

Vanderbilt Unity Index

“Unity” is a term easily thrown around. Defining it and measuring it, however, are more daunting. This brief essay undertakes that challenge.

Whether unity evokes visions of a fading photograph of grandmother’s victory garden stuck in a World War II era ration book, flickering black and white footage of a crowd covering the expanse of the National Mall on a sweltering summer day, or a president grabbing a bullhorn on top of a pile of rubble, images of a unified United States are part of our collective memory. However, these images of national nostalgia belie the fact that disagreement, not unity, is the normal state of affairs in American public life.

Politics is always about managing conflict and disagreement, determining, as Harold Lasswell once said, “who gets what, when, and how.”¹ Abraham Lincoln was more pointed: “unanimity is impossible.”² The **Vanderbilt Unity Index (VUI)** seeks to measure fluctuations in Americans’ general sense of faith and trust in their political institutions, not the reactions of the public to particular policies. As an aggregate of several different inputs, we believe the VUI can serve as an estimate of the country’s faith in our shared political life.

A cursory reading of American history demonstrates that the country has been defined by deeply held political disagreements. If presidential approval alone stood in as a measure of national unity, the unity “rate” would have been hovering within a point or two of 50 percent since the advent of polling in the 1930s. President Donald Trump’s approval rating was almost always in the low 40s, while President Barack Obama’s was usually in the high 40s. Only a handful of times (and usually when the United States has been on a war footing) have presidents soared in the ratings. George W. Bush hit 90 percent approval in the Gallup poll after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. FDR was in the high 80s right after the attack on Pearl Harbor. But these are the exceptions, and no president’s popularity has stayed at those levels for any sustained length of time. By the fall of 2008, the 43rd president’s popularity stood in the mid-20s.³ The bottom line: Disagreement, not unity, is the norm.

As prominent political scientist Samuel Huntington observed, the United States was destined to be in a constant state of “disharmony.”⁴ Famed journalist Eric Sevareid added an important twist to this point when he observed that “we are a turbulent society but a stable republic.”⁵ The story of American politics is largely a tale of conflict rather than consensus. After the hard-fought 1800 campaign to secure the presidency, Thomas Jefferson observed in his first inaugural address that “every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.”⁶ This distinction is important and seems to apply less to politics today as policy disagreements quickly harden into existential questions, and some political actors are willing to abrogate the “rules of the game” enshrined in the Constitution. Former Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam has recently reminded us that our leaders today question each other’s motives, and that evil intent is associated with the other side—rather than just disagreement about the means to achieve the common good.⁷

We launched the Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy with the following thesis:

Total partisan warfare has replaced evidence-based problem-solving as the controlling force in our public life; the engines of perpetual conflict are overwhelming the classic work of politics: the

¹ Lasswell, Harold D. *Politics; Who Gets What, When, How*, by Harold D. Laswell. New York: Whittlesey house, 1936.

² https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln1.asp

³ <https://news.gallup.com/interactives/185273/presidential-job-approval-center.aspx>

⁴ Huntington, Samuel P. *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. Harvard University Press, 1981

⁵ Sevareid, Eric. *Not So Wild a Dream*. University of Missouri Press, 1976, p. xix.

⁶ https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jefinau1.asp

⁷ Haslam, Bill. *Faithful Presence: The Promise and the Peril of Faith in the Public Square*. Nashville: Nelson Books, 2001, p. 26.

mediation of differences. Rhetorical jousting matches, whether in 280-character tweets or split-screen soundbites, elicit emotional outrage, reinforce ideological intransigence and elevate platitudes of polarization above informed discourse. The path forward is therefore all too often left uncharted—and, perhaps most tragically, even unsought. This is not a partisan point: As a matter of discernible fact, the American experiment as a diverse, multiethnic democratic republic is undergoing one of its most difficult tests in its 244-year history.⁸

Our goal in this essay is to measure unity so we can track how the country is doing, especially after the terrible events of Jan. 6, 2021. We have created the VUI, which provides a quarterly snapshot of how unified Americans feel while allowing us to compare these results against other quarterly periods since 1981. Having a 40-year trend available helps provide important context to understanding the shifts in unity felt by the American public. Because some of the inputs used in constructing the VUI are not available for periods before 1981, the VUI would not be a useful tool for measuring American political sentiment any earlier.

We anticipate that the VUI will be questioned. That is only fair. Even so, we believe it represents an important starting point, and future changes and refinements will be invaluable. This measure is based on publicly available data and techniques commonly employed by social scientists, allowing for others to make those improvements, if so inclined.

As described in more detail below, the VUI incorporates five inputs, including publicly available survey data, polling questions themselves, and measurements of Congressional polarization, to provide a quarterly and replicable measurement of Americans' level of political consensus (which we believe represents a credible measurement of "unity," as such a concept is typically not polled by national surveys). Combining inputs like "strong" presidential approval and ideological identification, the VUI rescales the data to create a single score with a potential range of 0–100 (with 100 representing a most unified state) for each annual quarter from 1981 through the first quarter of 2021.

Given the inherent limitations of polling when it comes to terms like "unity," which may have starkly different meanings across the population, we concede the VUI likely will prove most useful in indicating whether the American public is more or less unified on political matters at a given point of time compared with prior or later periods than a definitive or absolute calculation of unity within the American body politic.

VUI's Five Components

To enable meaningful historical comparisons and to ensure the benchmark remains germane in the future, we sought data that has been available for many years and that we anticipate will continue to be collected for the foreseeable future. Also, we need to measure *strongly held* political opinions and *strong* disagreement rather than more generic preferences for one political party or policy proposal. Therefore, we designed the VUI to capture the share of "strong" or "extreme" liberals, for example, rather than those simply identifying as "liberal."

The VUI rests on the following five indicators, which we have collected since 1981, and the 40-plus years of data they represent provide a strong starting foundation for the VUI:

- **Presidential Approval**: Measuring presidential approval has been a staple of the American polling industry for more than 85 years. However, as noted above, when determining the level of political consensus, we need to look beyond the generic approval/disapproval numbers. The VUI collects

⁸ <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/unity/about/>

the percentage of Americans who “strongly” disapprove of the president as calculated by the Gallup Poll.⁹ Respondents were asked, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [president] is handling his job as President? Do you approve/disapprove strongly or only moderately?” **Figure 1** shows the percentage of Americans expressing strong disapproval of the current president on a quarterly basis since 1981.

- **Ideological Extremists:** Again, simply measuring the number of Americans who consider themselves “liberal” or “conservative” likely is not an effective measurement of political unity. Instead, the VUI takes into account the share of the public comprised of ideological extremists, defined as self-identifying as a “strong” liberal or “strong” conservative on a 5-point scale, as measured by several reputable polling organizations. Survey respondents were asked, “Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a liberal, moderate, or conservative? Would you say you are strongly liberal/conservative or somewhat liberal/conservative?” As shown in **Figure 2**, the steep rise in ideological extremists since 2000 corresponds with current scholarship surrounding growing polarization.
- **Social Trust:** We measured the share of Americans who report feeling they can generally trust other people in the biennial General Social Survey (GSS). The survey question asks, “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful dealing with people?” Respondents can either answer “Can trust” or “Can’t be too careful.” Due to the availability of survey data, this component is measured biennially rather than quarterly. The results depicted in **Figure 3** again correspond with current scholarship noting the continued decline in social trust across American society since 2000.
- **Congressional Polarization:** Roll call votes available from www.voteview.com on a biennial basis at the close of each Congress comprise an important component of the VUI because we believe representatives are generally motivated to vote in ways that they feel would ensure their reelection. We use the ideological distance between the two political parties in the U.S. House of Representatives as a measure of elite political conflict. Specifically, we take the absolute difference between the first dimension DW-Nominate score of the median Democrat Representative and the median Republican Representative. This measurement has been employed previously by scholars as a measurement of polarization.¹⁰ Again, the increasing levels of Congressional polarization shown on **Figure 4** mirror current research on growing polarization in recent years.
- **Protests and Civil Unrest:** To estimate the level of active civil unrest in the country, we measure the number of polling questions about protests asked by major polling organizations in a given quarter.¹¹ While we recognize that this is perhaps an unconventional measure, we believe that this captures moments of national controversy and dissent as pollsters want to measure public opinion on topical issues ongoing in the country. Because yesterday’s headlines generate tomorrow’s polling questions, we assume that the number of questions asked about major protests reflects the scale of civil unrest. Consider, for example, after large-scale protests against the Iraq War were held across cities around the world in early 2003, major polling firms posed seven questions about

⁹ In the event Gallup Poll did not ask respondents to state if they strongly approve/disapprove of the President in a given quarter an alternative poll with the same question wording was used.

¹⁰ Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. Congress: A political-economic history of roll call voting. Oxford University Press on Demand, 2000

Bateman, David A., Joshua D. Clinton, and John S. Lapinski. "A House Divided? Roll Calls, Polarization, and Policy Differences in the US House, 1877–2011." *American Journal of Political Science* 61.3 (2017): 698-714.

¹¹ We counted the number of survey questions asked by Gallup, The Roper Center, The Associated Press, Pew Research Center, ABC News, CBS News, and NBC News that included the word “protest” and controlled for the total number of surveys conducted in that quarter to account for the general increase in polling over this time period.

protests over the following month, but they had asked no similar questions in the month preceding such protests. **Figure 5** shows the number of polling questions on “major protests” since 1981.

To create the VUI, we re-scaled all these components to run from 0 to 100 and in the same direction (with higher numbers indicating more harmonious outcomes), combined them and normalized them to 100 so that 100 is the maximum possible value of unity. We allowed all factors to influence the measure equally. Because Congressional Polarization and Social Trust rely on biennial (rather than quarterly) data, we expect some of the quarterly shifts in the VUI to be muted.

Figure 1: Strong Disapproval of President

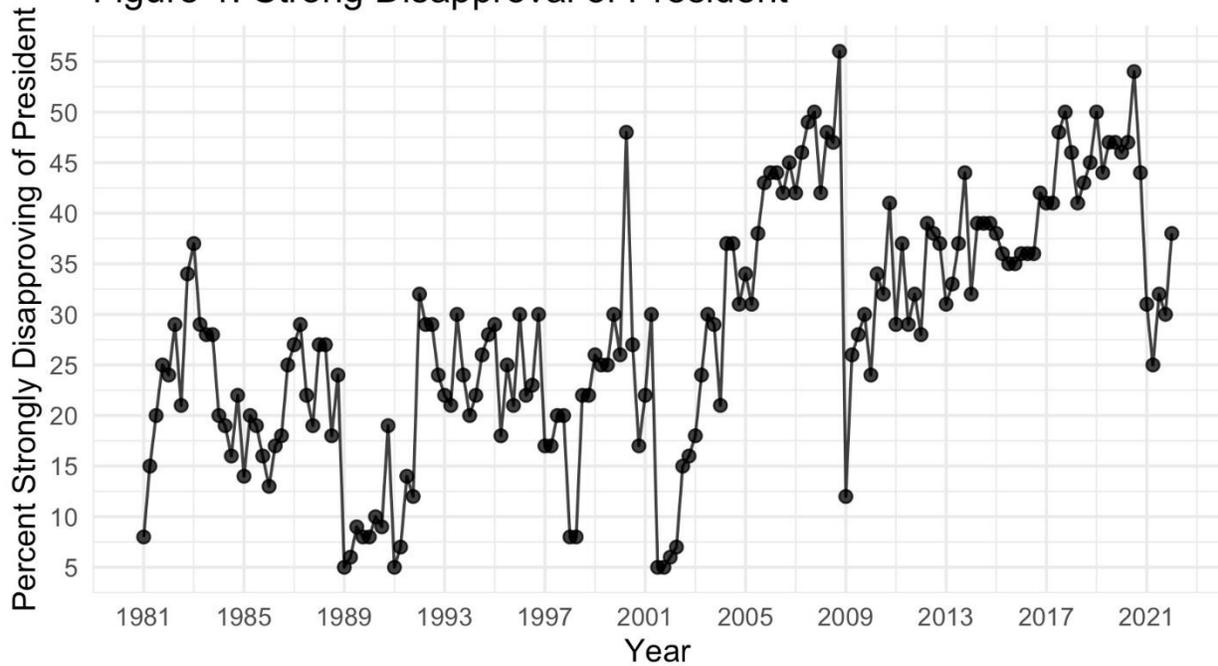


Figure 2: Ideological Extremists

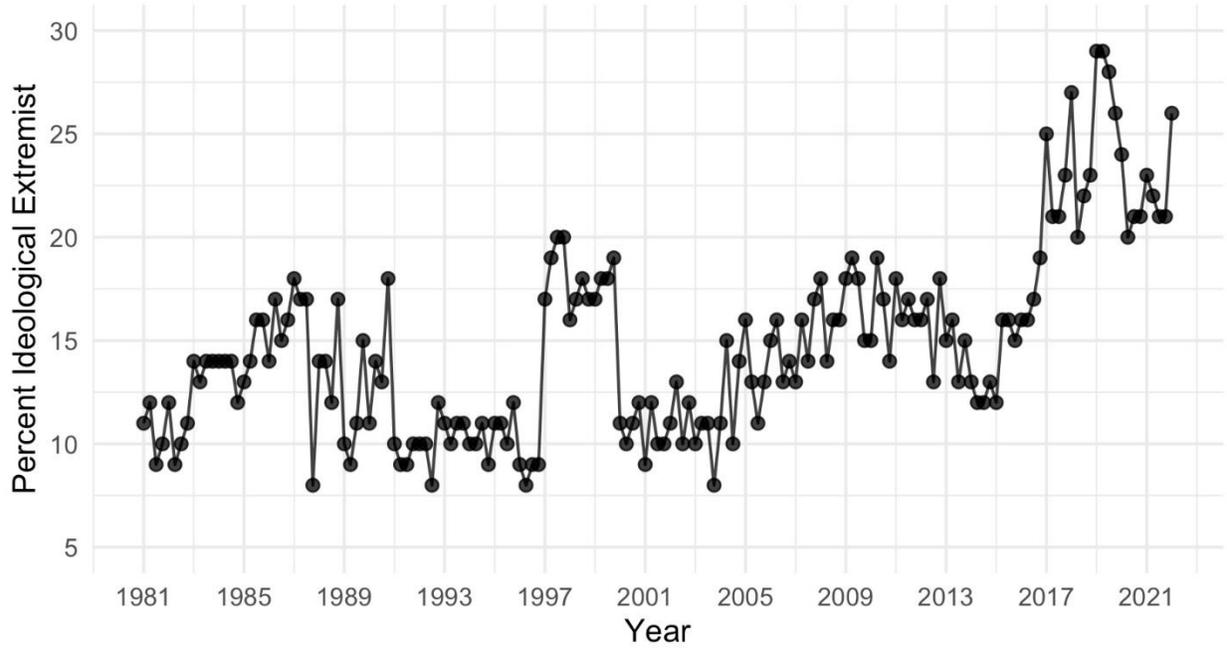


Figure 3: Social Trust

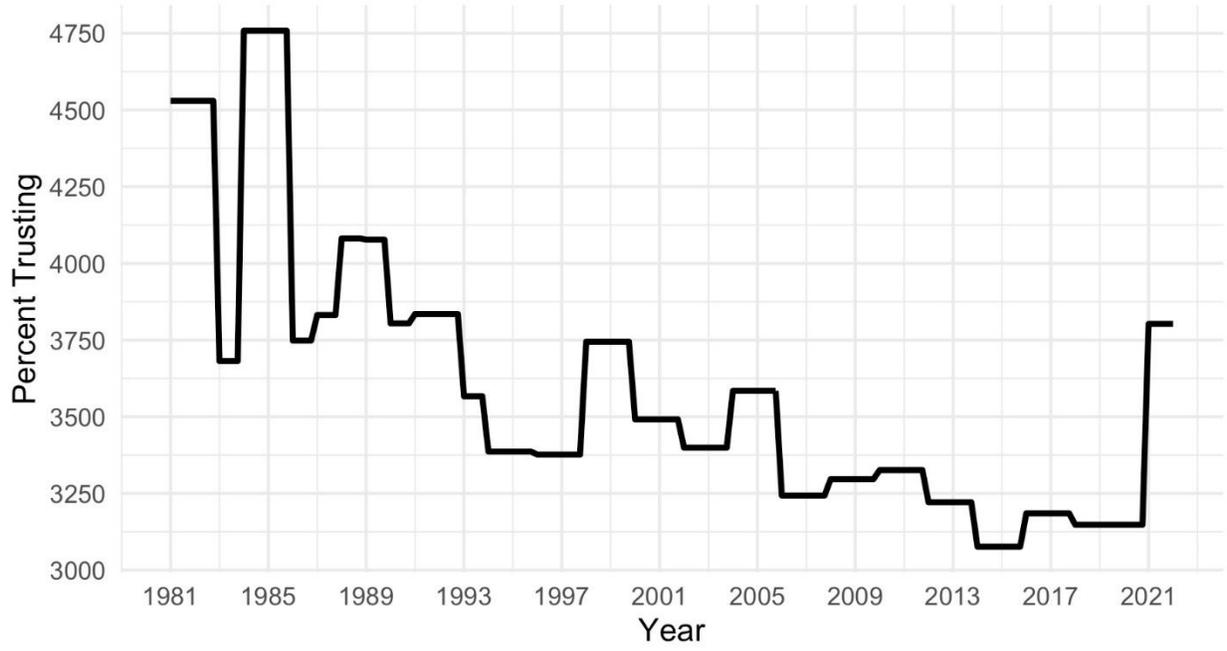


Figure 4: Congressional Polarization

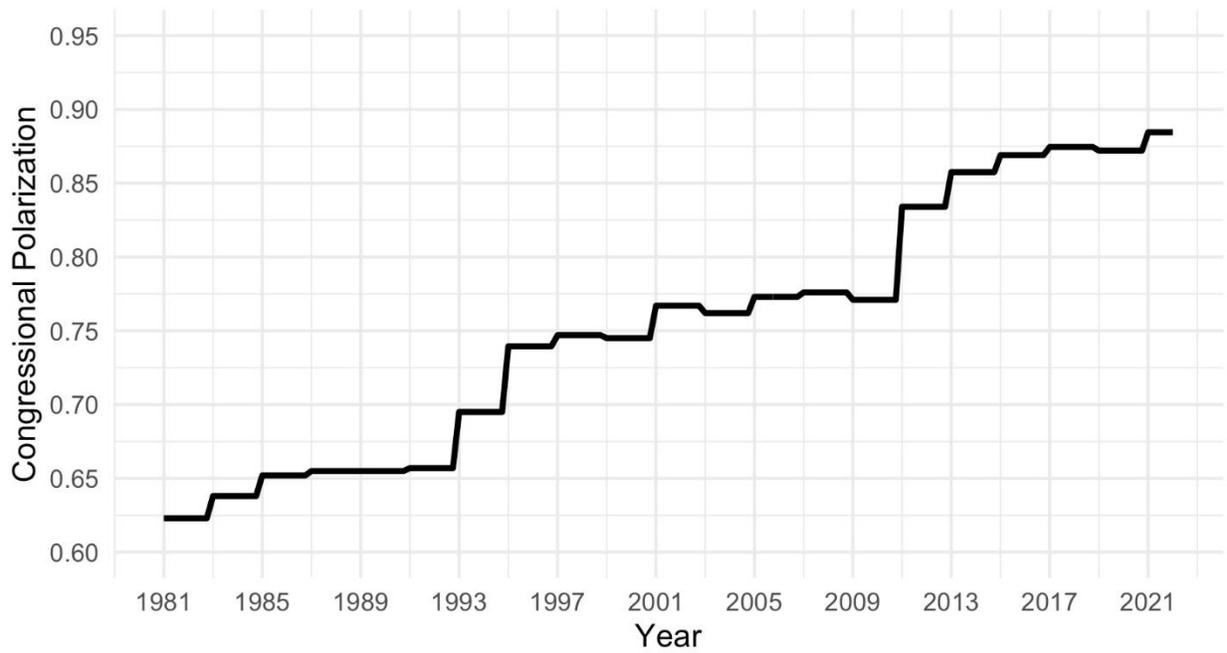
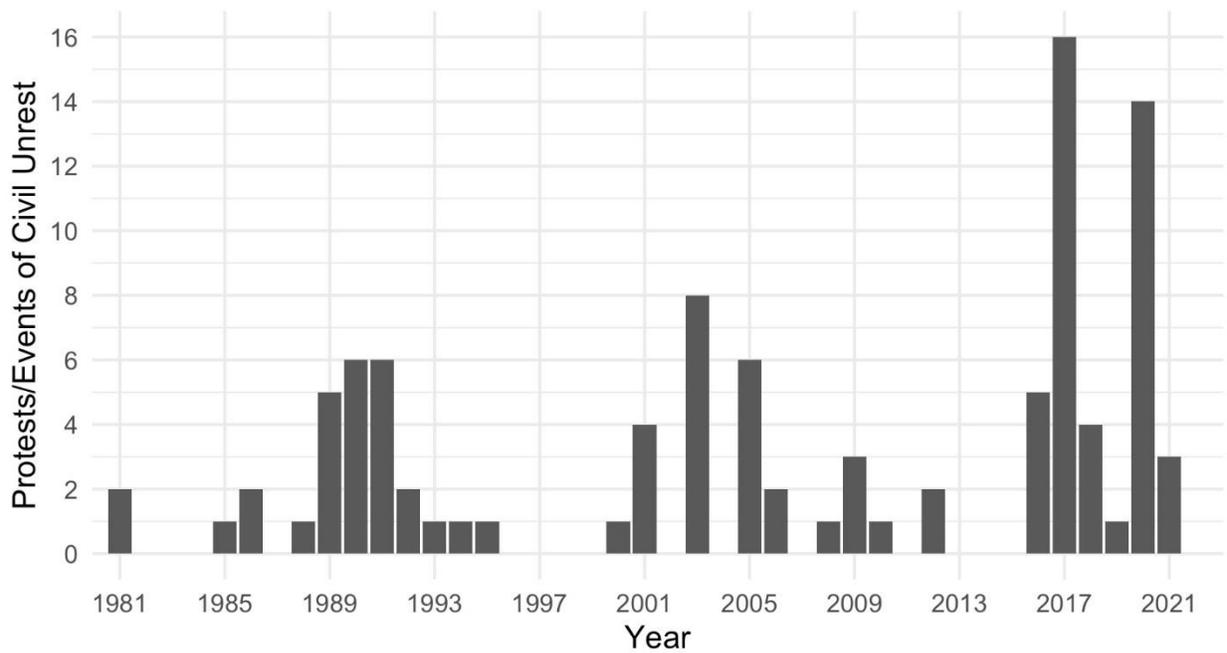


Figure 5: Protests and Civil Unrest



Analysis and Results

The VUI indicates a gradual decline in national unity since 1981, a fact that has been recognized by scores of pundits and politicians decrying America’s rising polarization in recent years. By comparing the shifts

in the VUI with recent American political history, the index moves in predictable ways, giving us at least some reason to believe the index has merit. So called “face validity” is important when assessing the VUI. As one looks at this measure, we believe the VUI is more effective at demonstrating shifts in national unity rather than as an absolute measurement of it at a particular moment in time. As **Figures 6 and 7** indicate, Americans are now less politically unified than they were 40 years ago. That is not a surprising result, but that fact gives us some confidence we may be on to something with the VUI.

With America emerging from the national malaise of the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the VUI (as shown in **Figure 6**) shows that President Ronald Reagan’s inauguration ushered in a period of national comity; the average VUI during both the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations (1981–92) was 67 points. Quarterly shifts in the VUI correspond nicely with key political events. The six-point dip in VUI in late 1982 and early 1983 corresponds with the height of the 1980s recession. We also see a two-point drop when the Iran Contra Affair was exposed in late 1986. The highest levels of national unity occurred during the end of the Cold War in December 1989 and the start of the Gulf War in late summer of 1990, where the VUI peaks above 70. While variation in the VUI is evident during Reagan’s eight years in office and the presidencies of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the trend line in **Figure 7** begins its sharp downward slope with the increase in ideological polarization in both the mass public and Congress, the rise and influence of Newt Gingrich as speaker of the house, and the nationalization of Congressional campaigns after 1994.

This general downward slope is interrupted in 2001 when the country rallied around President George W. Bush after the 9/11 attacks, when the VUI reaches 67 points, but this uptick was short-lived as Americans divided over such actions as the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The average VUI during Bush’s first term (2001–04) was 64 points, but it dropped to an average VUI of 58 during his second term—capturing the rising ideological polarization and discontent around the increasingly unpopular Iraq War. The eight-point spike in the first quarter of 2009, to 65 points, shows that Obama initially delivered on his campaign pledge to bridge the growing divide between red and blue America, but the VUI very quickly resumes its negative trend—showing that any euphoria associated with Obama’s historic election was short-lived.

The VUI demonstrates the “honeymoon” period of most new presidential administrations, the exceptions being presidents Bush (43) and Trump. While Trump observed in his inaugural address that the “Bible tells us how good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity,” his ascension to the presidency drove the VUI to its lowest points in the 40-year span. In fact, of the 10 quarters scoring lowest on the VUI, nine of them were during the Trump administration—a period consumed with divisive political rhetoric and critique of democratic institutions. That fact, which is not a partisan point, adds to the credibility of our measure. The VUI drops more than 12 points after his inauguration, and the VUI reaches its lowest recorded value in the summer of 2017 during the Charlottesville, Virginia, riots. An 11-point drop in unity occurs in 2020 with the onset of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests.

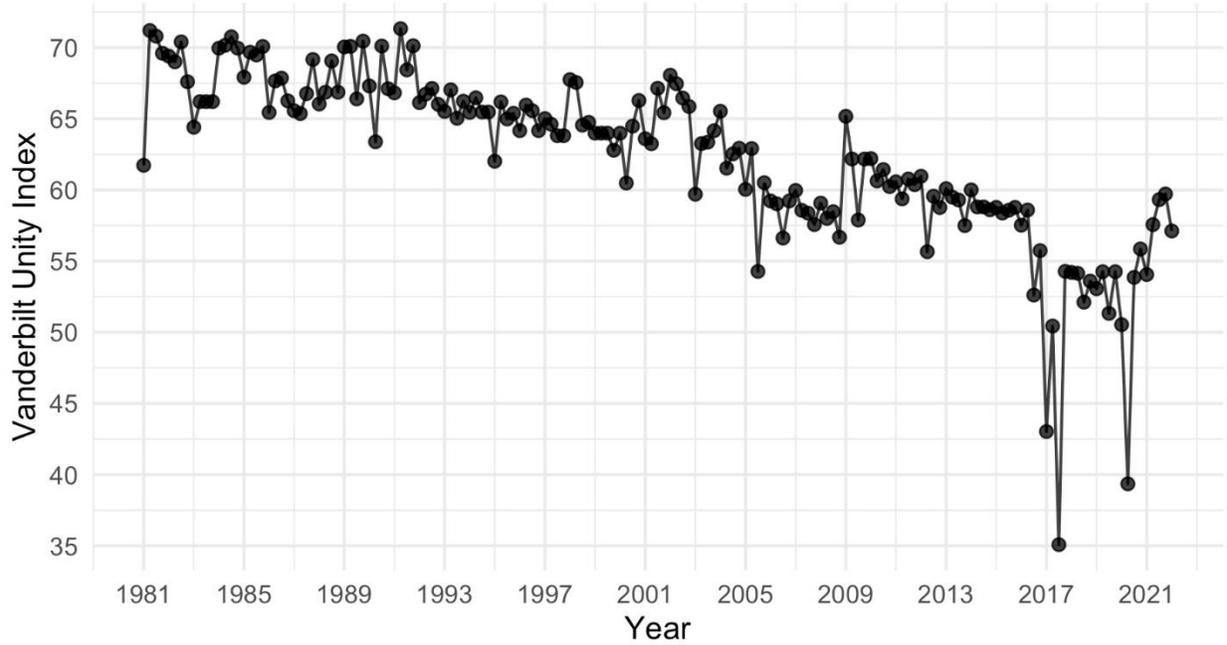
Even though President Joe Biden has managed to reverse the trend, it remains to be seen whether rising inflation and continued controversy over COVID-19 cause the VUI to quickly resume its downward trajectory. This increase in the VUI could simply be the “honeymoon” period that has greeted each incoming administration, with the exception of George W. Bush and Trump. That said, Biden’s inauguration, in the shadow of the events of Jan. 6, 2021, was not marked by the same feelings of national unity that greeted his former running mate, let alone Ronald Reagan.

Conclusion

The VUI provides an initial empirical snapshot of the often-observed trend toward disharmony in modern American political life and represents a systematic effort to measure a difficult concept—“unity.” While

this measurement is far from perfect, the VUI demonstrates the commitment of the Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy to facts and evidence, enabling us to document whether President Joe Biden can fulfill his promise of “bringing America together, uniting our people and uniting our nation.”¹²

Figure 6: Vanderbilt Unity Index



¹² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>

Figure 7: Vanderbilt Unity Index Trend

