



AP Photo/Brennan Linsley

Gun-rights advocate, restaurant owner and mother of four sons, Lauren Boebert wears her usual gun on her hip as she brushes the hair of Roman, 3, as the family gets ready to leave home for church in Rifle, Colo., on May 1. "When we first opened Shooters Grill, we were one month in, and I was there alone a lot, and there was actually a man who was beat to death in the alley. He lost his life that night, and it kinda shook me up. I was there alone a lot and I thought, 'what am I gonna do, what am I gonna do if something happens, what if somebody comes in here, my husband isn't here to protect me, I'm all alone,' and really, that's what got me to open-carry."



AP Photo/Matt Rourke

Dorothy Johnson-Speight visits the grave of her son, Khaaliq Jabbar Johnson, in Philadelphia on Monday, May 9. Johnson was killed in 2001 — shot seven times over a parking space dispute. "We're losing our loved ones at an alarming rate. I don't think that folks that are fighting and talking about the Second Amendment understand us. We don't want to take the rights of responsible gun owners away from those people. We just don't want our loved ones to be murdered on the streets of Philadelphia and cities across the country because they have the opportunity to get guns so easily," she says.

YEARNING FOR UNITY



AP Photo/David Goldman

Richie Clendenen, lead pastor at Christian Fellowship Church, left, and his wife Jenny, say evening prayers with their son, Trey, 11, as he goes to bed at their home in Benton, Ky., Sunday April 10. "I worry about the country he's going to inherit. I feel our rights are slowly being taken away from us," said Richie Clendenen. "I pray if Christianity could lose all rights in his future. I question what that's going to mean for him." Even in this deeply religious swath of western Kentucky — a state where about half the residents are evangelical — conservative Christians feel under siege.



AP Photo/Mary Altaffer

Police officer Jessi D'Ambrosio, right, of the 120th precinct in the Staten Island borough of New York, speaks to a resident while on patrol at the Richmond Terrace Houses, Thursday, July 7. D'Ambrosio, 32, and his partner, Mary Gillespie, 28, are the new "neighborhood coordinating officers" for the six-building project where Eric Garner once lived. Jersey Street, with a reputation for crime, runs the length of a complex, most of whose residents are black. "We want them to feel comfortable with us and that's what we're building on," Gillespie says.



AP Photo/Claire Galofaro

Billy Prater, 27, adjusts a Donald Trump sign on his fence in Beech Creek, W.Va., in Mingo County on April 28. Laid off from the mines, he had been out of work for more than a year. Now he works for the railroad, but the major customer is the collapsing coal industry so his work is unsteady. He was a registered Democrat from a family of diehard Democrats. But when he hung the Trump sign, his neighbors started calling and sending him messages, asking where he got it and how to get their own. "Everybody on this creek wants one," he said.

ENDURING DIVISIVENESS

By JERRY SCHWARTZ
Associated Press

Though they live about 1,730 miles apart, though they've never met, though they are of different races and backgrounds, Lauren Boebert and Dorothy Johnson-Speight speak almost in unison when they lament the fracturing of America.

Americans must "come together, be non-judgmental about people and their opinions," says Johnson-Speight. Americans must "come together as one," says Boebert.

And yet these two women stand squarely at the epicenter of American acrimony — territory explored by The Associated Press in "Divided America," a series of stories that surveyed a United States that is far from united.

Boebert owns the gun-friendly Shooters Grill in the aptly named town of Rifle, Colorado, and wears a handgun. Johnson-Speight fights for gun control laws after the 2001 murder of her 24-year-old son Khaaliq Jabbar Johnson, shot seven times in a dispute over a Philadelphia parking spot.

Their differences are stark, but their yearning for a more civil and less divided nation is genuine. In that, they mirror other Americans interviewed over the past six months. They are caught up in a campaign that magnified its disagreements, and left them longing for harmony; they live in a country that cannot square its present with its pedigree as "one nation, under God, indivisible."

The fact is, America's differences are real, and cannot be glossed over.

In Missoula, Montana, an effort to welcome dozens of refugees — Congolese, Afghans, Syrians — was met with demonstrations and angry confrontations. "I didn't do this to be controversial. I didn't do this to stir the pot," says Mary Poole, one of the leaders of the refugee project — but she did. Two patriotic visions came into conflict: the America that welcomes the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, and the America still shaken by terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and in the years since, insisting on homeland security above all.

On New York's Staten Island, police and the policed struggle to coexist. On an island that is home to 3,000 police officers, a black man suspected of selling loose cigarettes died in an encounter with police in 2014. The black community knows the police do an important job, but it is deeply

distrustful after the death of Eric Garner and other violent encounters with authority. Police, meanwhile, feel unappreciated, their character impugned. "I think the divide is worse than it should be and more than people think it is," says retired detective Joe Brandefine.

At the Christian Fellowship Church in Benton, Kentucky, pastor Richie Clendenen tells his congregation, "There's nobody more hated in this nation than Christians." Evangelical Christians' numbers are in decline, their political clout diminished. On signal issues — particularly same-sex marriage — they have lost, at least for the moment. They are angry and frustrated and unwilling to surrender. "We are moving more and more in conflict with the culture and with other agendas," says David Parish, a former pastor at Christian Fellowship.

There's so much more: Americans split on climate change, between those who say it is an existential threat and those who deny it is happening or at least that man has anything to do with it. Even as they contemplate electing the first woman president, even as women take on combat roles, Americans are struggling with a misogynistic backlash, online and in real life. Then there's the gun debate, which Adam Winkler, a constitutional law professor at UCLA says is "more polarized and sour than any time before in American history."

There is common ground. At the Annin Flagmakers factory in South Boston, Virginia, seamstress Emily Bouldin says Americans "may be divided on some things, but when it comes down to the most important things we come together." Nearly all Americans, according to surveys, believe in small business, the public schools, helping the less fortunate and caring for veterans.

Some differences, though, are profound and lasting, having less to do with what people think and more to do with where they fall — on which side of the line between prosperity and ill-fortune.

In Logan, West Virginia, in central Appalachia, the decline of the coal industry has brought a population drain, rampant drug abuse, heightened poverty (cremations are up because folks can't afford caskets) and deep resentment that fed support for Republican Donald Trump: "I don't know what's in his

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the final installment of Divided America, AP's exploration of the economic, social and political divisions in American society. For the complete series, visit eastoregonian.com

head, what his vision is for us," said Ashley Kominar, a mother of three whose husband lost his job in the mines. "But I know he has one and that's what counts."

The recovery from the Great Recession has left behind a lot of rural America. The Washington-based Economic Innovation Group found that half of the new business growth over the past four years was concentrated in just 20 populous counties, and three quarters of the nation's economically distressed ZIP codes are in rural areas.

The recovery meant little to workers in Hannibal, Ohio, where Chinese competition resulted in the loss of the largest employer, the Ormet aluminum plant.

And it meant little to students in Waukegan, Illinois; poor school districts had no way to make up funding losses when federal stimulus money dried up. So while the nearby Stevenson district spends close to \$18,800 per student, Waukegan spends about \$12,600. Its students must cope with a high school that is often badly maintained, where as many as 28 students share a single computer.

That Stevenson is mostly white and Waukegan is mostly minority should come as little surprise. The racial divide endures, at least in some part because minorities continue to be significantly underrepresented in Congress and nearly every state legislature, an AP analysis found. Thanks to gerrymandering and voting patterns, non-Hispanic whites make up a little over 60 percent of the U.S. population, but still hold more than 80 percent of all congressional and state legislative seats.

An example: African-Americans represent more than a fifth of Delaware residents, but for the past 22 years Margaret Rose Henry has been the state's only black senator.

"If there were more black elected officials, we would have a better chance to get something done," Henry says.

Much of this is not new. As much as Americans like to recall the past as a rosy Norman Rockwell illustration, they have been at odds from the start — thousands of British loyalists battled their revolutionary neighbors in the colonies, North and South went to war over race, labor and management fought for decades, often violently, and the Vietnam era was awash with vitriol.

If today's divisiveness is different, some say, perhaps it is because of a lack of leadership.

"Yes, America is great. It could be a lot better if the politicians weren't fighting each other all the time," says Rodney Kimball, a stove dealer in West Bethel, Maine.

Elvin Lai, a San Diego hotelier, says the voters themselves must accept much of the blame.

"I do believe that our political system is broken," he says. "I do believe that a person that is centered and is really there to bring the country together won't get the votes because they're not able to speak to the passionate voters who want to see change."

It's those passionate voters, after all, who cocoon themselves with the likeminded, watching Fox News if they lean right or reading Talking Points Memo if they're on the left. In their ideological segregation, their minds are not open to compromise.

Take gun control. For all the nastiness surrounding the issue, a Pew Research Center poll in August showed 85 percent of American supported background checks for purchases at gun shows and in private sales, 79 percent support laws to prevent the mentally ill from buying guns, 70 percent approve of a federal database to track gun sales.

Dorothy Johnson-Speight, who founded the anti-violence, anti-gun group Mothers in Charge after her son's death, says these are steps well worth taking. "We don't want to take the rights of responsible gun owners away," she says.

Her aim is peace — both in the streets and in the public sphere.

"We've got to find a way to be more accepting of one another, more tolerant of each other," she says. "We have more things in common than we do that are different and we need to find those commonalities in order to live in peace."

Lauren Boebert calls most gun measures "crazy," but she is not skeptical about the ability of the American people to rise above division, on this and other issues.

"Right now, we're using our rights to tear each other apart," she says, passionately. "Freedom of speech, it's just being used to say whatever mean, harmful, violent thing you can. ... That's not what it's for. You also have the freedom to lift them up and to hold them up and edify them. Let's come together, let's unify as Americans, all of us."