

Education, population, poverty, tax...getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining it's actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.

Belonging and bridges

By Gailina Liew, Executive Director, Jersey Policy Forum

Watching the political drama continuing to unfold in the United States these past few weeks has been surreal for many: a fair and free democratic election that resulted in a decisive win for the challenger (Biden); the then incumbent president's refusal to accept the result followed by months of propaganda by him (Trump) and his supporters to establish an alternative reality based on unproven claims about widespread fraud and that the election was "stolen" to justify the assertion that Trump would carry on as President into a second term; the violent storming of the US Capitol by people protesting the formal confirmation of Biden as the new US president on January 6, 2021; the second impeachment of Trump one week later. At the time of writing, the Presidential inauguration ceremony on January 20, 2021 is just a day away with many predicting and prepared for violent mayhem. What is really going on there?

Do people in the US really cherish their democracy?

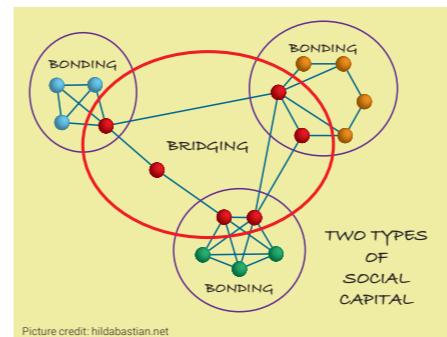
Turns out that party loyalty might actually trump democratic principles. A recent Yale University study published in the American Political Science Review found that only 3.5% of US voters would vote against their chosen candidate to protect democratic principles. According to co-authors Prof. Milan Svolik and PhD candidate Matthew Graham, "[O]ur findings show that US voters, regardless of their party affiliation, are willing to forgive undemocratic behaviour to achieve their partisan ends and policy goals...[P]olarisation raises the stakes of elections and, in turn, the price of prioritising democratic principles over partisan interests...[V]oters make tradeoffs. For the most part, people support candidates who share their partisan ideological, or policy goals, even if that means condoning undemocratic behaviour."

THINK-TANK



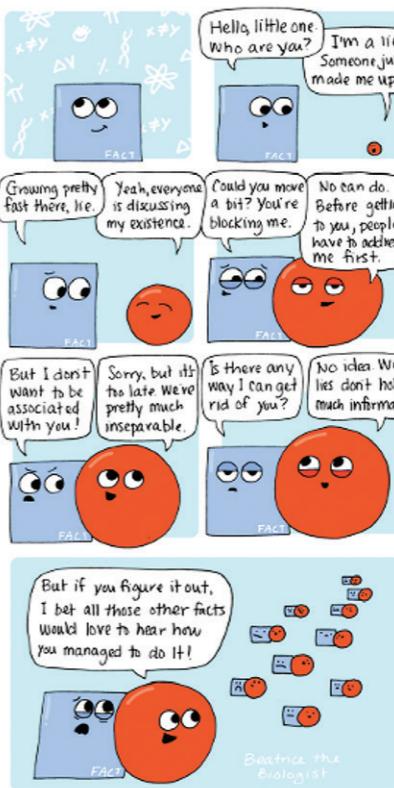
And what about personal values and principles?

Prof. Lavine at the University of Minnesota specializes in the psychological underpinnings of political behaviour. His research suggests that party loyalty is such a large part of a person's identity that it has turned traditional assumptions about democracy upside down – instead of voters asking themselves "How do I feel about this issue?", they ask "What is my party's



position on this issue?". Putting a party's priorities ahead of personal ones is tied up in the human need to belong to a group – think sticking with one's team to beat the other team - and this lies at the heart of the democratic inversion theory. Prof. Lavine refers to Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam who noted in his book, *Bowling Alone – The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, that Americans used to be engaged in many different activities such as bowling leagues that formed part of their social identity with groups that had little to do with politics. The human activity of forming social connections with others is described as social capital which can be bridging (outward-looking and inclusive of others) or bonding (inward-looking and exclusive of others). Decades ago, Americans would be attending church, playing in the bowling league, engaging in knitting circles and engaging with their friends, families and communities in many different ways.

In more recent times, factors such as increasing social isolation and internet use, change in population demographics, increasing inequality of outcomes and declining trust in institutions, etc. have increased the significance of other social identifications that we have always had – think race, gender, geography, urban/rural, religion, etc. In the US, these other factors are being used to create a strong social identity that lines up with the perceived social characteristics of the political parties. "Being Republican is now associated with being white, being a born-again Christian, not having a college education, and living in a small town or a rural area", says Lavine.



connections within a defined group that is then susceptible to all kinds of biases and challenges brought on by communicating within echo chambers – all compounded by the prolific use of social media to ensure that no other views can be heard.

Ultimately, Putnam believes that people and communities benefit from a balance of both bridging and bonding social capital to develop powerful collective identities to address the human need to belong while being inclusive of other collective identities. He notes that there are seven "spheres deserving special attention" to begin to address this challenge.

1. Educational reforms including improved civics education, well designed service learning programs, extra-curricular activities and smaller schools
2. More family-oriented workplaces to enable development of social capital at work.
3. Supportive urban design
4. Religion to be both more influential and at the same time more tolerant
5. More use of technologies that reinforce, rather than replace, face-to-face interaction
6. More interactive art and cultural activities
7. Reforming political campaign activities and decentralization of power

For a less academic approach, read Colum McCann's *Apeirogon*, a novel based on the real friendship between two fathers, an Israeli and a Palestinian, who have each lost a daughter in the longstanding Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Both join a support group for bereaved parents to share their grief and advocate for a peaceful resolution. "This became their jobs: to tell the story of what had happened to their girls."

From Putnam's work, we can see that this behaviour is about strong bonding

What stories can we all share to build more bridges?