

## Report on The Patriotism Project: Re-imagining Patriotism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### *Summary*

Led by the Center for Ideas and Society (CIS) at the University of California, Riverside (UCR) and in partnership with the UCR Palm Desert Center and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at UCR Extension, this project engaged UCR and the Inland Southern California community in discussions of American patriotism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a patriotism laboring under conditions of social and political polarization. Patriotism in the United States surely honors pluralism and values free speech and individual expression. Yet how much disagreement can American patriotism brook? How deep is the divide between the patriotism of the right and the patriotism of the left? Does patriotism require whitewashing the racism, imperialism and xenophobia in much of U.S. history? Can or should one “love” America in the face of economic inequality, police brutality and civil unrest?

The project led three zoom conversations with local hosts and culminated in a virtual author’s talk and discussion with Steven B. Smith, Alfred Cowles Professor of Political Science and Professor of Philosophy at Yale University, about his new book, *Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes* (Yale University Press, February 2021). The three conversations leading up to this discussion focused on “Patriotism and Indigeneity,” led by UCR History professor, Clifford Trafzer, “Patriotism and Political Extremism,” led by UCR Political Science Professor John Medearis and “Patriotism and Black Lives Matter,” led by Paulette Brown-Hinds, publisher of *Black Voice News* and founder of Voice Media Ventures, a strategic media and content creation firm.

### *Were our project’s objectives met?*

The project had three primary aims. First, to look at the question of American patriotism through different demographic and disciplinary lenses; second, to overcome the “communication barrier” caused by increasing polarization and to provide participants the opportunity to engage in civil discourse with those who held differing values or viewpoints; and, third, to encourage collective reflection on the meaning of a wide range of American values associated with patriotism, including those of freedom, social justice, dissent and democratic institutions. These objectives were met.

Of the three locally-hosted discussions, perhaps the most moving was the first in which Professor Trafzer reported on the patriotism of the country’s Native Americans, who, he said, have always been passionately patriotic, serving in every U.S. war, beginning every community event with the Pledge of Allegiance and gearing their patriotism to the land itself. Participants in this discussion peppered Professor Trafzer with questions and added reflections of their own on love of land. The second locally-hosted discussion was more theoretically oriented, asking whether American *democratic* patriotism, far from dampening and discouraging dissent, instead requires it. Democracy, according to Professor Medearis, is necessarily oppositional, the title of his own book. The final session began with a consideration of Frederick Douglass’s speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” and centered on the on-going challenges of creating a truly inclusive nation.

Prior to the fourth event with Professor Smith on his new book, free copies were sent to the 112 project participants who requested it. Although not all registrants made it to the event, many

communicated independently with Professor Smith via email. At the actual event, the book club atmosphere facilitated a robust discussion, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Blp5xqjjV1k>.

*Who attended, listened, etc. and how many?*

Each of the sessions had about 50 participants, a mix of faculty, graduate students and community members. About half stayed for the sessions' break-out sessions. In specific,

- 44 participants attended the "Patriotism and Indigeneity" session;
- 50 participants attended the "Patriotism and Political Extremism" session
- 39 participants attended the "Patriotism and Black Lives Matter" session
- 47 participants attended the book discussion with Professor Smith.

*What was challenging about completing our project?*

There were no particular challenges. The Center staff worked hard to get copies of Professor Smith's book to those who requested but working with Yale University Press went smoothly.

*What impact do we think our work had on the campus community?*

What was important about this project was representing the possibility of civil discussion over fraught topics. Participants were respectful of one another, interested in what presenters and others had to say and seemed genuinely grateful for not only human contact, if virtual, under pandemic conditions but also reflections on America patriotism during turbulent times.

*How might the Center change the process moving forward to further support VOICE Initiative awardees' efforts?*

We pursued this initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic. Facilitating such dialogues in the future will have to find an appropriate venue for in-person discussions that can include both university and community participants.