hope

To engender authentic hope in America, leaders, citizens and others must actively spark people to imagine possibilities; and locate people in the American tradition of a nation always becoming. They must help people see that their fellow Americans still care deeply about this nation; and that they are part of something larger than just themselves. And they must shine the light on people across the country who are demonstrating the political will and capacity to bring about progress.

But be clear, the peddling of more false hope will not engage Americans in public life and politics; to the contrary, it will push people further away, deepening their frustration, deadening their public senses, and make them shake their heads in utter disbelief and concern.

Hope is precious and fragile.

Americans Find **False Hope** in...

Inflated expectations — pronouncements about plans and programs that may sound good but the plans cannot produce, at least on their own, the kind of change promised. Creates great mistrust.

Tough talk — a lot of “talk” on tough issues and “pledges” made that typically turn into nothing more than broken promises, pandering, double-speak. All this undermines a sense of forthrightness and caring about the common interest.

Taking the pulse — using polls to manipulate one’s ideas, positions and speeches and then suggesting people have been heard. Offers a kind of vacuous politics by reaction; leadership is missing often.

Manufactured heroes — exaggerating one’s past record, performance and self-importance in various events; suggesting one has all the answers about the future. Heroes cannot be manufactured.

Witch hunts — a self-righteousness about others’ weaknesses, especially when everyone has weaknesses. Produces a sense of double-standards and a politics of destruction.

Another crisis is upon us — making hay of an issue or problem that needs pointing out, but such warnings usually come and go swiftly. Echoes of the sky is falling, once more; results in disbelief.

The guilt trip — beating up on Americans over not participating in public life and politics, hoping that they will respond. This approach only backfires for it is based on guilt.

Americans Find **Authentic Hope** in...

Signs of small steps — knowing that everyday people are acting on challenges in their lives, neighborhoods, communities, including random acts of kindness.

Demonstrated conviction — people saying what they think, voting their conscience, acting with courage.

Enduring American traditions — recommitting to the nation’s founding principles, such as shared values, common sense, the spirit of overcoming challenges. Hope comes from the idea that America is always becoming and that history occurs in cycles.

Real conversations — people seeing or engaging in conversations that reignite their belief that people can talk together, even when they disagree, and make progress on public challenges.

Knowing that people still do care — articulating the growing belief among Americans that individuals must take greater responsibility for moving the nation forward. Hope comes from people knowing that others are in it with them.

A focus on real concerns — when there is increasing talk about real concerns in people’s lives such as education, guns, schools, violence. This gives people hope.

Spirituality — understanding that Americans’ seek a genuine spirituality — based on notions that people are innately good; the possibility of humankind; a sense of belonging to something larger than just themselves.

“People don’t know how to dream anymore.”

—Denver man

“The Founding Fathers could never have envisioned the size and complexity of government/society today. It’s like putting the toothpaste back in the tube.”

—Louisville woman

“We’re approaching a level of frustration that’s causing us to be more inventive in addressing the wrongs we see in our community.”

—Baltimore man

“Politicians will use the words from this group to sound like they really know what our needs are and will address them; so much of the time, **it’s just empty campaign promises.** They have such good handlers.”

—Dallas man

“Using polls to make decisions about how their constituents feel is **ridiculous.**”

—Baltimore woman

“I’m tired of everybody referring to politics as a game. That’s part of the problem. It’s not a game, and people shouldn’t be playing. **We should all be taking this much more seriously.**”

—Fresno woman

“Politicians ignore simple steps that they can take.”

—Denver man

“I [have realized today that I] need to become **a whole lot more involved.**”

—Louisville woman

“We should feel like a nation, but we’re so divided. ”

—Chicago man

**Citizens say
leaders peddle a
kind of false hope
— a cancerous,
perverse, shallow
path to pursue.**

About Hope

Hope is based on 11 citizen conversations, with some 150 citizens, held in six communities across the United States on May 15, 1999. The six communities are Louisville, KY; Denver, CO; Chicago, IL; Dallas, TX; Fresno, CA and Baltimore, MD.

The participants for these conversations were randomly selected to reflect a cross-section of age, gender, occupation, marital status, ethnicity, education and political affiliation. The citizen conversations were led by trained facilitators.

This research was funded with a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, a Philadelphia-based foundation making strategic investments that encourage and support citizen participation in addressing critical issues affecting social change. The grant to The Harwood Institute supports an ongoing initiative to crystallize citizen aspirations for politics and public life and the development of the Harwood Barometer for Political Conduct.

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a catalyst for charting a course for America's public life. It works to deepen the understanding, sensibilities and practices of individuals, communities and institutions on how the public realm works and how to make progress in it. The Harwood Institute is a non-profit, non-partisan 501(c)3 organization.



The **Harwood** Institute

4915 St. Elmo Avenue • Suite 402 • Bethesda, MD 20814
301-656-3669 • 301-656-1533 fax