

# Democracy's Meanings

# HOW THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS DEMOCRACY AND WHY IT MATTERS

# Nicholas T. Davis, Keith Gåddie, and Kirby Goidel

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and Why It Matters*

Nicholas T. Davis, Keith Gåddie,  
and Kirby Goidel

University of Michigan Press  
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## Preface

On January 6, 2021, a right-wing, pro-Trump protest was held on the National Mall to contest the results of the 2020 presidential election. It quickly evolved into a violent assault on the United States Capitol, threatening the safety and lives of lawmakers engaged in the final act of the American presidential election: the counting and certification of electoral votes. During the assault, five people were killed. It was the first failure of a peaceful transition of presidential power in U.S. history, and it brought into relief the observation of V. O. Key (1949/1984, 443) in *Southern Politics*, that “if a democratic regime is to work successfully it must be generally agreed that contestants for power will not shoot each other and that ballots will be counted as cast.”

What Key described is the foundation of the “democratic consensus.” In a democracy, free and fair elections determine the allocation of institutional power, and winners and losers alike must accept the results as the legitimate expression of the public will. While it was a surprise when and how this particular breakdown of the democratic consensus manifested, American democracy—as we argue throughout this book—has regularly endured existential, if not physical, crises, often clinging to the thin reeds of democratic legitimacy.

The January 6th insurrection was a bookend to an uncommonly anti-democratic presidency, and it resulted in subsequent calls to defend democracy. As Sen. Amy Klobuchar observed in her opening to the January 20 inauguration that installed Joe Biden to power, “when an angry, violent mob staged an insurrection and desecrated this temple of our democracy, it awakened us to our responsibilities as Americans . . . it falls on all of us,

not just the two leaders we are inaugurating today, to take up the torch of our democracy, not as a weapon of political arson, but as an instrument for good. We pledge today never to take our democracy for granted.”<sup>1</sup>

President Joe Biden’s inaugural address mentioned democracy 22 times, always as an active concept and primary subject, and presented the idea that the restoration of democracy could only occur through civic unity. Biden lauded the resilience of the country’s institutions and processes, noting that it was “democracy’s day” and that “just days after a riotous mob thought they could use violence to silence the will of the people, to stop the work of our democracy, and to drive us from this sacred ground,” the will of the majority had prevailed. The new president placed the charge for protecting and defending democracy squarely on the shoulders of the American people—a laudable challenge, though a tall task given the deep divisions within American politics.

Indeed, whatever brief respite democracy enjoyed during the Biden administration’s honeymoon was short-lived. Between January 1 and June 21, 2021, 17 states enacted 28 laws restricting the right to vote, and at least 61 more bills with additional, restrictive provisions are moving through conservative state legislatures (Brennan Center 2021). And while the proposed For the People Act (H.R. 1) would counteract some of these laws, it remains unlikely that Congressional Democrats will deliver federal voting rights protections. As a public letter signed by several hundred political scientists lamented, “time is running out.”<sup>2</sup>

Understanding what Americans think about (the state of) their democracy is the central focus of this book, which we started in late 2015. At the time, political, journalistic, and scholarly voices were already decrying the “crisis” of confidence in democracy. Polling allegedly reflected these concerns. Yet, few were asking people what they thought democracy was, or why it was in trouble. It struck us that understanding how people think about a concept like democracy—how they actually define it—would be useful in understanding whether they liked democracy, feared for its

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1. One might note with some irony that this same level of urgency was not present when the Voting Rights Act was gutted in 2013 by the Roberts Court in *Shelby County v. Holder*. While there was certainly appropriate criticism of that ruling at the time, broader concern for the well-being of democracy has a frustratingly late quality to it.

2. Political Scientists in Support of the For the People Act of 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.polisciforthepeople.com/>

health, saw it threatened, or reveled in its resilience. So, we polled the American public and asked them what democracy means.

As we emerge from the experiences of this period, we are struck by the democratic deficit that faces the United States. Americans are socially divided, and yet, they share a set of expectations for good governance that are woefully unfulfilled. The turmoil of the past several years will be difficult to resolve with any immediacy, and democracy remains beset by threats, from popular conspiratorial delusions to misperceptions about facts to weakened political institutions. It can be difficult to know where to begin.

Some will argue in the coming years that this period marked the end of America as the “Exceptional Nation.” This phrase, often bandied about but never clearly defined by the politicians and journalists who invoke it, is another example of American arrogance in the context of the broader world. The foundations of the American exceptionalism argument—the lack of a feudal system, the Puritan influence on a moral democracy, and republicanism as a substitute for classism and economic mobility—erode when confronted with the reality of the American experience. Slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow society are barely removed from both feudalism and classism. Economic mobility is possible, but exceedingly difficult due to the consolidation of wealth. The rules of representative democracy have antimajoritarian checks that have been routinely subjected to procedural abuses and contain design flaws that permit discriminatory laws designed to exclude citizens from the voting franchise and equal protection of the law. And there have been anti-democrats, populists, and strong-man authoritarians who have emerged throughout American history to take advantage of these developments. In that respect, former President Trump was a continuation of that tradition, joining the pantheon of populist executives like Huey Long, Gene Talmadge, and Alfalfa Bill Murray, who rose to power in authoritarian enclaves of the American South in the 1920s and 1930s.

Against this backdrop, we wrote this book, which stands in the shadow of Key’s argument that there is an “empirical democratic theory.” As we sit at the end of nearly six years of work exploring how the American public thinks about democracy, we find that citizens have strong opinions about democracy, how it should function, and the material conditions it produces. Our goal in writing this book was not to prescribe a

particular vision of democracy, but instead to understand how Americans actually think about it. We hope that our democracy typology, while a bit reductionist, is helpful in sparking more interest in these attitudes—when asked, for example, people really do expect more from democracy than the presence of elections. If democracy is in crisis, then forestalling future democratic erosion will depend on the demands that citizens have for democracy and, critically, the extent to which their elected representatives understand and respond to those demands. Ordinary people are not spectators, but the levers of power in American politics are frustratingly insulated from public demands.

We realize that this book spans the political conditions under which the Trump presidency arrived, floundered, and was eventually excused by like-minded partisans. Trying to make sense of that particular mess was not explicitly our intention, though it would be foolish to ignore it. The puzzle of what Americans think about democracy preceded Donald Trump—indeed, Herbert McClosky and John Zaller asked many similar questions in their 1984 book about Americans’ attitudes toward capitalism and democracy. Likewise, the contemporary story told here is not meant to focus on any one politician or party. Instead, the goal was to look for interesting intersections of ideas about democracy that help us uncover the underlying structure of the public we seek to understand. Perhaps then we can understand how to better refine and defend democracy for the long run.

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On a personal note, each of us is grateful to our families for putting up with our hollering about democracy, which reached a fever pitch several times these past years. Nick thanks his partner, Marybeth, for helping him chase a dream that started on a factory floor. He's grateful for his boys, Theo and Ollie, who are wild, full of joy and fury; may they fight to create a better democracy than the one they inherited.

Kirby thanks his expanding family—Beth, Spencer, Hannah, Gabby, and Manny—for their patience with his endless obsessions over the future

of American democracy and their willingness to remind him that the beauty of American democracy, however flawed at the moment, resides in its promise to be better tomorrow than it was today. May Selena Elizabeth, and other grandchildren yet to be born, read this book amazed at how little we understood about what democracy requires and how much more we needed to grow.

Finally, Keith thanks his wife Kim for the perpetual conversation about what ails American popular democracy, and their adult children Collin, Alec, Cassidy, and Kenedy for having both individual passions and a collective desire to build a better world. There are mountains beyond here greater than you've ever imagined. Go take them.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

In the case of a word like democracy, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides . . . Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different.

—George Orwell (1946)

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

—Lewis Carroll (1871)

In mid-July of 2018, former U.S. president Barack Obama gave a curious speech in South Africa at a celebration of what would have been Nelson Mandela’s 100th birthday. As emeritus figures, public speaking is an expected, though somewhat banal retirement exercise for past presidents. Think of an aging band being trotted out to cover their 30-year-old hits—everyone remembers the songs but they’re never as good as the original recording. However, on this occasion, Mr. Obama had neither a domestic press to worry about nor the pressures of appearing nonpartisan. He was, in some sense, freer to speak his mind in a public venue than he had been in over a decade.

This celebration of Mandela’s birthday was a tribute to his singular service as a transcendent political figure—a commemoration of the rejection of apartheid’s racial authoritarianism. It was, by extension, a celebration of democracy, and Mr. Obama had been asked to speak on the subject.

Usually, such speeches about democracy are the dross of public lectures. What is there to say about democracy other than to speak its praises in some garish way that creates a thin veneer of a concept that barely resembles its complicated reality? From Jefferson to Lincoln to Churchill to fictional senators in galaxies far, far away—nearly all public figures claim to love democracy.<sup>1</sup> In that sense, Orwell's epigraph that opens this chapter was right in noting that speakers usually describe democracy with the sort of platitudes that permit audiences to nod along with statements describing the wonders of democracy without having to grapple with either its substance or whether its practice lives up to its promise.

Unlike those bland invocations of democracy's virtues, however, Obama's lecture left little to the imagination. He began by describing how the last 100 years had seen a flourishing of pro-democratic attitudes across the world, arguing that the "rule of law and civil rights and the inherent dignity of every single individual" were the fundamental principles of democracy. He then listed the inventory of items usually associated with standard depictions of it: Democracy "depends on strong institutions and it's about minority rights and checks and balances, and freedom of speech and freedom of expression and a free press, and the right to protest and petition the government, and an independent judiciary, and everybody having to follow the law."<sup>2</sup>

These are the old saws, and it would have been fair to leave it at that. No one would have complained nor disagreed with these sentiments; in fact, they received polite applause. But this is where Obama's speech becomes much more intriguing. The former president's depiction of democracy quickly pivoted from a discussion of civil equality to economic egalitarianism—"those of us who believe in freedom and democracy are going to have to fight harder to reduce inequality and promote lasting economic opportunity for all people." In his words, democracy not only involved the production of civil goods like freedom and equality, but necessarily shaped *material well-being*. The plot thickens.

His speech later expanded on these ideas, noting that "humans don't live on bread alone. But they need bread . . ." The implication here is obvi-

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1. We are, of course, referring to Senator Palpatine's remark, "I love democracy. I love the Republic" in *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*. A poor movie, albeit a memorable quote.

2. Barack Obama, Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, Johannesburg, South Africa, July 17, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?448781-1/president-obama-delivers-2018-mandela-lecture>

ous. Subsistence is simply not conducive to democracy, and “. . . when economic power is concentrated in the hands of the few, history also shows that political power is sure to follow—and that dynamic eats away at democracy.” Of course, bald corruption in the public view is bad, but Obama warned that it was not the only danger that threatens democracy. “Sometimes it may be straight-out corruption, but sometimes it may not involve the exchange of money; it’s just folks who are that wealthy get what they want, and it undermines human freedom.” A democracy that allowed for empty bowls and empty bellies was unsatisfying.

Connecting the sustainability of civil freedoms and institutional checks and balances to economic parity is no accident. The theory of democracy unpacked here involves more than process-based levers. In fact, it confronts the finding that democracy sometimes performs badly for its poorest citizens (Ross 2006). Freedom of speech is no salve if citizens cannot enjoy some basic standard of living. As Obama concluded, “We’re going to have to worry about economics if we want to get democracy back on track.”<sup>3</sup>

These ideas draw upon some of the classic tensions found in questions about the nature of democracy. Is democracy merely a form of preference aggregation via popular and free elections? Or should it be judged by the condition of its citizens? One would be hard-pressed to depict Obama as a social democrat, and, yet, his argument implies that democracy necessarily incorporates both the production of welfare and civil liberty goods. And he is hardly alone in linking these outputs together. This “maximal” or substantive view of democracy is woven throughout many of the social democracies of Europe. It is the view of democracy for which Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) are known, and the view of democracy that someone like Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) abhors.

While the basis of the American founding rests on the marketization

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3. Of course, some might find these statements ironic coming from the former president, whose left-leaning colleagues complained about his administration’s modest pursuit of the sort of redistributive welfare policies that would have alleviated some of the inequality that he lamented in South Africa. Politics is hard and hindsight is clearer than foresight, but that criticism is not without merit. We leave it to the reader to discern his commitment to these sentiments, but they are a useful framing tool, if only for their demonstration that democracy’s promises—even by the well-intentioned—are often unrealized. In fact, this speech highlights that the *political* remedies for achieving “more” or “better” democracy are bitterly debated, even among members of the same party.

of liberal ideas that lend a “minimalistic” quality to democracy, the ebbs and flows of democracy’s promises suggest that not only is it dynamic, but that democracy is more than an empty set of processes or levers. It is a living thing that produces political goods, and the scope and nature of those outputs vary tremendously. In a very real sense, then, democracy is inescapably ideological in nature.

While scholars have long understood these implications—debating them ad nauseam from Plato to Lipset—it is less clear whether the American mass public understands democracy in these terms. How do ordinary citizens connect democracy to the production of civil and welfare goods? What do they know about the meanings of democracy? And do these understandings matter? That is, do they affect subsequent political attitudes and behaviors?

This book investigates those questions.

## Democracy and the Mass Public

Understanding democracy lies at the heart of academic political science (Key 1966; Dahl 1956). In this vein, fundamental questions regarding governance have traditionally animated interest in democracy—are citizens capable of governing? Why is democracy privileged over other alternatives? Do citizens favor democratic over nondemocratic rule?

Yet, for all of the theorizing about the value of democratic self-governance and the capacity of citizens to pursue it, the *meaning* that the average citizen assigns to the concept of democracy remains elusive. Historically, even as individuals report that they are satisfied with or support democracy (Norris 2011), their understanding of the core features of democracy remains ambiguous (Baviskar and Malone 2004) and context dependent (Schaffer 1998; Canache 2012). This lack of clarity is troublesome given wide-ranging concerns about the capacity of democracy to withstand populist assaults (e.g., Crozier et al. 1975; Inglehart and Norris 2019), coupled with a recent chorus of journalists and scholars who contend that democracy is in crisis (Diamond 2016; Foa and Mounk 2016; Mechko, et al. 2017; Page and Gilens 2020; Abramowitz 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). It is important, then, to distinguish between whether democracy is functioning optimally or as promised *and what citizens expect from it*.

In this book, we explore what the public thinks about democracy and why it matters. We argue that how individuals conceptualize democracy is, in a meaningful sense, ideological—the weaving of liberalism into the fabric of American democracy binds the functional nature of civil liberties (Beetham 2005) to the underlying market economy (Polanyi 1944; Ebner 2011). Within this context, it is possible that an individual's specific conception of democracy constitutes more than naïve or abstract support for a set of process-based institutional rules, but, instead, an evaluative framework of social, political, and economic preferences. In turn, the meanings that citizens associate with democracy are necessary for understanding their support for political institutions. In this sense, what others have referred to as popular democratic backsliding (i.e., poor ratings of democracy among the mass public) may instead reflect a gap between how citizens understand democracy's obligations and the outputs they observe in practice.

While democracy means different things to different people, we will show that the meanings the public assigns to democracy can be characterized by four unique, composite understandings of democracy's "essential" features. These understandings structure normative beliefs about how democracy *should* function and evaluative beliefs about how government *is actually* performing. This, in turn, is critical for understanding the apparent fragility of democratic support in the contemporary era. If we are to gauge the health of democracy by the democratic commitments of ordinary citizens, we must begin by asking what they believe democracy means, how they believe it should function, and, crucially, what conditions they believe it should produce.

### *Categorizing Democratic Meanings*

In the first chapter, we introduce the idea that the functional meaning of democracy is often misunderstood in American politics. It is simply not a value-neutral concept. Democracy is not "only" a collection of institutional mechanisms that govern elections and produce representation but can be conceptualized and judged by the nature of its outputs. Laurence Whitehead (2002, 3) captures these tensions in his text on democracy and democratization:

"[D]emocracy" is best understood not as a predetermined end-state, but as a long-term and somewhat open-ended outcome, not just as a feasible equilibrium but as a socially desirable and imaginary future. This constructedness means that there can be no single 'cook book' recipe for democracy applicable to all times and places. It must be the court of democratic opinion (rather than a stipulative definition) which arbitrates disputes over precisely what should count in each setting.

For our purposes, this description raises a number of pointed questions. How do public understandings and expectations (the court of democratic opinion) constrain or enable democratic processes and outputs? Under what conditions do democratic processes produce outputs and results that are democratizing? And, under what conditions do they create outcomes that, though achieved through democratic processes, undermine democracy? Answering these question reveals that "democracy," as an aspirational ideal, often creates the optical illusion of a moving goalpost. Moving closer to the ideal sheds light on inequalities and other procedural and institutional failings not apparent from a distance. The closer we move to democracy as an aspirational ideal, the further away it can appear.<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop, our approach to studying democracy is both intuitive and inductive, and it probably runs against the grain of much contemporary political science, which is deductive and formal in its approach and logic. Rather than imposing our expectations (or biases) on how the public should think about democracy, we instead let patterns involving beliefs about democracy emerge from survey data. The results of our analysis reveal four different views about the "essential" characteristics of democracy, which incorporate how Americans connect democratic

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4. This is not a new conclusion. In 1911, Robert Michels identified the iron law of oligarchy, or the proposition that democratic organizations and, by extension, societies cannot remain democratic for very long. He argued that elected leaders develop distinct interests from the people who elected them, eventually leading to the concentration of power away from the citizenry. Consider, for instance, wild, bipartisan public support for COVID-19 relief and unified GOP opposition of it among elected officials. Chris Hayes (2012), in *The Twilight of the Elites*, argued that this tendency implies that democracy occasionally needs waves of reform to reset the disparities between the elected and their electors. The political unrest in America in 2021 seems to draw on these themes. As citizens are made aware of political dysfunction, they inevitably recognize deep fissures in the democratic project. They are, to put it bluntly, stuck in "doom loop" (Drutman 2019).

processes to civil and material equality. Before outlining what to expect in the remainder of this book, we begin by providing a brief overview of the groups that make up this democracy typology.

Minimal democracy, defined only (or primarily) as a set of participatory processes, may yield preferable outcomes to authoritarian states, but that is not necessarily guaranteed (Przeworski 1999). “Even as an idea (let alone as a practical expedient),” writes John Dunn (2019, 123), democracy “wholly fails to ensure any regular and reassuring relation to just outcomes over any issue at all . . . The idea of justice and the idea of democracy fit very precariously together.” Indeed, fear of unrestrained majorities and their potential to deprive minorities of their rights—especially property rights—serves as a foundational pillar of the United States Constitution and a rebuke to most minimalistic approaches to democratic governance.

As we demonstrate in subsequent chapters, most Americans reject such a skeletal definition of democracy. Instead, about 20 percent of the respondents surveyed here prefer a *procedural* version of democracy that combines a love for democratic processes with the protection of individual rights. On balance, these folks see democracy in crisis when it expands beyond process and the protection of individual rights (or, perhaps stated differently, when the mass public begins taking democratic outputs seriously and demands greater economic equality). For procedural democrats, democracy is not designed to promote equality, *per se*, or assure that democratic citizenries have access to basic necessities. It exists largely as support for a narrow definition of individual rights.<sup>5</sup> Members of this class are well educated, quite politically conservative, and mostly white. Throughout the remainder of the text, we will refer to this version of democracy as “mini-

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5. Former President Donald Trump’s litigation efforts to overturn the 2020 election results illustrate this point. Aside from the cynical manipulation of partisan preferences, the hollering about election rigging revealed different underlying assumptions about what constitutes democracy and, critically, whose votes—and, thus, rights—should count. The notion that Black and urban votes were less legitimate or subject to partisan manipulation is a historic argument from white conservatives, especially but not exclusively in the South, dating back to the post–Civil War Reconstruction era and recurring throughout the next 150 years. Efforts to shape election rules to avoid “corruption” and “illegality” by suppressing Black voters or fracturing the white vote have manifested through electoral gerrymandering, subjectively implemented voter registration requirements and rules, voter purging and challenges to voter eligibility, and also the use of violence (see Woodward 1955; Kousser 1974, 1991; Bullock, Gaddie, and Wert 2016; Bullock, Buchanan, and Gaddie 2015; Mickey 2015).

mal” or “procedural,” and we will refer to people who subscribe to this view as “minimalists” or “procedural democrats.”

As the foil to more minimal views of democracy, substantive, or *social*, democracy involves an expansive understanding of democracy that balances favor for both democratic processes and outputs. Persons with these views embrace the protection of individual rights and freedoms of speech but tie these ideas to economic equality and the provision of basic necessities. These citizens want more, not less, democracy, and they are particularly sensitive to the failure of American democracy to solve long-standing economic problems and to advance a more equitable and just society (by reducing, for example, racial inequalities). Regardless of process, substantive democrats believe democracy fails when its policy outputs disproportionately benefit the wealthy. Comprising about 40 percent of our sample, these persons are generally, but not exclusively, liberal, encompassing a mix of self-identified liberals, conservatives, and moderates concerned about issues broadly related to fairness and equality. We refer to this set of meanings as “social” or “maximal” democracy, and label persons belonging to this class of our typology “social democrats” or “maximalists.”

Residing somewhere in between procedural and substantive views of democracy is, for a lack of any better word, a moderate perspective.<sup>6</sup> Their support for civil liberties is not quite as full-throated as their proceduralist counterparts, and while moderate democrats are more committed to economic equality and social welfare than procedural democrats, the meaning they assign to democracy is not quite as expansive as substantive democrats. Even so, they concede that there is a role for democracies in providing some basic necessities to its citizens. If a thermostatic model of public opinion accurately describes public support for democracy—that is, citizens’ support for democracy recedes as democracy strengthens and intensifies as democracy weakens (Claasen 2020)—these moderate democrats likely play a critical role in controlling the temperature. About 30 percent of our sample comprises this moderate view of democracy.

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6. While this label is a bit bland, it more or less corresponds to Merkl's (2014) “middle-ground” group of democratic theories. “Moderate” is a word often misunderstood and abused in the discussion of public opinion. People who hold some left-leaning and some right-leaning views, for example, are often described as moderate—as if the average of the two opposite beliefs makes them “balanced.” In our case, moderate is actually literal: these people take a tempered view of democracy’s relationship to rights and welfare goods, but they are not, strictly speaking, *neutral*.

Finally, the last category of our democracy typology includes people who demonstrate little commitment to democracy as a set of processes or outcomes. These folks are effectively *indifferent* to the form and shape of democratic governance. That is, these persons do not seem to hold meaningful beliefs about many qualities of democracy. About 10 percent of people hold these views.

Taking stock of the categories that form our typology, it seems that indifference to democratic processes and outcomes is limited, which casts some doubt upon allegations about low support for democracy. Instead, the “crisis” we confront involves the ongoing conflict over the definition and reach of democratic governance. The public meanings of democracy are not shared, but contested, and these contested definitions yield an intense struggle.<sup>7</sup> In the remainder of the book, we explore these tensions, the attitudes that accompany them, and what they mean for prevailing political debates.

## Outline of the Book

Our central argument involves the idea that people have firm expectations about democracy that shape how they evaluate it. These understandings of democracy structure how the mass public grades democratic governance, their preferences across a range of issues, and how they think about political parties and political representation. In short, operating definitions of democracy set a baseline for how citizens believe democratic governments should function and the outcomes democracies should produce. In this sense, public understandings of democracy are not merely the subject of high school civic lessons or uncritical socialization processes; they matter across a range of interconnected attitudes and beliefs.

We begin by examining classic definitions of and disagreements about democracy in chapter 2. Though there is widespread agreement on democracy’s necessary conditions (e.g., free and fair elections, opportunities for meaningful participation, and political equality), there is little agreement

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7. For example, the GOP efforts to delegitimize electoral bureaucracy are not efforts to totally jettison elections but, instead, to rig the rules of the game in their favor. The underlying notion of popular self-governance remains intact, even as the machinery of democracy is fundamentally transformed. In turn, it is not surprising that the public views the health of democracy through a partisan lens.

on the conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for it to flourish. The potential combinations of processes, institutions, and outputs are endless, yielding models of democracy rather than a single shared understanding of what democracy ought to look like (Held 2006; Merkel 2014). In chapter 2, we emphasize the contextual dependence of our understandings of democracy, outline how these understandings have changed over time, and identify the inherent tensions that frustrate democratic governance.

In chapter 3, we draw from this historical and philosophical material as we begin to engage the problem of measuring how the public thinks about democracy. Even if democratic features were well understood, democracy requires balancing tradeoffs between competing, rather than consensual, values, which promotes conflict over democratic meanings. This conflict actually dovetails with the advent of public opinion polling, which transformed our understanding of democracy, first, by advancing a conceptualization of democracy as the aggregation of individual opinions and, second, by challenging whether citizens were capable of guiding policy decisions.

This overview guides us to a critical point: we need a different approach for categorizing and evaluating public understandings of democracy. Our solution involves polling a list of survey items that were designed to disentangle whether people think about democracy mostly in terms of its production of civil political goods like rights and liberties, or whether they also link democracy to welfare goods like basic necessities, social mobility, and economic equality. We pair these questions with other survey instruments that ask whether citizens distinguish between the institutional features that govern how democracies actually operate and the normative, political values that give democracy its functionality. This data—the essential characteristics of democracy—serves as the backbone of the rest of this book.

In chapter 4, we use a semi-supervised, machine learning approach to construct a typology from this data that reflects how citizens connect these ideas. Rather than imposing judgement on citizen's beliefs based on either elite or academic definitions as to what constitutes democracy, we instead examine how citizens connect various processes, institutions, and outcomes spontaneously by letting the data sort people into the different categories of democratic meanings that we introduced above. This variance in public understandings of democracy has important implications for the study of democratic attitudes. Where scholars have repeatedly cautioned

about declining democratic commitments (i.e., democratic backsliding), such statements often ignore that citizens understand democracy in fundamentally different ways. Procedural and social democrats may be equally dissatisfied with democracy but for very different reasons. On balance, we find that citizens want more, not less, democracy. In fact, the modal class of democratic meanings in the data is neither a procedural nor moderate view, but a *social* one.

If beliefs about equality, access, fairness, and justice often fall under the general umbrella of ideology, then to what extent do these expectations overlap with our categories of democratic meanings? In chapter 5, we analyze how a variety of political and social preferences affect one's categorical view of democracy. We find that, while symbolic group attachments like partisanship and ideology are weakly related to democratic meanings, beliefs about government intervention, attitudes about race, and income sort people into competing classes of democratic meanings. Procedural democrats are least inclined to support broader definitions of equality; in contrast, individuals who adopt substantive (or social) understandings of democracy express the greatest support not only for racial but also economic equality, which is grounded in views about individualism and the role of the state. These analyses help illustrate that the democratic typology is not a conventional “ideology,” *per se*, but does function as a cohesive, political worldview encapsulating how state power and resources should be allocated.

If operating definitions of democracy are distinct from traditional measures of ideology, then do they help us to explain how citizens think about policy-making processes and political representation? In chapter 6, we explore the relationship between democratic meanings and beliefs about political compromise and the role of political parties. We find that attitudes about the matters of bargaining, negotiating, and compromise in democratic politics—what Justice David Souter called in *Johnson v. DeGrandy* the “obligation to pull, haul, and trade to find common political ground” (512 U.S. 997 [1994])—vary considerably among the classes. We also discuss the connection between the democracy typology and populist attitudes, particularly antipathy toward elected officials, unelected experts, and other political elites necessary for a functioning democracy.

Understanding the role of public understandings of democracy in evaluations of democratic performance is the focus of chapter 7. Here, we investigate how different meanings of democracy affect support for it.

These results indicate a durability and resilience to democratic support—an overwhelming majority of Americans are dissatisfied with democracy, yet they nonetheless believe in the merits of democracy as a political system. This is not to suggest that “democratic backsliding” is not occurring—one of the political parties, after all, is mired in xenophobia (Bartels 2020), plainly scornful of governing (Mann and Ornstein 2012), and fomented a literal and violent insurrection in the halls of Congress. Rather, democracy historically lives in a perpetual state of existential crisis, which contributes to the United States’ pattern of expansion and retrenchment of democratic-ness.<sup>8</sup>

In turn, perhaps the true test of democratic support resides not in abstract commitments, but in public and elite reactions to violations of democratic norms. What do citizens do when their beliefs about democracy are challenged by the behaviors of favored political elites? In chapter 8, we evaluate whether citizens recognize antidemocratic behaviors and, once recognized, how they respond. It also gives us the opportunity to explore the relative importance of democratic commitments compared to partisan affiliation and symbolic political ideology. The peril of democracy is supposed to arise from ordinary citizens either not recognizing or being unwilling to punish norm-breaking by leaders and backtracking on their commitments to procedural justice when it suits them. We explore Americans’ views toward norm-breaking using a dozen hypothetical norm violations derived from recent current events. While there is broad consensus regarding behaviors that are perceived as inappropriate, we find stark differences across the democracy typology in evaluations of the severity of norm-breaking, which has important implications for understanding why democratic support remains high, even as democratic outputs remain poor.

Finally, in chapter 9, we discuss our findings and their implications for understanding the contemporary challenges that face democracy. The reality of multiple, often competing, understandings of democracy leads us to reframe, if not reconsider, claims that democracy is in crisis and that the public is backsliding from its democratic commitments. On balance, our findings reveal a public that wants more democracy, not less, but that is divided over what exactly “more democracy” means—in other words,

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8. It is not helped by partisan polarization, a fragmented media system bound to the horserace frame, and a social media ecosystem that proliferates misinformation among the politically engaged (Goidel 2014).

on a fundamental level, it is struggling to *democratize*. We end by reflecting on democracy as an aspirational ideal and what that means for public understandings of democracy and the study of democratic attitudes. This involves briefly addressing former-president Donald Trump's post-election attacks on democracy and democratic legitimacy during the waning days of his administration. While it is tempting to view these attacks as arising solely from an authoritarian impulse, they also reflect the challenges that emerge when democratic meanings are explicitly contested, and partisans believe that "democracy is on the ballot." In the aftermath of the 2020 election, nearly four in five Trump voters (78 percent) believed the election outcome was marred by outright fraud and unfair processes (Norris 2020), and approximately half of Trump voters believe Trump "rightfully won" the election (Kahn 2020). They believed this, not because they wanted to jettison democracy, *per se*, but because they disliked specific democratic outputs. While these citizens were too easily misled and greatly misinformed, they acted not to end democracy but to save it by "stopping the steal." Ironically, this effort was not to save democracy for the many, but rather to save it for themselves—a horrifying, but hardly unique, attempt to remake the meanings of democracy for exclusionary ends.

## Summary

Throughout this book, we attempt to speak plainly about democracy. Our goal is not to paint a portrait of it that critical observers of history and the present would not recognize. We are neither historians nor theorists, and we sit upon the shoulders of a considerable amount of research that has discussed the tensions we raise. As empiricists, we try to measure the qualities that Americans think are essential to democracy, and we hope to supply the reader with an honest snapshot of democracy at the start of a new decade and in the wake of what has been one of the most enduring challenges to democracy's institutions in the memory of most of her citizens.

We conclude here by returning, briefly, to Mr. Obama, whose comments opened this introduction. Linking democracy to human flourishing is an admirable perspective. Yet, it should be clear that his depictions of democracy's existential virtues sometimes fall short of its practical supply of democratic goods, particularly in the American case. From the initial federal response to the COVID-19 virus, to the lack of preparation for

apocalyptic winter conditions experienced by Texans in early February 2021, and to Georgia and Wisconsin's attempts to dramatically restrict the franchise—democracy's production of political goods too often leaves Americans wanting. In turn, the exportation of American democracy across the world comes with a deep irony. Even as politicians lecture far off lands about the basic contours of what makes democracy successful, the American people labor under a system whose own constitution is increasingly unloved by democratizing nations (Law and Versteeg 2012).

This book offers one window into how a democratic citizenry views such matters, yet it is but one piece to a larger puzzle. In the end, to understand American democracy requires acknowledging that its nature and meanings are fluid, and that the struggle for democracy is one in which citizens play one, but hardly the only, part.<sup>9</sup>

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9. This is captured well by remarks made by President Joe Biden on July 16, 2021. Referring to the January 6th insurrection, he observed: "I never anticipated, notwithstanding no matter how persuasive President Trump was, that we'd have people attacking and breaking down the doors of the United States Capitol. I didn't think that would happen. I didn't think we'd—I'd see that in my lifetime. But it's reinforced what I've always known and what I got taught by my political science professors and by the senior members of the Senate that I admired when I got there: that every generation has to re-establish the basis of its fight for democracy." Retrieved from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/16/remarks-by-president-biden-before-air-force-one-departure-4/#:-:text=But%20it's%20reinforced%20what%20I,literally%20have%20to%20do%20it>

## CHAPTER 2

### What Is Democracy?

#### *Definitions and Scholarly Disagreements*

Democracy . . . is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder; and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike.

—Plato, *The Republic* (Book VIII)

Democracy is the name we give the people whenever we need them.

—Robert, in *L'Habit Vert* (Marquis de Flers and Gaston Arman de Caillavet)

Democracy is dynamic. Historically, its nature shifts as political elites define and redefine it to advance strategic political goals. Although these developments may seem removed from our investigation into *popular* understandings of democracy, it is worth recalling that the public often takes its cues from trusted elites (Zaller 1992). Popular understandings of democracy, then, reflect elite debates about whether particular procedures or outcomes are democratic. For example, do voter identification laws protect the integrity of the electoral process and the fairness of elections or do they suppress the vote? Does money in politics undermine representation or empower the free expression of ideas? Do massive wealth inequalities reflect on the character of democracy? Public opinion on these questions often mirrors elite divisions and partisan debates, which are contentious and shift as the balance of power changes over time (Whitehead 1997).<sup>1</sup>

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1. To be clear, such meanings are not entirely subjective. Democracy does not exist merely

In this chapter, we build a foundation for understanding how the public thinks about democracy by providing a brief review of democratization in the United States, alongside a broader overview of the academic democratic theories that guide our thinking about how to measure public opinion toward democracy.<sup>2</sup> In particular, we identify three broad tensions that are inherent in any definition of democracy: (1) *process versus protections*, which involves the tensions posed by encouraging public inputs against the protection of individual freedoms; (2) *freedom versus redistributive justice*, which incorporates the tensions arising from economic freedom and economic inequality, including those inequalities rooted in race, class, and gender; and (3) *power versus accountability*, which involves the tension between the capacity of democratic governments to act in ways that serve the public and the ability of democratic publics to hold elected officials accountable. We conclude by discussing how these tensions combine to form a spectrum of democratic models that guide our subsequent analysis of mass attitudes toward democracy.

### The Intellectual and Historical Foundations of American Democracy

While we cannot hope to exhaustively cover the philosophical debates about the nature of democracy, we can unpack some of the folly found in the American “folk theory” of it (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016). Popular among pundits, elites, and textbooks, that narrative conveys democratic values, beliefs, and priorities have remained more or less the same throughout American history, and that the original wisdom of the Framers, the writers of the US Constitution, is biblical. This silly approach is misguided for several reasons, not least of which is because democratic meanings were and remain intensely contested among political elites. The

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in the “eye of the beholder.” Still, its nature shifts with the historical context and the popular demands of the moment. Such flexibility allows scholars to discuss American democracy before the implementation of 19th Amendment and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, when large segments of the public were effectively disfranchised, and the United States failed to meet what today might be considered minimal standards for democratic governance.

2. One might fairly take issue with integrating the definitions of democracy pushed by economic and political elites, which are the subject of strategic manipulation and political gamesmanship, and academics, which draw from historical context. Our point is simply that there is value in assessing how both academic and elite understandings of democracy inform public opinion about it.

nature of democracy evolves and reflects the social, economic, and political forces of the time. The comparatively egalitarian nature of democracy in 21st century America, for example, would be unrecognizable to historically oppressed groups—in part because neither norms nor institutions are wholly stable but also because the public’s valuation and extension of democratic principles has evolved over time. This evolution is never linear—progress toward democratization is often followed by retrenchment—but it can (usually) be characterized by a (slow and uneven) advancement toward democratic ideals.

To some, democracy may seem like a simple enough concept to define. Almost every American government text begins by returning to a hagiographic discussion of the Greek origins of the word: *demos*, meaning people, and *kratos*, meaning power or rule.<sup>3</sup> In these textbook treatments, the obviousness of democracy as normatively “good” is implied by its very definition. What could possibly be wrong with “rule by the people?” Yet, for much of history, democracy was associated with mob rule, demagogues, and violence rather than enlightened self-governance. *The Federalist Papers*, written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay assiduously avoided using “democracy” in arguing on behalf of the newly crafted constitutional republic. Even Thomas Jefferson, arguably the more democratic of the Founders avoided the word.<sup>4</sup> Such was the anxiety over the excesses of public involvement and its threat to wealth and capital.

It was not until 1844 that the Jefferson-Jackson Party embraced using democracy as a conceptually useful rhetorical tool. As the negative connotations faded, democracy was transformed into a word that conferred legitimacy and the rhetorical power of common people fighting against an entrenched and manipulative elite.<sup>5</sup> In short, democracy became popular (and populist), so much so that its definition expanded to include related

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3. Mentioned less frequently is that Kratos was also the Greek god of strength, most famous in mythology for dispensing punishment to Prometheus, who defied the gods and gave fire to human beings. As punishment for his disobedience, Prometheus had his liver eaten out each day by an eagle. Each night his liver grew back, only to be eaten again the following day.

4. Jefferson was a slave owner, and so we qualify “democratic” in the context of his time; he was primarily responsible for establishing the first political party and connecting it explicitly with the executive branch (Ackerman 2009). His judgments regarding freedom—like nearly all of his peers—were severely blinded, and so such a description comes with a heavy caveat.

5. The irony with this development should not be lost on the reader: many common people, from minorities to women to poor folk, could not actually participate in these early days and were, quite literally, at the mercy of an entrenched elite.

concepts like political, personal, and even economic freedom (e.g., Dalton and Shin 2007). As Adam Przeworski (1999) observed:

Perusing innumerable definitions one discovers that democracy has become an altar on which everyone hangs his or her favorite ex votos. Almost all normatively desirable aspects of political, and sometimes even of social and economic, life are credited as intrinsic to democracy: representation, accountability, equality, participation, justice, dignity, rationality, security, freedom, . . . the list goes on.

In his cultural history of democracy's meanings, historian Robert Wiebe (1995) similarly noted that over time "the subject of democracy comes to resemble a great pile of everybody's pet concerns." The reason is relatively simple: to claim a policy, process, or outcome as democratic was to confer it with legitimacy (Dupuis-Déri 2004). To claim something was undemocratic was to cast doubt on its procedural or substantive fairness. Within political debates, democracy served both as an ideal and a bludgeon, a vaguely defined aspiration and a rhetorical weapon used to legitimize (or delegitimize) competing points of view.

In fact, throughout American history, there has never been a singular "American democracy." Rather, there are competing ideas about the form, scope, and diversity of democratic institutions and practices. To better understand the resulting tensions that characterize debates about democracy's meanings, it helps to return to the beginning. Drawing from classic Greco-Roman ideas, democracy in the United States was rarely conceived of as a vehicle for egalitarian values or preferences by the Framers (Tushnet 1987). Classic political thought never embraced a leveling democracy. Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, with whom early American elites were familiar, articulated hierarchical world views based on their perception of a natural order. This understanding of limited democracy is littered across the writings and correspondence of early American political elites and finds a comfortable home in the Constitution (Gummere 1962).<sup>6</sup>

Several Enlightenment developments also helped supply the core intel-

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6. In fact, there's a cynical, though reasonable, argument to be made that the driving reason for *any* constitution at all was simply to stop each colony from printing its own money and getting into trade wars—not because the Framers had any delusions of grandeur about codifying democratic values, *per se*, but because the nascent confederation of colonies was up to its eyeballs in French debt.

lectual material for the eventual wedding of capitalism and liberalism to democracy in the United States. Enlightenment faith in rationality helped secure capitalism as a mechanism for empowering individual choice and producing the middle class, which is often identified as a precondition for successful democratic governance (Lipset 1959). In theory, the logic runs something like this: capitalism was good not only because it generated economic growth and development but because it better distributed that economic growth to create a thriving middle class that added political stability and minimized class divisions and economic inequalities.<sup>7</sup>

Political philosophers of this period validated the concept of elite public opinion, supplied a rationale for the usefulness of political parties, and inspired thinking about the ordering of political institutions to manage and mediate the “excesses” of democracy. Democracy was closely bound to the legitimacy of the institutions of government. There was little consensus that democratic demands would necessarily result in specific policy outputs, but, instead, the Framers placed faith in the idea that tempering democratic inputs (or passions) with elite calculations (or reason) would result in government that, more often than not, served the common good.

Assessing whether these beliefs were naïve is beyond the scope of this project, but, drawing from these early developments, we can identify at least three lasting tensions that have structured the subsequent conflict over democracy’s nature that propel this project forward.

### *Process versus Protections*

This first tension balances the presence of technical democratic values and procedures, namely the use of elections and majority rule, against guarantees that a majority will not abuse the minority or deny it basic rights and freedoms. The guarantees of a social contract, of property rights, and other “libertarian” rights are meant to constrain numerical majorities. The contemporary challenge involves addressing the consequences of how exclusions on individual freedoms in the past have perpetuated social injustice and economic and political inequality today. The regular mass protests

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7. In practice, the gulf between that logic and the actual evidence of American democracy—replete with significant inequality, a fading middle class, and low ratings of trust and legitimacy—is probably not lost on the reader.

that have erupted after police killings of unarmed nonwhite citizens in the United States, for example, reflect deeply ingrained inequalities built into the nature of democracy. If the application of the rule of law effectively involves a sliding scale depending on one's skin color, then protections of individual rights against majoritarian impulses offer only the thinnest veneer of liberty.

We also observe these tensions, somewhat ironically, in the alarming growth of minority political rule in the United States. To the extent that voting is supposed to aggregate preferences on the basis of a one-person, one-vote logic, the United States Senate is so wildly disproportional with respect to the ratio of residents to representatives that the protections afforded to a numerically small number of Americans effectively generate a "tyranny" of the minority. Perhaps ironically, Madisonian institutions designed to thwart majority rule have instead empowered political minorities. This design has proven particularly effective in protecting the status quo against comprehensive and politically popular policies like health care reform, direct economic aid during times of crisis, climate policy, and, critically, the expansion of voting rights.

### *Freedom versus Redistributive Justice*

The English Enlightenment and common law tradition had at its basis the assumption that governments should only minimally interfere with citizens' liberties. This freedom extends to property, to transactions, and to the ability to enter contracts, yet it also, perhaps ironically, brings with it obligations of the state to protect freedom through fairness. Consider that contracts and weights and measures ought to be "fair," interest on loans shall be reasonable (i.e., no usury), and behaviors that adversely affect neighbors should be avoided. The state has long upheld these protections, as it promotes trust, good commerce, and the general welfare. But how does one manage the moral impulse to do good in the general welfare against property rights and the assumptions that economic markets create economic inequalities by design?

Such freedoms are often balanced against the need for redistributive justice. The singular example, of course, involves race. America's long history of de jure and de facto discrimination has meant that the playing field has never been equal and, indeed, has been heavily tilted in favor of white Americans. For example, today white Americans have 10 times the wealth

of African-American citizens and earn more even after accounting for vocational experience and education (McIntosh et al. 2020). Yet inequalities in America extend to other domains as well. Over the past three decades, perhaps the single most worrisome economic trend is the accumulation of wealth by the wealthiest Americans (Stiglitz 2012).<sup>8</sup> Households in the top one percent based on income, for example, receive roughly a quarter of all income (before taxes) and control nearly 40 percent of all wealth (Stone et al. 2020). These citizens' share of wealth and income has also grown disproportionately over time, thinning out the middle class in the process. Such inequalities give lie to the myths of equality of opportunity and social mobility as features of the American economic system.

### *Power versus Accountability*

Politics is the use of power, of state authority to compel behaviors. How far can the state go in its exercise of such power? And how do we keep it from going too far? Accountability and state legitimacy are closely tied together—unless the public has some process by which to hold political actors accountable, the legitimacy of institutions is questionable. Elections are the first check on governing excesses by the state. When the state fails in its exercise of power or abuses its power, free elections are supposed to allow the public a remedy to correct this by changing the government. This is a core assumption of liberal democracy. Due process rights and democratic controls—legislatures, juries, electorally accountable executives—are a vehicle for this. Absent the stabilizing influences of democratic values and guarantees in the long run, accountability can suffer as majorities change what is permissible to do with power based simply on their majority.<sup>9</sup>

Operating under constitutional restrictions on the uses of political authority, the capacity of democratic governments to address complex long-term problems is often a concern. In 1973, for example, Michael

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8. To be sure, this domain is a racialized one, and most inequalities in America are intersectional in nature.

9. The reader familiar with the period 2016 to 2020, for example, might remember frequent norm violations and the sense that permitting uncouth social and political behavior has shifted the goalposts over what is politically acceptable in American politics. Most worryingly, we observe this prospect in the recent Republican purging of electoral bureaucrats who would not "stop the steal."

Crozier, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki identified an earlier crisis of democracy, whereby growing expectations for what democratic governments should (and could) accomplish were unmatched by their authority to govern. For Pippa Norris (2011), these democratic deficits arise when democratic performance fails to meet public expectations. For current purposes in the American context, we would simply note that elite rhetoric about democracy can set public expectations about what democracies can (or cannot) accomplish, and that often expectations are created that cannot be matched by a government defined by a Madisonian system of checks and balances and the separation of powers.

### Minimal or Maximal Visions of Democracy?

The way in which these tensions are resolved gives scholars a method of thinking about conceptual differences among “forms” of democracy. At their most basic level, truly minimalist definitions make no claims regarding the protection of individual rights. A choice between competing elites is a sufficient, if not ideal, condition of democracy that simply affords voters the opportunity to replace one ruling party with another (Schumpeter 1942; Przeworski 1999). Such minimalistic versions of democracy strip the meaning of democracy to its most basic, bare-bones form. In doing so, they challenge “classic models,” which assume that publics are capable of self-governing, knowledgeable enough to guide policy decisions, and committed to the rules of the game (Held 2006). Instead, elites structure the rules of game, and voters participate mostly as passive spectators. While competitive elections help guide decisions, there is no definable or measurable “public will” to guide policy, *per se*. The public will was (and is) a phantom (Lippmann 1922, 1927). Instead, the presence of competitive elections and the choice between competitive elites might nevertheless satisfy the requirements of self-rule (Dahl 1956, 1989).

While Schumpeter and others argued for such minimal definitions of democracy, that democratic realism is rarely divorced from liberalism. Derived in part from Enlightenment debates, liberalism emphasized the dignity of the individual, the protection of individual rights, equal protection under the laws, market-based economics, and economic freedom.<sup>10</sup> It

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10. Again, we note the cynicism necessary to speak glowingly of such ideas while simultaneously upholding a brutal system of chattel slavery.

was inherently distrustful of majorities and majority rule, despite embracing the idea that government is based on the consent of the governed. In turn, the marriage of liberalism to democracy was sold as a way of constraining majoritarian impulses and protecting individual rights from the excesses of democracy. This view was common among the Framers, culminating in Madison's Federalist No. 10, which notes that "Pure democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."

Rather than a truly minimal form of democracy, a procedural, liberal one prioritizing freedoms, rights, and autonomy characterizes the growth of democracy in the United States. Liberalism—a concept deployed "in a dizzying variety of ways in political thought and social science" (Bell 2014, 682)—wedded the market economy and individual economic freedom to democratic governance. In the American context, liberalism's ties to capital and markets also incorporated rugged individualism and economic opportunity via the expanding western frontier.<sup>11</sup> In turn, the inherent contradictions between democratic and capitalist values created an inescapable tension that has served as the basis for waves of economic crises and democratic reform (Burnham 1970; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Klein 2020). How does a democratic tradition that stresses political equality coexist with an economic tradition that values the accumulation of wealth and economic inequality? At what point does economic inequality and the power and influence that wealth convey become so great that the absence of political equality is not only exposed, but the canard impossible to maintain?

During periods of economic crises, these old saws are often exposed, allowing for waves of economic and political reform. During these periods, democracy has almost always expanded, as have public and elite understandings of what democracy means. Much of this expansion has been within political institutions. The democratization of party organizations during the Progressive Era, for example, is one prominent example. Elsewhere, the Great Depression exposed the vulnerabilities of market economies (and liberal democracies) with little or no social safety net and the

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11. It also encompassed violence. It is therefore difficult to divorce those features from the brutal displacement of the First Nations. Indeed, the persistence of the founding myth that economic opportunity is built into the fabric of liberal democracy can be largely traced to this period of westward expansion and dispossession (Watts 1989; Saunt 2020).

appeal of fascist dictators during times of economic crisis. At the time of his election in 1932, Franklin Roosevelt was encouraged to assume dictatorial powers to deal with the depression. Walter Lippmann went so far as to tell Roosevelt that he “may have no alternative but to assume dictatorial powers,” while U.S. Senator David Reed openly opined that “If ever this country needed a Mussolini, it needs one now.”<sup>12</sup> This was not an idle threat (Alter 2006). In 1936, 45 percent of Americans believed the acts and policies of the Roosevelt Administration would lead to a dictatorship.<sup>13</sup> Given the era in which we write, it is perhaps worth remembering that this is not the first time Americans have worried about the prospect that democracy might give way to an authoritarian regime.

Popular accounts often note that, by resisting dictatorship, Franklin Roosevelt “saved democracy.” If he did so, it was not by simply continuing democracy as it existed before. He redefined democracy to include “freedom from want” and by expanding public expectations that democracy should include a social safety net.<sup>14</sup> Critics on the right, in contrast, argued that the New Deal did little to alleviate the Great Depression and perhaps might have even prolonged it while expanding the bureaucratic state and undermining individual economic freedom (e.g., Powell 2003). Thus, the outcomes from the Great Depression and the New Deal violated the tenets of a minimalistic democracy in which the primary purpose of democracy was to allow citizens a choice between competing elites. Still, these criticisms aside, questions as to whether democracy required efforts to alleviate poverty, combat economic inequality, and provide basic economic necessities were permanently on the table.

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12. “Author reconstructs FDR’s ‘Defining Moment,’ National Public Radio, July 1, 2006, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5525748>

13. George Gallup reported the results of the American Institute of Public Opinion survey in “Nation Discounts Roosevelt Dictatorship Trend,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* (Aug. 2, 1936). It is also worth noting that in the modern U.S. two-party system, accusing a president of the other party of dictatorial excess is not unique to FDR. And it is possibly not hyperbole in some instances.

14. Critics from the left argued that Roosevelt did not go far enough. Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long, for example, took economic democracy a step further. “I’m for the poor man—all poor men, black and white, they all gotta have a chance,” Long argued. “They gotta have a home, a job, and a decent education for their children. ‘Every man a king’—that’s my slogan.” Indeed, Long’s “Share the Wealth” program advocated for the radical notion that the wealth produced by the economy was a public good and not the province of individual achievement, work ethic, or ingenuity (although, to be clear, Long was hardly a racial progressive [Jeansson 1992]).

Within the American context, this development did not necessarily or automatically translate into a more expansive welfare state, particularly compared to Western European democracies. Thus, the United States' liberal democracy slots somewhere between a *procedural* and *social* one, occupying a moderate or middle-ground area of this minimal-to-maximal spectrum of democracy (Merkel 2014). To the extent that welfare concerns have been incorporated into democracy, they were not included as new rights but rather were questions of policy. FDR had attempted to infuse them with the power of rights in his 1944 State of the Union speech (later termed the "Second Bill of Rights" speech). Rights to universal health care, for example, were never fully embraced, and welfare benefits were largely limited to groups perceived to be deserving (e.g., the elderly). There were other limiting factors, most notably race and ethnicity. As a consequence, ethnic diversity, and especially racism, played a role in limiting the reach and scope of welfare policies within the United States. If anything, the resulting "welfare" state has largely benefited a property-owning, white middle class rather than a truly universal system designed to assist the poorest, most vulnerable Americans.

Against these developments, it is enough to note that elite understandings of democracy vary from minimal or procedural understandings to more comprehensive substantive understandings, and that these elite understandings have expanded to include more features and become more varied over time. When elites talk about democracy, they are not always talking about the same thing (McConnaughy 2013). Part of this is strategic as the language of democracy is being used to advance a policy or political goal. But this also reflects legitimate, substantive differences in understandings of what democracy requires. As such, theoretical and practiced models of democracy within a single country can take different permutations (Held 2006).

### Taking Measure of Democracy's Meanings

The "empirical" frameworks used to study democracy more broadly and comparatively map onto the juxtaposition between the minimal and maximal definitions of democracy described above. They also bring us full circle to a significant debate in democratic theory, which involves whether democracy ought to be defined primarily by intrinsic or instrumental

values. As a method of resolving disagreement, democracy's chief intrinsic virtue is often attributed to its respect for personal autonomy. Governance naturally requires some amount of forfeiture of personal liberty, but democracy fosters a commitment to the equality necessary to balance personal liberty against the demands imposed by a political system (Singer 1973). In turn, democracy elevates civic engagement by empowering individuals to participate in collective activities, pressing them to apply their individual convictions to collective political decisions (Dworkin 1986; see also Kolodny 2014a). Democracy, in this sense, is enlightening, lifting up individuals and improving their capacity for democratic participation and collective decision-making (Pateman 1970).

Other depictions of democracy concentrate on its ability to produce "good" outcomes over time. By empowering individual autonomy, democracy fosters economic innovation and growth,<sup>15</sup> while the mechanisms of political accountability make military conflict less likely (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1992). In other words, democracy is preferable to alternatives because it is more likely to lead to positive social, economic, and political outcomes by distributing power and resources equitably—i.e., it produces output legitimacy (Scharpf 1999). Along these lines, *crises of democracy* emerge not when democratic processes fail but when outputs are unfavorable, when the promises of democracy for material well-being are unrealized. "In almost all cases," writes historian Robert Wiebe, "dissatisfaction begins at the far end of the line, with democracy's outcomes." Democratic reforms, he argues, are "alternate ways of changing what goes into the process in order to increase the justice or the efficiency of what comes out of it" (Wiebe 1995, 3).

A cohesive way of thinking about democracy involves blending these perspectives together.<sup>16</sup> Because democracy must always incorporate self-rule, scholars have gravitated toward understanding it in light of its procedural elements—the protections of rights and liberties, the scope of the voting franchise, and respect for the rule of law by political actors

15. The empirical literature here is less conclusive with research indicating positive, negative, and null effects. A recent meta-analysis, however, showed a positive effect in more than 188 studies and 2046 models conducted across 36 years (Doucouliagos and Ulubaşoğlu 2008; Acemoglu et al. 2019; Colagrossi et al. 2020).

16. Indeed, Dewey's (1981, 288) admonition "to get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life" is apropos.

and institutions. These systematic measures of democracy have facilitated comparisons and rankings of countries based on their level of “democratic development.” Two examples of these approaches include Polity and Freedom House, which attempt to systematically measure democracy within a country using a single linear continuum ranging from autocratic (or non-democratic regimes; “bad”) to fully democratic governments (“good”). Here, oppressive authoritarian regimes like North Korea or China anchor one end of that scale, with semi-democracies like Russia somewhere in the middle, and, finally, full democracies like the United Kingdom or Canada at the other end of the scale.

In contrast to these approaches, the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) emerged as an attempt to better distinguish among electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracies. V-Dem incorporates features that start to approximate the conditions used to parse minimal from maximal democracies but also pays more attention to the different forms and shapes democracy might take within a given context. Using expert evaluations across several hundred indicators (see Lindberg et al. 2014; Coppedge et al. 2020), the product is a highly granular set of several dozen indices gauging the five democratic types noted above. The motivation for V-Dem was the recognition that operational definitions of democracy should be multidimensional. This approach is persuasive. As Lindberg et al. (2014, 159) write, “Instead of imposing a definition that would necessarily omit features of democracy that matter to some users, we measure multiple varieties of democracy and allow users to choose the one that reflects their own understanding of the concept.”

While we are ultimately interested in *public* understandings of democracy, the empirical study of democratic institutions above helps guide how we think about measuring public meanings of democracy. One way of doing so acknowledges that the production of democratic goods occurs within the context of particular institutional structures that respect persons’ intrinsic values (Anderson 2009).<sup>17</sup> This framing is useful because it recasts the meaning of democracy as contextual and elastic, with the production of political goods as evidence of its nature. Pennock (1966, 420) argues that these political goods are evidence of institutional priorities and describes them as the outcomes and consequences produced by governing

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17. This dovetails nicely with how scholars conceptualize the relationship between civic (Almond and Verba 1963) or political culture (Pennock 1966) and democracy.

systems that affect the polity, economy, familial unit, and individual. These goods are partially the result of institutional structures and incentives, but they are also grounded in a “complex of attitudes, sentiments, myths, ideologies and goals relating to government, to politics and political roles” (416).

It is through this lens that the operational nature of democracy can be clarified by considering both liberty and welfare goods, which shape the social and material well-being of citizens. On a basic level, liberty goods reflect the extent to which autonomy is prioritized. Habermas (1989) notes that certain rights are necessary features for the development of autonomous decision-making (a chief intrinsic virtue), which include things like the freedoms of expression, association, assembly, movement, and so on (see also Dahl 1989). In contrast to these goods, welfare goods encompass the sorts of outcomes that shape material well-being (an important instrumental feature). The nature of these goods will vary with respect to the state’s assumption of responsibility for them, but, on some basic level, democracy’s promises of equal treatment should presumably spill into the establishment of the welfare state (Schumpeter 1942; Gutmann 1988).

At least in the American context, democracy has traditionally privileged the production of liberty over welfare goods. Yet, in E. E. Schattschneider’s (1960) telling, democracy could not be understood without reference to the production of welfare goods—or, in this case, the lack thereof. Writing in *The Semisovereign People*, he argued that the “function of democracy has been to provide the public with a second power system, an alternative power system, which can be used to counterbalance the economic power” (1960, 119). In his view, democracy had failed to produce the sort of egalitarian distribution of access to the social welfare goods upon which the justification of its liberal power-sharing was based.<sup>18</sup> This critique dovetailed with Lipset’s (1963) midcentury work, which argued that democracy required a system of values that could balance the antagonistic promise of equality of opportunity against pervasive inequalities of condition.

Today, with rampant economic inequality and a political system producing retrenchment regarding access to the vote, these concerns take on

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18. Curiously, this lack of parity was one of Jefferson’s great concerns regarding how economic inequality eventually stripped citizens of civil liberties (James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, 1785. *Thomas Jefferson to James Madison*. Manuscript/mixed material, retrieved from: <https://www.loc.gov/item/mjm012587/>).

a renewed relevance. Yet, despite these heady elite debates and discussions, much remains unknown about how the public regards these ideas. Do citizens think about the meanings of democracy in the ways outlined here? Do they mostly think about democracy in terms of its procedural qualities, or do they also think about it in terms of its relationship to material well-being? What is the relationship between these political goods and the meanings of democracy?

## Summary

American democracy can be situated within a broader philosophic and comparative framework. It did not simply spring from the ground fully formed or realized. While much of its development can be traced to classical theories of self-governance, the practical form that democracy takes in the United States is not biblically inspired. The resulting Constitutional system was as much borne from practical necessity and economic compromise as commitments to Enlightenment values. In fact, there is a reasonable argument to be made that the United States is something of a young democracy considering that the full franchise is only sixty-something years old. The legacy of antidemocratic beliefs and behaviors in American politics runs consistently and painfully deep.

In this chapter, we sought to accomplish two things. First, we briefly reviewed the historical development of American democracy and the tensions that characterize its fitful growth. Second, we assembled both theoretical and empirical approaches to the measurement or operationalization of democracy to argue that it is possible to conceptualize democracy in *procedural* or *social* terms. Although there is relatively modest agreement about the essential features of democracy among scholars, it is nevertheless possible to juxtapose democracy's nature in minimal or maximal terms. With this framework in mind, we turn next to exploring mass opinion about democracy through this useful lens.

## CHAPTER 3

### Polling the Public about Democracy

First of all, it is necessary not to confuse the mechanisms of democracy with its fundamental purposes. It is all too easy to worship the machinery rather than the spirit of democracy. Democracy does not consist in special forms and sets of powers but in the underlying principles upon which political association rests.

—Charles Merriam (1941, 309)

If democracy is a work in progress, then one of the central tensions underlying historical and contemporary political conflict revolves around questions about what democracy means, requires, and produces. Understanding how the American public defines democracy is not merely an academic or theoretical exercise but lies at the very core of democratic politics. Public understandings of democracy not only reflect the values of a country but also the values to which they aspire.

Having explored both the development of American democracy and the contemporary themes that animate the study of democracy in chapter 2, we turn now to investigate what ordinary Americans think democracy means. To what extent do public conceptions of democracy overlap with the themes of the previous chapter? Do ordinary Americans think about democracy primarily in terms of voting and choosing between competing elites? Does their understanding of democracy have less to do with procedural mechanics than the individual freedoms listed in the Bill of Rights? Do they perceive that democracy involves more than just procedural goods—that democracy should also provide citizens with basic necessities, social mobility, and economic equality?

The answers to these questions are complicated. First, there is little reason to suspect that the public subscribes to any single, unifying understanding of democracy. As early as 1960, Prothro and Grigg challenged the prevailing wisdom that democracy required consensus on “the rules of the game.” Even if a consensus might have been theoretically desirable, they observed, it was never evident in empirical data. To the extent that any agreement existed on the rules of the game, it mostly involved abstract and vague views of democracy. Once the rules were more fully articulated and carefully specified, agreement about the contours of democracy quickly fell apart. As McClosky (1964, 373) observed, “The electorate displays a substantial measure of unity chiefly in its support of freedom in the abstract; on most other features of democratic belief and practice it is sharply divided.” Even among the most politically involved and aware, consensus on basic democratic values was rare.<sup>1</sup>

Second, there are inherent tensions in any understanding of democracy requiring citizens to prioritize one set of democratic values over another (Grant and Rudolf 2003; Sniderman et al. 1996). Is it possible to have a fair trial with a free press reporting on the explicit details of a case prior to trial? Can meaningful political equality coexist alongside stark economic inequalities? Or, alternatively, is there a point at which economic inequalities are so vast that political equality becomes impossible? McClosky and Zaller’s (1984) *American Ethos* perhaps best described the inherent tensions in the values espoused by a capitalist economic system and a democratic political one. While citizens were deeply committed to individual freedom, egalitarianism was valued primarily within the political, not the economic, realm. Most Americans revered capitalism, viewing the economic world through the cultural lens of “rugged individualism.” Page and Jacobs (2009) described Americans as “conservative egalitarians,” meaning that they pragmatically supported government efforts to reduce economic inequality but generally favored markets and free enterprise as a matter of principle. Relative to citizens of other advanced democracies, Americans placed greater responsibility for economic success (or failure) on the individual, rather than on larger social, economic, or political forces. In turn, public understandings of democracy were rooted not in a coherent set of

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1. More recent polling suggests public consensus on the importance of a variety of institutional rules (e.g., judicial independence, checks and balances) is quite strong, although these are not “values,” strictly speaking (Bright Line Watch 2017). For a recent update of McClosky’s 1964 study, see Hicks, McKee, and Smith (2021).

democratic values, *per se*, but in the tradeoffs required to sustain capitalist democracy.

Third, process preferences do not neatly align with policy preferences or self-identified ideological commitments. While liberals may be more inclined to call for (and believe in) public participation, the levers of direct democracy have sometimes been used to undermine state government capacity through anti-tax initiatives and to curtail individual freedoms through anti-civil rights initiatives (Gamble 1997; Lupia and Matsusaka 2004; Haider-Markel, Querze, and Lindman 2007).<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, process-based preferences for more democracy do not always yield more democratic, participatory, or progressive outcomes and, like all political processes, are subject to elite manipulation.

Consider also that process preferences may not be as deeply rooted as partisan or issue-based beliefs (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Allen and Birch 2015; VanderMolen 2017). Conservative Republicans expressed outrage at President Barack Obama's use of executive orders to affect policy change, for example, but offered few objections to those pursued by the Trump administration. Their criticisms of the Obama administration focused on process violations for tactical reasons and were rooted in substantive policy-based objections. They minded the use of executive power far less than who was exercising power and what it was being used to accomplish. Connecting to the research on motivated reasoning, support for specific rules of the game—whether in politics or sports—depends strongly on partisan cues and individual perceptions regarding which side is likely to win (or benefit) from a specific set of rules (Kopko et al. 2011; Claasen and Ensley 2016; Edelson et al. 2017; Engelhardt and Utych 2018).

Against this backdrop, we review historical and contemporary polling that investigates whether citizens distinguish between the institutional features that govern how democracies actually operate and the normative, political values that give democracy its functionality. We begin by discussing why public opinion is vital to the health of democracy and how social

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2. There is evidence suggesting that initiatives enhance policy responsiveness while increasing citizen involvement and engagement (Bowler, Donovan, and Tolbert 1998; Arceneaux 2002; Smith and Tolbert 2009), though legislators may outmaneuver any popular restrictions placed on government (Gerber, Lupia, McCubbins, and Kiewiet 2001; Kousser, McCubbins, and Moule 2008). We do not dispute this literature, but observe that processes, even those originally created by progressives, do not necessarily lead to progressive outcomes.

and political scientists have traditionally measured public opinion toward it. In turn, we argue that to fully understand how Americans think about democracy requires grappling with how it produces both civil and welfare goods—an approach that aligns us with the instrumental understanding of democracy discussed in chapter 2. While beliefs about freedom and liberty are the standard fare of democracy, fairness and justice not only apply to the *liberty* goods that democracy produces but also to the standard of *material* well-being that citizens enjoy. To conclude this chapter, we press this distinction by polling a set of “essential” characteristics of democracy that embody these features.

### Public Opinion and Democracy

The advent of the modern opinion poll was celebrated as a mechanism for enhancing democratic governance. “When a president or any other leader pays attention to poll results,” George Gallup argued, “he is, in effect, paying attention to the views of the people.” Rooted in the rhetoric of science and the logic of statistics, probability-based polling promised what was previously missing in discussions of political debate: a mechanism for accurately gauging and communicating the public will to policymakers (Gallup and Rae 1940). Gallup and his peers argued that quantifying citizen preferences could increase the correspondence between public preferences and policy outcomes. For these early advocates of polling, this meant fulfilling Lord James Bryce’s fourth stage of democracy, whereby the “public will” became “ascertainable at all times” (Bryce 1888; Pearson 2004). In other words, the public opinion poll was imagined to do more than simply inform democracy but, instead, shape public understandings of how democracy was supposed to function.

Critics have countered that polls advance a weak version of democracy—one that minimizes deliberation while assuming a passive, rather than engaged, citizenry (Ranney 1946; Blumer 1948; Ginsberg and Chang 1986; Herbst 1993). In this respect, polling assumed public opinion was waiting to be discovered through standardized questions rather than dynamically formed through social interactions, public debates, and political conversations. According to this perspective, polling removed the deliberation of political processes from the articulation of public opinion.

We are largely agnostic about these criticisms, though they still animate

scholarly conversations about the limits of the mechanics of polling. For present purposes, it is simply enough to note that the advent of polling advanced one understanding of democracy (democracy as the aggregation of individual or atomistic preferences) at the expense of others (participatory or deliberative democracy). In doing so, it altered public and elite understandings of how democracy should function. If public preferences were knowable, then elites should be responsive to public demands.

The advent of scientific opinion polls also provided insight into the quality of public inputs in democratic processes. Despite George Gallup's faith in the everyday wisdom of the common man, early research into democratic competence was not encouraging. The public was poorly informed, lacked clear preferences (or constraint), and acted almost entirely on the basis of partisan attachments that were formed early in childhood (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; but see Key and Cummings 1966). The citizenry fell so far short of the democratic ideal that it was curious that democratic governments were able to function at all. So how did they manage to muddle along?

First, it was argued that the "democratic ideal" baked into much democratic theory was far too stringent when reality was much more forgiving. The expectation that citizens would have meaningful preferences on the issues of the day as well as process-based preferences for achieving those outcomes was untethered from their everyday experiences. People might not possess intimate knowledge about the levers of democracy—like, say, the filibuster—but they notice when the aid they were promised does not arrive. For democracy to function, voters needed only minimal knowledge, often easily accessible from their daily lives (e.g., the price of milk or gas), to select between competing elites (Schumpeter 1942; Key and Cummings 1966; Dahl 1971; Fiorina 1981). An expanding "revisionist" literature revealed that voters could make reasonably well-informed decisions without much understanding and only minimal information (Downs 1957; Brody et al. 1991; Popkin 1991). Further, partisan affiliation and other information heuristics guided voters to the choices they would have made if they were better informed (Downs 1957; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Sniderman, Brady, and Tetlock 1991).

Second, the "miracle of aggregation" meant that democratic publics did not necessarily suffer from the same flaws as individuals (Page and Shapiro 1992). Instability of belief at the individual level was mostly random noise, while aggregated opinion reflected a "rational public" with opinion

moving coherently in response to external events and policy shifts.<sup>3</sup> With readily available and reasonably accurate partisan heuristics, voters could make satisfactory choices at the individual level (Lupia and McCubbins 1998) and rational choices in the aggregate as an electorate (Page and Shapiro 1992). Left unanswered was the question of what might happen if partisan cues pointed in the wrong direction, if heuristics were misapplied, or if elites intentionally manipulated available information (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000; Dancey and Sheagley 2013; Achen and Bartels 2016; Lau and Redlawsk 2001). Still, putting aside that caveat for the moment, by focusing attention on the limited capacity of democratic citizens for self-governing, midcentury polling helped to redefine understandings of democratic governance. Citizens did not have to be deeply knowledgeable or actively engaged for democracy to produce policies that approximated the public interest. A less information-demanding version of democracy allegedly worked just fine.

### **What Does the Public Think about Democracy?**

The advent of scientific polling also raised basic questions about what individuals thought about democratic processes and political institutions. Were they generally supportive of democracy as a political system? What role did they believe citizens, like themselves, should play in the political process? How much faith and confidence did they have in the rules of the game or in the political institutions that formed the basis of their democratic political systems?

Throughout much of its history, Americans have supported democracy as an abstraction and as an underlying ideology, rooting the legitimacy of government in popular sovereignty and in the set of institutions and processes that comprise liberal democracy. More recently, Americans' faith, confidence, and trust in their political system has declined even as they seem to appreciate parties and certain candidates. Amidst these shifts, one pattern seems clear: the meanings of democracy have also evolved. Writing in 1933, William Starr Myers observed:

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3. George Gallup made a similar argument about why polls as aggregates of individual opinions should be trusted. If asked to judge the length of line, he observed, any individual opinion would be wildly off target, but the average across a large number of guesses would tend to be reasonably accurate.

If the prevalent idea of democracy be taken at any one time during the past two thousand or more of years, it will of course be found that the meaning of the word has varied greatly. It has been used to denote not only a kind but a form of government, a purpose or motive of the people, and also the political or economic result of their desires. (Myers 1933, 153)

### *Early Polling on Democracy*

With the advent of modern polling, pollsters began to ask Americans what they believed about democracy. Two surveys by Roper from late 1939 are illustrative. In November 1939, a Roper Poll asked citizens if democracy was possible without free speech, private enterprise, freedom of religion, and taxation, respectively. At the time, each of these characteristics was seen as essential. Only 5 percent of Americans thought democracy was possible without free speech, 7 percent without free enterprise, 3 percent without freedom of religion, and 4 percent without taxation.<sup>4</sup> Even in the 1930s in the aftermath of the Great Depression, the public clearly linked the political and economic systems into a blended understanding of liberal democracy. To the average citizen, private enterprise and democracy necessarily coexisted, one unthinkable without the other.

In the same survey, respondents were asked if they considered the American system of government a democracy or a representative democracy. The results highlight the challenges inherent in categorizing public understandings of democracy. Thirty-five percent of respondents described the American system of government as a democracy, while 39 percent described it as a representative democracy. One in five Americans (20 percent), however, said they did not know, reflecting the ongoing challenge of a poorly informed mass public.<sup>5</sup>

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4. One year later, in December 1940, Roper asked "*Do you think your own personal liberties would be decreased . . . if some form of dictatorship were substituted for our representative democracy?*" Eighty-eight percent said yes, dictatorship would decrease their own personal liberties, 5 percent said no, and 7 percent said they did not know. Even then, anxiety over authoritarianism ran deep.

5. Roper Organization. Roper Commercial Survey, November 1939 [survey question]. USROPER.RCOM39-010.Q03A. Roper Organization [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL [distributor], accessed Dec-16-2019.

Then, in December 1939, Roper asked survey respondents whether the pairing of democracy and private enterprise was nearly perfect and needed no changes, in need of significant revision, or breaking down because of the inherent tensions between private enterprise and democracy. Sixty-four percent of Americans said the political system was nearly perfect and needed no important changes, 19 percent that it needed significant revision, and 5 percent that the systems of private capitalism and democracy were breaking down.<sup>6</sup> This question was repeated in October and December 1946 in the aftermath of World War II. The percentages saying that the system was nearly perfect and needed no important changes varied from 43 percent in September to 51 percent in December. By comparison, the share saying the political system needed to be thoroughly revised was 33 percent in September 1946 and 27 percent that same December. These shifts suggest that, while the American founding has been a source of national pride, support for “revising” the political system has been very much dependent on context—even across just a few months within a single year.

A 1947 Gallup poll took a more detailed approach to asking citizens about their views of democracy: “*Will you tell me what the term ‘democracy’ means to you?*”<sup>7</sup> At the time, Americans largely saw democracy as “government by the people” (44 percent), though various freedoms (including freedom of speech, the press, and religion) also registered strongly when combined into a single category (55 percent). While support for democracy is variable, responses to open-ended questions of this type are remarkably consistent over time and across space. Throughout much of the world, survey respondents primarily identify “freedom” or “the people” in defining democracy, suggesting an accessible and widely shared understanding of popular sovereignty.

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6. The specific question was as follows: *Which one of the following most nearly represents your opinion of the American form of government? A. Our form of government based on the Constitution is as near perfect as it can be and no important changes should be made in it, B. The Constitution has served its purpose well, but it has not kept up with the times and should be thoroughly revised to make it fit present-day needs, C. The systems of private capitalism and democracy are breaking down and we might as well accept the fact that sooner or later we will have to have a new form of government.* Roper/Fortune Survey, December 1939 [survey question]. USROPER.39-013. R01. Roper Organization [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL [distributor], accessed Dec-16-2019.

7. Gallup Organization. Gallup Poll (APIO), February 1947 [survey question]. USGALLUP47-390. QK13A. Gallup Organization [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL [distributor], accessed Dec-16-2019.

Early opinion polls also provide insight into how Americans thought about democracy by gauging how they saw democracy elsewhere. In May 1947, Gallup asked Americans a series of questions regarding whether they thought specific countries were democracies. Eighty-eight percent deemed the United States a democracy compared to 48 percent for Great Britain, 32 percent for France, and 5 percent for Russia. For Americans, democracy was at least partially defined as the government in the United States. Other countries—even democratic ones—were seen as less democratic (or not democratic at all).<sup>8</sup> Beliefs in American exceptionalism run deep.

The Roper Center database contains relatively few questions that make direct reference to democracy in the 1950s and the 1960s, though at least one question asked Americans whether they thought the “Red Scare,” the Joseph McCarthy-inflamed fear of communist infiltration, was doing more damage than good:

I'd like to read you some statements that have been made about the communist problem. Would you please tell me which of the choices on this card is closest to how you feel about each: Congressional investigations are stirring up hysterical fear and suspicion that is doing more damage to democracy than the communists in this country. Agree or disagree?<sup>9</sup>

Relatively few Americans (22 percent) agreed with this statement while a substantial majority (64 percent) disagreed, suggesting greater concern with communism than with the consequences of communist fearmongering on democratic governance. Consistent with the literature on tolerance, which finds that fear often decreases accepting others’ legitimate rights of expression, the broader context of political fear undermined support for democratic principles.

During 1976, the economic crisis following Watergate resulted in ques-

8. Further underscoring this point: when asked in 1946 if the United States should “*do everything it can to tell other nations the advantages of our type of democracy for the common people of the world?*” 68 percent of Americans said “yes,” which indicated a deep-seated belief that the U.S. form of democracy best approximated the ideal democracy.

9. Opinion Research Corporation. ORC Public Opinion Index, November 1958 [survey question]. USORC.59 JAN.R11. Opinion Research Corporation [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL [distributor], accessed Jan-3-2020.

tions asking Americans once again how closely they connected the economic system (free enterprise) with a democratic political system. Here, respondents were asked about the link between the market economy and democracy:

Some people say a free market economy is necessary for personal liberty and democracy and that if the free market is taken away we will lose liberty. Other people say the two aren't really related and we can be free and democratic in any kind of economy. Is a free market economy essential to freedom, or not?<sup>10</sup>

Fifty-nine percent of Americans said, yes, a free market was necessary for personal liberty and democracy, while only 15 percent said no. This question was repeated in 1977 with similar results (60 percent agreed that the free market was as necessary as freedom to democracy). While comparisons across time are difficult given differences in question wordings, Americans continued to link free market capitalism with both democracy and personal freedom. In fact, while capitalistic and democratic values may exist in tension, the overriding commitment to individualism seems to insulate the public against any sweeping condemnations of the excesses of capitalist systems (McClosky and Zaller 1984).<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Americans also closely connect their political system to their national identity. When asked in a 1977 Harris survey how important democracy as a political system was in making America great, 74 percent said it was a major factor, 15 percent said it was minor factor, and 5 percent said it hardly mattered at all.<sup>12</sup> When asked in a subsequent question

10. Cambridge Reports/Research International. Cambridge Reports/National Omnibus Survey, July 1976 [survey question]. USCAMREP76 JUL.R229. Cambridge Reports/Research International [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL [distributor], accessed Jan-3-2020.

11. Tocqueville first observed and lauded the role of individualism in American politics, though he also noted its potential to morph into a form of egoism, which could undermine community spirit, political participation, and civic-mindedness. Indeed, this is the theme of Bellass et al.'s *Habits of the Heart* (1985) and one of William Hudson's (2001) "perils" of American Democracy. Individualism and private interests undermine a sense of community and a commitment to serving the public interest.

12. Specific question wording: *Now here is a list of things some people believe have made America great. For each, would you tell me if you feel this was a major factor in making America great, a minor factor or hardly a factor at all) . . . Democracy as its political system?* Louis Harris & Associ-

to project forward over the next 25 years, 72 percent said the American political system would continue to be factor in making America great.<sup>13</sup> Democracy and American-ness were largely inseparable in the minds of ordinary Americans.

### *Contemporary Polling on Democracy*

The democratic political system has historically been a source of pride tied directly to national identity, even as, perhaps ironically, American democracy has struggled to live up to its own stated democratic ideals. Still, those beliefs about democracy's greatness persist in the contemporary era, though some qualifications are in order. First, Americans are increasingly inclined to see the need for significant revision to the country's political processes and institutions. In a 2018 survey, the Pew Research Center reported that 61 percent of Americans believed significant changes were needed to the "fundamental design and structure of American government."<sup>14</sup> Less engaged, minority, younger, and less educated Americans perceived a greater need for significant revision. In the current era, the political system is not working particularly well for these persons while working extremely well for others.

Why this interest in changes to democracy? Bear in mind that some of the earliest questions gauging opinion on the need for system redesign were asked in the wake of the Great Depression, a more difficult era and one in which the effects of the economic collapse were widespread and broadly felt. The economic recovery following the Great Recession (from 2007 to 2009) was relatively strong by traditional measures (e.g., unemployment and GDP), but the gains were uneven and the promise of eco-

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ates. Harris Survey, November 1977 [survey question]. USHARRIS.011678.R06. Louis Harris & Associates [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL [distributor], accessed Jan-3-2020.

13. The attentive reader will note the similarity between this language and the one employed by Donald J. Trump during the 2016 election. What's old is new.

14. Pew Research Center. "Most Democrats Favor Major Changes in 'Design' of Govt.; Republicans Are Split, April 25, 2018. Specific question wording is as follows: *Thinking about the fundamental design and structure of American government, which comes closer to your view? Significant changes to the design and structure are needed to make it work for current times OR The design and structure serves the country well and does not need significant changes*, [https://www.peoplepress.org/2018/04/26/the-public-the-political-system-and-american-democracy/overview\\_5-3/](https://www.peoplepress.org/2018/04/26/the-public-the-political-system-and-american-democracy/overview_5-3/)

nomic opportunity was increasingly in doubt. The public health and economic crisis created by the coronavirus outbreak beginning in 2020 and continuing through 2022 once again exposed the underlying and intractable inequalities embedded into the fabric of American liberal democracy, as does the unfolding climate crisis that has exacerbated deadly winter storms and summer heat waves. For large groups of Americans, especially the poor and working class, the democratic promises of basic necessities like shelter, running water, and heating and cooling—much less economic prosperity—have not been matched by democracy's performance. It is not surprising that the lack of these welfare goods would generate enthusiasm to revisit the system's design.

Second, democratic deficits are also evident in the differences in evaluations of the importance of democracy compared to the performance of democratic characteristics (e.g., equality of opportunity, free speech). For example, individuals who believe free speech rights are essential to democracy but not adequately protected express less satisfaction with democracy as a political system.<sup>15</sup> Bright Line Watch's recent polling helps make this point: they find persistent gaps between public ratings of the importance of various democratic principles and the perceived performance of democracy in satisfying those values, with the largest gap involving principles related to institutions and accountability.<sup>16</sup> The problem then is not that Americans see these democratic characteristics as unimportant, but that they do not believe they describe the contemporary political system particularly well. A fair reading of these comparisons is that Americans want *more* (and better) democracy rather than less.

Having said that, there is considerable variance in the percent of Americans believing that a given democratic characteristic is important. Eighty-four percent of Americans believe that the “rights and freedoms of all people are respected” is very important as a characteristic of democracy compared to 59 percent who believe that government policies should “reflect the views of most Americans.”<sup>17</sup> Overall, characteristics associated

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15. This is also from the Pew Research Center. The questions asked respondents how important a feature was to democratic governance and then asked how well the feature described the political system today.

16. Bright Line Watch, “A Democratic Stress Test: The 2020 Election and Its Aftermath,” 2020, <http://brightlinewatch.org/a-democratic-stress-test-the-2020-election-and-its-aftermath-bright-line-watch-november-2020-survey/>

17. Pew Research Center, “The Public, the Political System, and American Democracy,”

with the rule of law and personal freedom garner more support than characteristics associated with political debate or policy responsiveness. The characteristics associated with political debate are also given the lowest marks for how well they describe the country. Substantial majorities believe that the “tone of political debate is respectful” and that “Republicans and Democrats work together on issues” are not particularly apt descriptors of the United States today.

Other studies reveal similar patterns of findings. Since 2017, Bright Line Watch has conducted regular surveys designed to gauge elite and public assessments of democratic performance.<sup>18</sup> Experts generally perceive democracy as continuing to perform reasonably well and are far more positive about democracy’s prospects (relative to the public) across a range of democratic characteristics. The public, in contrast, is more skeptical about basic features of democracy like free speech and the integrity of the electoral process.

Yet, if experts are generally more positive about the state of American democracy, they, too, have become more pessimistic lately. Experts believe that former president Trump undermined democratic norms, particularly on issues related to judicial independence, the use of government agencies to punish opponents, the domestic use of military force, and legislative and constitutional checks on the executive branch. Public evaluations have largely followed in suit, sharing expert concerns about the erosion of democratic norms. There is also ample evidence of partisan divisions in these evaluations. Where experts see violations of democratic norms, Trump supporters are more positive and more willing to support violations of democratic norms and principles (Clayton et al. 2021; a finding we return to in chapter 8). Indeed, the most apparent threat to democracy revealed in polling data during the Trump presidency resides less in the perceived importance or evaluations of democratic norms and more in growing affective polarization. Democratic processes are seen largely through the lens of partisanship (Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022), and people are willing to relax their support for democratic norms when those norms are clouded in partisan controversy (Graham and Svolik 2020).

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2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/04/26/the-public-the-political-system-and-american-democracy/>

18. The full set of reports can be found at <http://brightlinewatch.org/>

## Gauging Public Understandings of Democracy

While this polling history contributes to how we evaluate how the public thinks about democratic governance, there are still significant gaps with respect to how people think about the outputs associated with democracy and how, in turn, these features contribute to cohesive views of it.<sup>19</sup> To understand the images average citizens associate with democracy, we explore two types of survey questions. First, we ask individuals what they think democracy means using open-ended survey questions. These questions do not emphasize any particular feature of democracy but instead ask individuals to convey how they think about democracy using their own words. Second, we pair these questions with close-ended survey questions asking respondents to rate various features of democracy. While these items mention democracy, they do so in the context of democracy's instrumental virtues.

This dual approach is useful for fleshing out public understandings of democracy because it accounts for both prompted and unprompted opinions. In the case of open-ended questions, characteristics or qualities that spring immediately to mind tell us something about those features that spontaneously arise when someone hears the word democracy. These free-flowing "top of the mind" responses are valuable because they communicate the preformed ideas that are readily available or assessable to citizens. Close-ended survey questions, meanwhile, inform us about a broader array of democratic elements that may be missed in open-ended or free-thought exercises. They also allow us to examine the pattern of interactions across individual items. How strongly correlated, for example, are beliefs about free elections and beliefs about free speech or economic inequality?

While we see these approaches as complementary, there has been debate in the literature about which approach is best for deciphering the public's understanding of democracy. Researchers relying on an open-ended question have typically concluded that citizens of democracies around the world can (1) define democracy in their in their own words, and (2) share

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19. We suspect that some readers may have now chafed themselves raw over the idea that the United States is a "democracy" and not a "republic." This retort is the sort of thing we inevitably hear at least once a term from freshmen students, but we would simply echo Ed Burmila in *The Baffler*: "To say that the United States is not a democracy is correct if democracy is defined in a way that no government on Earth, past or present, qualifies as one." See: <https://thebaffler.com/latest/were-a-republic-not-a-democracy-burmila>

Fig. 3.1. Word cloud of open-ended responses to “What does democracy mean to you?”  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2016 CCES module. Word size is weighted by frequency of mentions.)



an understanding of what democracy means that is largely synonymous with western liberal democracy (Dalton et al. 2007). When asked to define democracy in their own words, individuals overwhelming refer to individual rights and freedoms followed by institutional processes (such as free and fair elections or majority rule). In figure 3.1, we present the results from a 2016 module of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), which largely corroborates those findings. Here, the more frequently a word is used, the larger its appearance in the word cloud.

Recall that earlier in the chapter, we referred to a survey question in the 1940s asking respondents what democracy means to them. Consistent with that previous research, these findings suggest that the public understands democracy almost exclusively in terms of individual freedom. Institutional processes, like voting and representation (gauged by responses emphasizing the “people”) finished a distant second, while issues related to equality emerged even less frequently. Within this context, it is impossible to tell how many of the responses implied political equality (“one person, one vote”) rather than social or economic equality. The ambiguity of meaning provides reason for not over-interpreting this result. What exactly does equality mean? Or, for that matter, freedom? Is it more than a clichéd Pavlovian response? Are individuals who associate democracy with freedom also more likely to support free expression of unpopular ideas or by unpopular groups? Or is the association between freedom and democracy a relationship without much meaning?

While this type of open-ended question is revealing, it is hardly definitive. For this reason, scholars have also asked about various features of

democracy, even to the point of avoiding the word “democracy” altogether, to better gauge support for democratic processes and values absent democracy’s vaguely positive connotations (Schedler and Sarfield 2007; Coppedge 2012).<sup>20</sup> Research examining the characteristics of democracy has found less agreement on what democracy means while casting doubt on just how much the public shares a single coherent understanding of democracy (Bratton 2010). In fact, scholars looking at democratic characteristics have typically identified two (procedural versus substantive) or three (procedural, liberties, and economic) understandings of democracy (Baviskar and Malone 2004; Bratton et al. 2005; Dalton et al. 2007; Crow 2010).<sup>21</sup> Yet, there are other ways of conceptualizing these qualities. For example, we might also want to distinguish understandings of democracy in terms of inputs (political participation and representation), processes or decision rules (majority rule, free and fair elections), and outputs (economic growth, political freedom, and equality).

Our initial analysis introduces a 15-item inventory regarding the “essential” characteristics of democracy. These items were collected in a survey module fielded in the 2016 and 2017 waves of the Cooperative Congressional Election Studies surveys. Pulling from survey items used in the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Social Survey (ESS), this inventory asks respondents to convey whether they believe certain features are “essential” to democracy. While many of these items have been used to study democracies across the world (e.g., Ferrin and Kresei 2016), they have only sporadically been fielded to study how Americans think about democracy.

These features are critical to assessing the extent to which people hold more limited or substantive definitions of democracy, and they serve as the key ingredients for our argument that democracy is best conceptualized in multifaceted ways. Broadly, these survey questions capture what we believe are three separable dimensions of democracy: process-based qualities (items 1–5 in table 3.1), civil liberties (items 6–11), and perceptions related to political and economic equality (items 12–15). If the first dimension reflects design and access considerations, the second and third batteries of items presumably reflect civil and welfare goods that are

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20. Bratton (2010), for example, used an anchoring approach suggested by King et al. (2004), which helps to center democratic understandings based on vignettes.

21. Recent analysis using McClosky’s (1964) research as a template also identifies another racial dimension to democracy (Hill, McKee, and Smith 2021), which we return to in chapter 5.

conventionally attached to democracy. Our specific question wordings are provided in table 3.1 below.

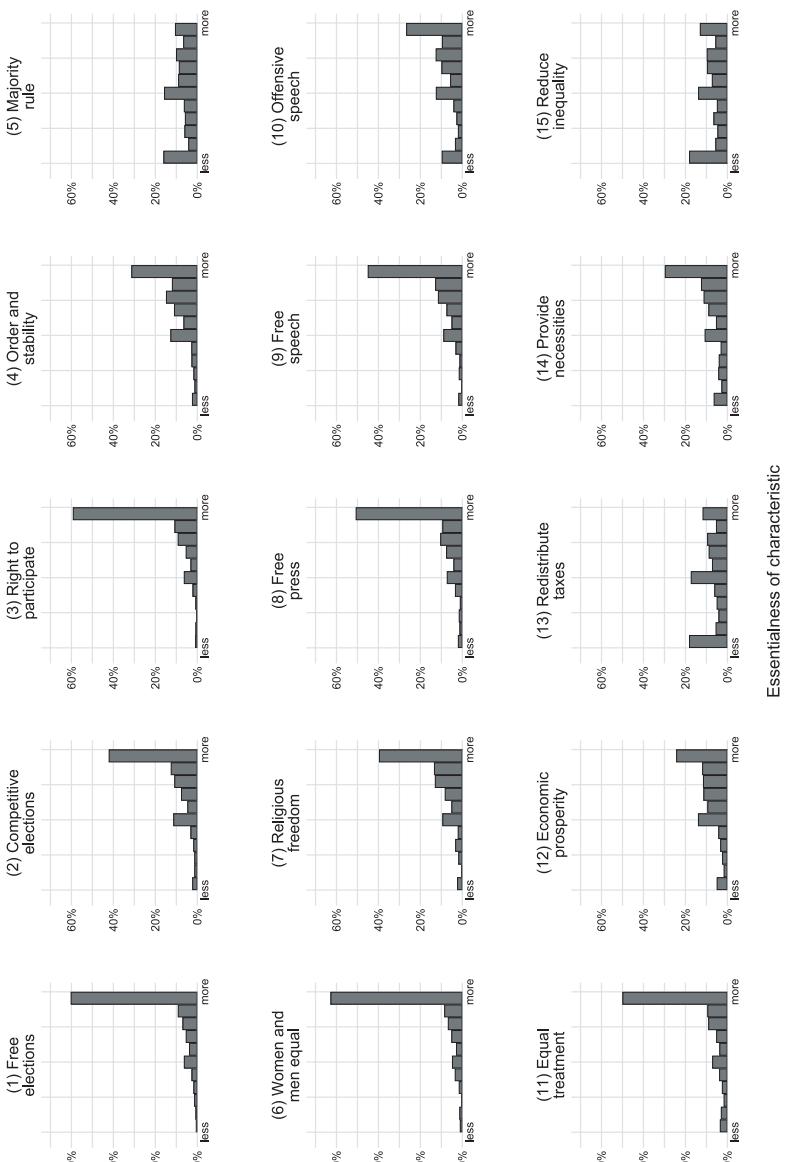
Figure 3.2 illustrates the distribution of responses to the items included in the battery. We find that there is significant support for *free elections* (1) and *competitive elections* (2)—the majority of responses to these items skew toward the right pole of the x-axis, which communicates that respondents thought a quality was “essential” to democracy. In addition, while the *right*

TABLE 3.1. The Essential Characteristics of Democracy

*Wording: Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. How essential do you personally think of the following are as a characteristic of democracy?*

Variable	Description
(1) Free elections	<i>People choose their leaders in free and fair elections</i>
(2) Competitive elections	<i>Elections are competitive with a choice of at least two political parties</i>
(3) Right to participate	<i>Every citizen has the right and opportunity to participate in democratic processes</i>
(4) Stability	<i>Government provides stability and order</i>
(5) Majoritarian	<i>The majority gets what it wants, even if the rights of some minorities are restricted</i>
(6) Gender equality	<i>Women have the same rights as men</i>
(7) Religious freedom	<i>People of all faiths, even those considered extreme, can practice their religion freely</i>
(8) Free press	<i>The media can report the news without government censorship</i>
(9) Free speech	<i>People can openly say what they think and criticize the government even during a national crisis</i>
(10) Offensive speech	<i>People can say things in public that might be offensive to racial or religious groups</i>
(11) Equal treatment	<i>Everyone is treated equally by the government</i>
(12) Gov promotes prosperity	<i>Government policies promote economic prosperity and growth</i>
(13) Redistributive taxation	<i>Government taxes the rich and subsidizes the poor</i>
(14) Gov provides necessities	<i>Everyone has basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter</i>
(15) Gov reduces inequality	<i>Government reduces gaps in income and wealth</i>

*Note:* Full battery that was fielded in the 2016 CCES.



**Fig. 3.2. The essential characteristics of democracy**  
 (Note: Data drawn from authors' 2016 CCES module. Figure illustrates the distribution of responses to various features of democracy. The left-edge of the x-axis conveys that respondents saw the quality as less essential, while responses to the right-end of the axis convey a feature is more essential. Values ranged from 0 (not essential) to 10 (essential).)

*to participate* (3) is deeply wedded to conceptions of democracy, curiously, there is less consensus regarding both *stability* (4) and *majoritarian rule* (5). Attitudes about majority rule involve the idea that majority preferences should be respected, even if such outcomes might trample minority rights. It is curious that the public is more or less divided with respect to how essential this idea is given that it has serious implications for the protections of rights and liberties.

Items 6 through 11 reflect attitudes toward various civil guarantees that are protected in various founding documents and amendments to the Constitution. These are the expressly “political” goods that are (mostly) embodied in the Bill of Rights. *Gender equality* (6) receives very high levels of support. Similarly, *religious freedom* (7) is considered essential, but full-throated support is, on average, a bit less than the freedoms of *press* (8), *speech* (9), or *equal treatment* (11) before the law. Predictably, offensive speech receives only modest ratings, reflecting either enlightened sensibilities or socially desirable behavior in respondents. Few people willingly admit to admiring citizens who say offensive things to racial or religious groups, and racism is the one type of speech that the public has unequivocally grown less tolerant of over time (Chong and Levy 2018). Nonetheless, according to absolutists, the right to say ugly, offensive things in public is a fundamental civil liberty that democracy guarantees. A majority of respondents (65 percent) are supportive of this quality, but a nontrivial proportion report that it is not an essential characteristic of democracy.

The final set of items involves actions taken by democracy to reduce material inequality or promote economic prosperity. These welfare goods involve *promoting prosperity* (12), which receives much public support, as well as *redistributive taxation* (13), the *provision of basic necessities* (14), and the *reduction of wealth inequalities* (15). These final three items receive decidedly mixed support. While there is more support for the provision of necessities, on balance, redistributive taxation and inequality produce distributions of support that are clearly divided. The divide on these items is not surprising since they most closely resemble beliefs generally associated with the left-right divide in mass politics. This is not a trivial finding, but it does pose an interesting question: To what degree do these differences map onto conventional cleavages in American politics? As we will show in chapter 5, the answer to this question is more complicated than we might expect. For now, we simply observe that these differences are impor-

tant and that consensus regarding the connection between liberalism and democracy is fuzzier than we might otherwise imagine given the historical development of American democracy.

## Summary

In chapter 2, we focused primarily on how elites understand democracy. Here, we have turned to the question of how the mass public understands it. We began by laying out why public opinion matters for democracy—it provides the key grist for maintaining the relationship between the governed and those responsible for governing. Although pollsters have historically been curious about how the mass public views the functionality or effectiveness of democracy, much less attention has been paid to how citizens understand its nature.

In this chapter, we introduce the key data that serve as the backbone for the rest of this book: the essential characteristics of democracy. The public largely voices support for both the processes that characterize and rights that democracy produce, but they differ with respect to how democracy corresponds to material well-being. That distinction is not novel, *per se*, but research has insufficiently grappled with how citizens connect economic to civil outputs in the context of democracy. After all, capitalism is deeply embedded in the framework of American democracy, and to analyze how Americans think about it requires acknowledging this dimension.

It is important to note, however, that these definitions are neither static nor uniformly accepted, given shifting political contexts, political rhetoric, or partisan cues.<sup>22</sup> What people consider to be democratic may change depending on who is in power, which side appears to be winning under a given set of rules or a given issue, and what partisan cues or interpretations of democracy are provided by partisan and political elites. If some variance is to be expected, we contend that individuals have working understandings of democracy (or schema) centered on what they consider to be core democratic principles or characteristics (e.g., free and competitive elections, the right to participate in elections, or individual freedoms), and

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22. Wittgenstein (1968) observes that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.” A word like democracy, according to his picture theory of language, allows us to picture what democracy looks like in practice. As the practice of democracy changes so, too, would our picture of it.

these understandings guide their evaluations of politics, processes, policies, and political outcomes. But how do these preferences “fit” together? How do people *combine* these characteristics into an operating, or walking, definition of democracy? Do responses to these questions exhibit any sort of pattern among respondents? Answering these questions is the task to which we turn in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

# Creating and Validating a Typology of Democratic Meanings

ty·pol·o·gy  
/tī-'pä-lō-jē/—noun

*A classification according to general type, especially in archaeology, psychology, or the social sciences*

In chapter 3, our exploration of more than 50 years of polling about democracy uncovered a consistent, narrow focus on the institutional qualities of democracy. Yet, if democratic politics involve “who gets what, when, and how,”<sup>1</sup> then conceptualizing democracy in terms of a spectrum of the political goods it produces has obvious benefits. Democracy is not merely a set of levers mashed periodically to produce new governing officials, but a vibrant way of managing the well-being of a citizenry.<sup>2</sup> Following this “maximal” approach to measuring democracy, we introduced a battery of fifteen questions that assessed how ordinary citizens think about the outputs of democracy. On balance, the public agrees on some democratic basics—namely features that reflect the “procedural” elements linked to democracy’s protections of civil equality—and disagrees on whether democracy ought to produce material or “substantive” equality.

A remaining analytical problem, however, involves the matter of how to connect these attitudes together in a concrete fashion. That is, (how) do individuals assemble the production of these goods into composite visions

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1. This turn of phrase, of course, belongs to Lasswell’s famous 1936 book by the same name.

2. An idea that draws on Dewey’s (1937) conceptualization of democracy as “a way of life.”

of democracy? Is there any consensus on or agreement about the overarching form that democracy ought to embody? Rather than looking at individual attitudes about the essential elements of democracy piecemeal, our task in this chapter involves investigating how individuals organize their beliefs about democracy *systematically*.

### Identifying a Core Set of Essential Features of Democracy

The data for our analysis involves six questions from the battery that we introduced in chapter 3. Although the full battery of 15 items was fielded in the 2016 module of our CCES survey, only a more limited set of questions was fielded in the later 2017 and 2020 surveys. Using the first survey as our guide, we culled down the questions that we felt best represented a balance of the political goods that democracy produces.<sup>3</sup> The six items are as follows: (1) whether the majority's preferences are more important than the rights of minorities; (2) whether people ought to have the right to say deeply offensive things about racial or religious groups in public; (3) whether all citizens should be endowed with the opportunity and right to participate in democratic processes; (4) whether everyone should enjoy equal treatment by the government; (5) whether material inequality should be resolved by government; and (6) whether everyone should be given some basic level of necessities to survive. Although we briefly previewed these survey instruments in the previous chapter, we review them again here in order to establish their relevance to our project of analyzing composite views of democracy.

#### Majority Rights

In the United States, majoritarian selection mechanisms separate winners and losers in electoral contests—simply, candidates who win the most votes are elected to public office (save for the presidency, which decouples election outcomes from pure majoritarianism). As we reviewed in chapter

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3. Of course, we would have preferred to have fielded the full 15-item inventory across both surveys, but we were constrained for reasons of survey space. However, supplementary analysis in the appendix indicates that the typology produced by these six instruments closely tracks across all 15 items.

2, however, the broader philosophy of majoritarianism was a concerning basis on which to build a democracy. While the will of the people was considered the primary medium from which government drew its legitimacy, there was great concern regarding whether or not the passions of the mass public could be trusted.<sup>4</sup> Of the problems associated with self-rule, the potential for factionalism was particularly worrisome. The tendency for citizens to band together over common, but undemocratic, impulses posed problems for protecting the integrity of rights and liberties—a problem that becomes more acute when, say, the popular presidential vote does not correspond to the Electoral College outcome. While the legitimacy of government finds its source in the people, the Framers worried—or at least gave lip-service to the anxiety—that majorities would tyrannize numerically smaller groups. Madison envisioned the possibility that “the majority may trespass on the rights of the minority” and conceded that “the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority” could wreak havoc on the well-being of minority preferences (*Federalist No. 10*). Jefferson, in turn, further warned that while the majority may have the authority to do as they please, they ought to be mindful of what is “reasonable.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, majority rule notwithstanding, minorities ought not have their rights and freedoms limited—the law is the law, and the Constitution guarantees equal protections to majority and minority alike.

To the extent that majoritarianism is a fundamental design feature of electoral processes in the United States, recent political history has been characterized by significant *minority* rule. While the presidency is decided by the Electoral College, both the 2000 and 2016 presidential election winners failed to receive even a plurality of the mass public’s votes (joining the 1824, 1876, and 1888 elections before them).<sup>6</sup> Minority rule also describes the nature of the distribution of power in the Senate. As of the 2018 election cycle, the numerical share of the population represented by the majority party in power (about 44 percent of Americans) was sub-

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4. This is a polite way of saying: the architects of the Constitution wanted the veneer of a democratic institutional structure but were ultimately suspicious about the intellectual and emotional capacity of ordinary citizens to engage in such restrained self-rule.

5. Extract from Jefferson’s First Inaugural, 1801. MS (DLC 110: 18836–7). Transcription based on text published in *National Intelligencer*, March 4, 1801, and Jefferson’s manuscript (DLC 110: 18836–7). Published in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 33:134–52.

6. Of course, one’s vote *matters*, but not all votes matter *equally* in the sense that the Electoral College ties votes to geographic units (i.e., states), which has the effect of untethering presidential voting from the net voting result.

stantially smaller than the numerical share of the population represented by the minority party (about 56 percent of Americans). This works out to a representational ratio of roughly 2.8 million people per Republican senator and 3.7 million people per Democratic senator.<sup>7</sup> In these cases, a numerical minority of Americans are represented by an elected majority, which seems to violate some of the spirit of Madisonian assumptions about self-governance.

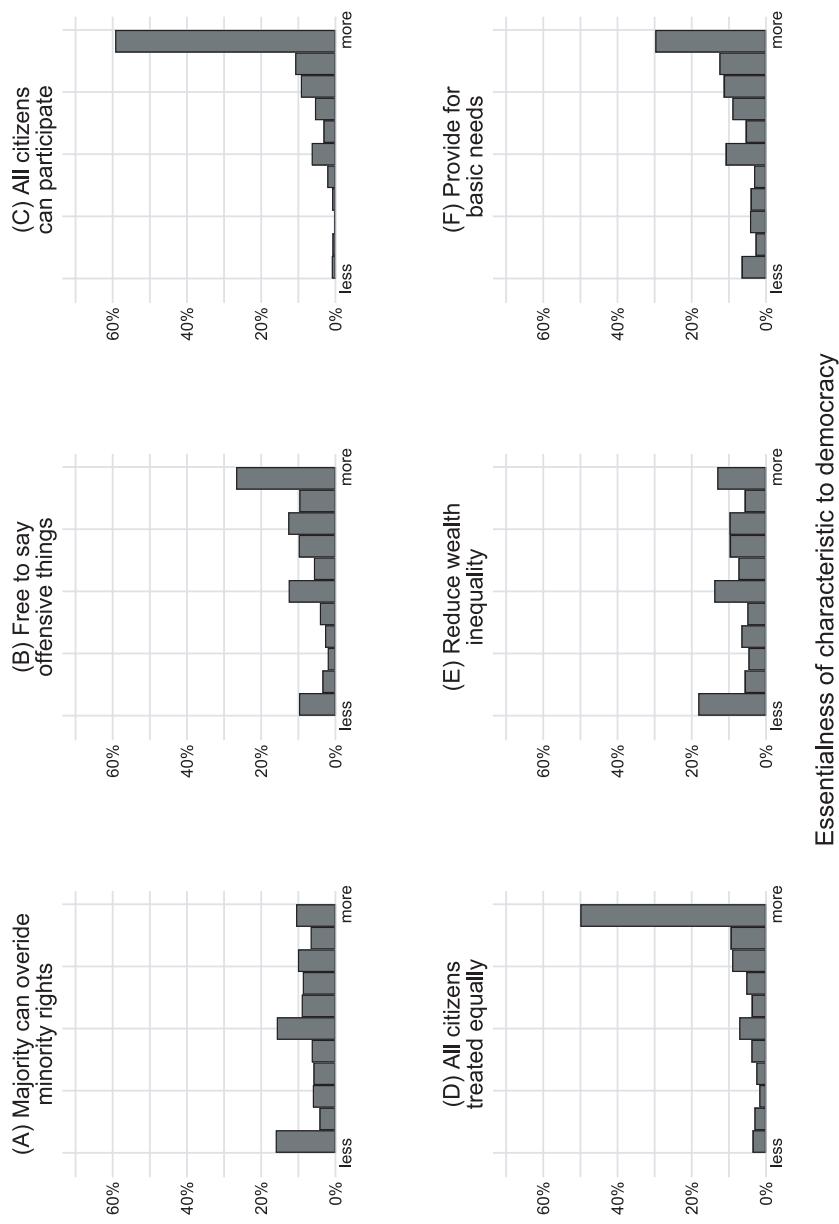
Whether these outcomes are features or flaws of democratic design likely depends on who benefits. Yet, they do pose an interesting set of questions: Do Americans believe in the superiority of majorities? That is, do they perceive that duly elected majorities ought to be able to pursue their interests, even at the expense of minorities? Or are their attitudes tempered about the limits regarding what majorities can legally do? In that case, are they prone to respect the rights of minorities? Recent research questions the practical limits that individuals see regarding the rights of the majority. Grossman et al. (2021) present some suggestive experimental work that shows that individuals often support “power grabs” that disadvantage minorities. That is, citizens are willing to strengthen the power of the electoral majority at the expense of out-of-power party. These findings largely corroborate real-world events in states like Wisconsin, which have seen legislative majorities pass crippling laws that undemocratically limit the constitutionally appointed powers of their rivals.<sup>8</sup>

Given these tensions, it seems that attitudes about majoritarianism ought to play a role in how individuals think about democracy. Panel A in figure 4.1 illustrates how respondents think about the limits of majoritarian rule. When asked whether majorities should get what they want, *even if the rights of minorities are restricted as a consequence*, responses are distributed relatively evenly across the range of values. Perhaps concerns about the tyranny of the masses were well-founded. While roughly 15 percent of respondents remain neutral with respect to the protection of

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7. An asymmetry grounded in the urban-rural divide. Interestingly, it is possible to control the U.S. Senate with the majority votes in states containing just 25 percent of the national electorate—thus 12.5 percent of the vote can translate into a Senate majority (see Regens and Gaddie 1995; Brownstein 2018).

8. For example, see: Conklin, Melanie, “GOP Has Bill to Reallocate Wisconsin’s Electoral Votes by Congressional District,” *Wisconsin Examiner*, January 8, 2021, <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2021/01/08/gop-eyes-bill-to-reallocate-wisconsins-electoral-votes-by-congressional-district/>



**Fig. 4.1. Short-form essential characteristics of democracy**  
 (Note: Data includes six instruments from the 2016 CCES survey. Respondents are asked whether each quality is an “essential” characteristic of democracy and to supply a rating ranging from 0 (not essential) to 10 (essential).)

minorities from majorities, almost 40 percent of respondents conveyed that protecting minority rights at the expense of majority preferences was not an essential feature of democracy. In other words, a large minority of Americans accepts that it is appropriate for the majority to “get what it wants” no matter the social or political costs to their rivals.

### *Free Speech*

An enduring feature of the United States’ Constitution involves the protection of free speech. No less than the very first entry in the Bill of Rights outlines a special defense of an individual’s right to express themselves. These First Amendment protections are grounded in the idea that free speech encourages citizens to wrestle with difficult ideas, and that the absence of regulation helps create a culture in which people search for truth.<sup>9</sup> Thus, there has been a general tendency to view speech as a form of public good, or the sort of good that benefits a wide population of persons.

This perspective, however, is perhaps more complicated than we might otherwise assume. In some sense, speech may be a public “good,” but it also may function as a public “bad.” As Sullivan (1995, 960) writes, “just as speech creates ‘benefits’ that the speaker cannot fully capture, so it imposes ‘costs’ that the speaker need not fully bear.” For example, permitting racist speech can plainly harm members of minority groups. We might prioritize the right of citizens to say hurtful things in an attempt to avoid arbitrary censorship, but the act of doing so can impose significant costs on other members of the community that offset whatever benefit is accrued by permitting the speech in the first place.<sup>10</sup> Consider, as another example, the social media communication style of former president Trump. Even though his Twitter feed produced a deluge of verifiably false information for the better part of four years,<sup>11</sup> it was not until his baseless allegations

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9. There is a special irony, then, in the semi-regular calls to regulate the teaching of subjects like race and racism within universities.

10. For more about the relationship between speech and harm, see Ishani and McGowan (2012).

11. See, for example, Daniel Dale’s reflections fact-checking the former president in “Reflections on Four Weird Years Fact Checking Every Word from Donald Trump.” Retrieved from: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/19/politics/fact-check-daniel-dale-reflections-fact-checking-trump/index.html>

of electoral fraud in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election that the social media company eventually deplatformed him for disseminating harmful information. As this case illustrates, speech is often unchecked in the American marketplace, despite pundits breathlessly complaining about the growth of a contrived cancel culture.<sup>12</sup> In fact, if anything, government probably *subsidizes* speech—that is, permissible speech is “artificially” protected in such a way to allow for a range of otherwise unpopular, if not unseemly, content.<sup>13</sup> In the case of election-rigging talk, President Trump’s comments likely helped turn Republicans against the results of the election (Clayton et al. 2021).

To what extent do citizens connect speech to democracy? Do they actively support the freedom of expression? Previous polling suggests that nearly everyone champions freedom of speech in the abstract (Gibson 2011). But, in practice, what do ordinary citizens think about the contours of speech? Research on political tolerance shows that Americans reliably endorse the principle of free expression, even as they exhibit great reluctance to sustain these ideas when presented with disliked groups (e.g., Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, and Wood 1995; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, and Stevens 2005; Gibson 2011). Attitudes about the rights of Ku Klux Klan members to demonstrate in public, for example, are one popular scenario for testing whether beliefs about free speech are durable. Perhaps unsurprisingly, subjects often convey that they are uncomfortable with the rights of white nationalists to demonstrate in public (e.g., Druckman 2001; Gibson 1987).<sup>14</sup> More generally, Lindner and Nosek (2009) show that an individual’s willingness to protect speech usually hinges on both the nature of the criticism and the observer’s personal political orientations. Although there are some cases in which liberals and conservatives react differently to the sort of speech they find objectionable, there is a natural hesitancy to extend freedom of expression to groups and speech that makes citizens uncomfortable, angry, or that they find objectionable.

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12. In part, this development seems to be the result of the fact that American law effectively has no objective formula for determining, much less quantifying, what counts as a compelling interest, which frustrates the regulation of hate speech and pornography, for example.

13. Buttressing these consequentialist arguments—or explanations grounded in the value of what something *produces*—is a substantial and longstanding distrust of the state. Historically, the power of censorship worried elites and citizens (Koppelman 2013).

14. When framed explicitly as a matter of free speech, however, subjects are often more likely to accept the Klan’s rights to demonstrate in public, suggesting that tolerance can be encouraged even in the face of objectionable behavior.

With this in mind, we asked whether respondents thought that an essential feature of democracy involved the right to say things in public that might be offensive to racial or religious groups. In other words, in the face of bad or uncomfortable or salacious speech, would respondents support the rights of others to say such things? Panel B in figure 4.1 illustrates broad support for the idea that citizens connect unencumbered speech to democracy. Almost 60 percent of respondents believe that saying things that might be deemed offensive to others is permissible. Some individuals only weakly communicate these attitudes (perhaps unsurprisingly), and there is significant variation across the range. Almost 15 percent of respondents took the midpoint of the scale. However, the extent to which people connect this feature to democracy is not equivocal: about a quarter of respondents communicated discomfort with the essentialness of offensive speech.

### *Equal Rights to Participate*

Along with free speech, access to the levers of power is perhaps the most basic and well-accepted component of democracy. Historically, Madison wrote that the right of suffrage was fundamental, but it is abundantly clear that the framers' support of the franchise was limited. The eligibility to vote was largely restricted to land-owning, white members of the upper class, and the extension of the franchise occurred fitfully over the course of American history (McConaughy 2013; Mickey 2015). While we cannot exhaustively review many of the important historical and political developments that led to various groups securing the right to vote, an abridged summary may be helpful.

The Fifteenth Amendment (1870) demanded that race, color, or previous condition of servitude could not prevent citizens from voting. However, with the South's violent hostility toward Reconstruction, additional legislation was required to bypass the entrenched system of Jim Crow. Both the Twenty-fourth Amendment in 1964 and the later Voting Rights Act in 1965 were necessary to fully incorporate minority voters into the fold, although, even today, the gutting of the Voting Rights Act by the Roberts Court in 2013 has led to a renewed disenfranchisement of voters across the South.<sup>15</sup> The Nineteenth Amendment (1920) extended the

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15. Vann R. Newkirk II, in *The Atlantic*, "How *Shelby County v. Holder* Broke America," <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/07/how-shelby-county-broke-america/564707/>

franchise to women, ensuring that the right to vote could not be abridged on account of sex. Finally, the Twenty-sixth Amendment (1971) secured the right to vote for all persons 18 years or older.

The slow rollout of suffrage notwithstanding, its singular importance is not lost on survey respondents. Panel C in figure 4.1 illustrates responses to the question of whether democracy is characterized by an equal right and opportunity to participate in democratic processes. Unsurprisingly, respondents conveyed full-throated support for equal access to participate in democratic processes. Almost 80 percent of respondents conveyed that access to participation was “essential,” while more than 50 percent of respondents selected the maximum value 10.

### *Equal Treatment*

Equal treatment is a close conceptual cousin to the equal right to participate, yet they involve different institutional domains. Whereas participatory rights involve more specific electoral or direct voting processes like referenda, equal treatment by the government is associated with the idea that all citizens—regardless of race, religion, or creed—ought to enjoy common protections by the government. These ideas are bound up in the Fourteenth Amendment, which reads that “No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

This language is likely so common and familiar to the modern reader that it may go unnoticed that the original 1787 Constitution was effectively silent on the Declaration of Independence’s promises of equality. In fact, the Constitution’s original pass at “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .” was effectively toothless window dressing. There were no real mechanisms to protect the precarious groups who have needed such legal protections. Instead, it would take the significant efforts of later contributors to chart an expansive vision of equal protection for all citizens.

To that end, the Equal Protection Clause employs sweeping and universal language that invokes protections for all citizens from discrimination. As the architect of the Fourteenth Amendment, John Bingham, argued, “Hereafter the American people cannot have peace, if, as in the past, States

are permitted to take away the freedom of speech, and to condemn men, as felons, to the penitentiary for teaching their fellow men that there is a hereafter, and a reward for those who learn to do well.” On a practical level, it supplied the basis for desegregating schools and barring discrimination against women, helped achieve voting rights, and has implications for sexual privacy. It also extended much of the Bill of Rights guarantees to the actions of state governments.

Given the prominence of these ideas, we expected that many respondents would connect equal treatment to democracy. For the most part this is true. Panel D in figure 4.1 illustrates that better than 70 percent of respondents conceptualize equal treatment as an essential characteristic of democracy. And yet, there is a nontrivial proportion of roughly 15 percent of all respondents who actually conveyed that equal treatment is *not* an essential characteristic of democracy. This disagreement is interesting, and, as we will see, has important implications for our forthcoming analyses.

### *Material Equality*

While civil equality enjoys broad support, the tension between the equality of opportunity and condition is a longstanding one. For their part, the framers were shameless elitists. That is, they fully supported the idea that talent or an individual’s work ethic and *not* institutional barriers would separate the successful from the less successful. This belief was distilled particularly well in Madison’s Federalist No. 10, where he writes that: “From the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property, the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results.” Put simply, he believed that inequality was natural, expected, and appropriate because it reflected differences in individual merit.

More generally, the framers did not seem to be concerned with wealth inequality—or at least not the sort of inequality that citizens in the 21st century would recognize. In part, it is possible that the omission of this topic was not necessarily that the founders were unconcerned with the economic conditions of the citizenry, but, rather, that colonial America actually did not possess the sort of wealth inequality that is characteristic of the United States today. As Lindert and Williamson (2016) write, the richest one percent of households in 18th century America owned roughly half the wealth that it enjoys today, and, by objective measures of inequal-

ity, the gulf between rich and poor citizens was far less extreme.<sup>16</sup> Further, the opportunity to achieve upward mobility was a far better prospect in the pre-industrial period. Land was historically the key to economic stability, and, given the vast tracts of land available for enterprising individuals, it was possible for both laborer and landowner to profit.<sup>17</sup> However, as the political and economic domains opened to a greater segment of the mass public, these changes corresponded with increasing consolidation of wealth among (white) elites, and, by the mid-20th century, income inequality began to rapidly escalate.

The pursuit of redistributive activities by government as a way of remediating this inequality, however, would have been rejected by economic and political elites in the 18th century. Correspondingly, the use of instruments like the income tax to redistribute wealth has grown contentiously and in fits over time. A progressive income tax with a maximum rate of 10 percent was instituted during the Civil War but repealed in 1872—ironically on the grounds that it created unequal treatment of the wealthy and, therefore, ran afoul of equal treatment promises. In 1894, a new income tax was passed by Congress, but it, too, was eventually repudiated by the Supreme Court. Nearly 20 years later, opposition to this taxation was finally overcome via the Sixteenth Amendment. From this point forward, the exact contours of progressive taxation as a way of both revenue generation and as a redistributive tool have expanded and contracted, contingent on the whims of different majorities in Congress.

While their European counterparts living in social democracies connect high levels of redistributive taxation to democracy (Ferrin and Kriesi 2016), it is less clear whether Americans believe that material equality—an “even playing field”—is associated with democracy. They certainly link free market economics and capitalism to it (e.g., McClosky and Zaller 1984), in part because the American right has spent a great deal of time and energy describing the social safety nets of European democracies as “socialist” (and, therefore, un-American and bad).

What do Americans think of these ideas, today? When asked whether combatting inequality was an essential feature of democracy, we found

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16. Of course, under the prevailing system of chattel slavery, Black Americans owned nothing, so this comparison is necessarily a qualified one.

17. Often, it should be noted, at the expense of native populations and via the labors of indentured or enslaved people. Someone pays for mobility, and, as often as not, it is the dispossessed who suffer (Saunt 2020).

that Americans are largely divided, as panel E, figure 4.1 illustrates. A bare majority of persons think that redistributive taxation is an essential feature of democracy. This is perhaps not unsurprising in the sense that this question weaves a political, though abstract, prescription for alleviating material inequality with democracy.

### *Basic Necessities*

If the previous section involved support for government redistribution to redress income and wealth inequalities, then the final element of democracy we examine involves the incorporation of the welfare state's promise to take care of the poor and disenfranchised. Curiously, while the Framers clearly believed that an upper and ethnically European class of elite should chart the future of the young republic, there was some concern about the broader financial independence and material well-being of citizens. In fact, it seemed unimaginable that a society in which there were severe disparities in wealth and rampant poverty could sustain democracy. Jefferson had witnessed the strain that landless laborers and dependent persons placed on French municipal and federal services. In his view, men might not be equal, *per se*, but some basic set of necessities was required in order to ensure that men were not dependent on the will of others. Thus, he actually proposed in 1776 that every adult, white male Virginian should be granted at least fifty acres of land if he was in need (Wood 1996).

It is difficult to say, exactly, what this implies for today's American citizen. But suffice to say, some sort of minimum equality of condition—some *basic necessities*—might be required to ensure that individuals can engage faithfully in democratic processes. These concerns were particularly apparent during the era of political machines. Machine politics of the early 20th century involved securing votes from poor patrons by providing them with basic necessities to live. This was Jefferson's nightmare scenario: that the poor would be subservient to economic overlords who used the trappings of the electoral system to artificially maintain political power. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Franklin Delano Roosevelt echoed similar concerns: "People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made." His was a more basic point that circles back around to Barack Obama's speech outlined in chapter 1 of this book: you probably can't have free, effective democracy without some sort

of governmental framework that ensures some minimum support for citizens' needs—a point that the economic and social ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic brings into sharp relief.

To what extent do citizens believe that the provision of basic necessities is an essential feature of democracy? We asked respondents whether a scenario in which everyone had basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter was an essential feature of democracy. As panel F in figure 4.1 illustrates, the majority of respondents believed that such things should characterize democracy—the modal response was the value “10,” suggesting that most Americans believe that democracy bears some responsibility to the downtrodden.

### A Democracy Typology

While attitudes about these features of democracy are interesting on their own merits, we are left with a lingering question about whether and how they fit *together*. That is, how do beliefs about these six qualities of democracy combine into composite views of it? While there are many ways of analyzing survey data, we use a latent variable model known as *latent class analysis* (LCA) to investigate how Americans connect these features together.

The logic of this data reduction technique is straightforward. Each survey subject supplies a set of responses to our six survey questions. Looking at the resulting data, there may be patterns of responses that suggest that we can “group” like-minded respondents together. In a simple model, for example, there might be two groups in our data that exhibit different combinations of attitudes on average. In the LCA framework, each respondent’s configuration of preferences is associated with a probability that conveys how likely it is that their individual pattern of preferences would sort them into one of these groups. Thus, LCA can be used to sort persons into a group that most closely resembles their pattern of responses to a set of questions,<sup>18</sup> where the number of classes that actually “fit” the data is determined by test statistics that convey when a model ceases to convey useful information.<sup>19</sup>

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18. If you’ve taken Pew’s Political Typology quiz, then this approach is conceptually analogous to that. Individuals respond to questions about their attitudes and are then sorted into different groups. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/quiz/political-typology/>

19. Specifically, when the model becomes “oversaturated” and produces so many small groups

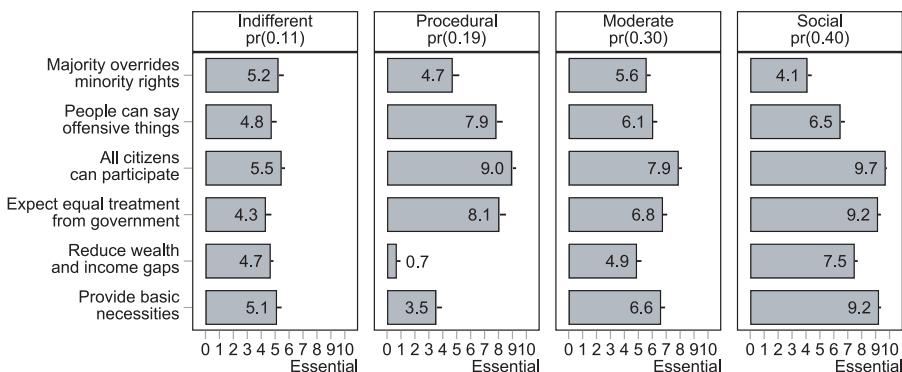
In our case, we ultimately find that a four-class solution fits our data best. There appears to be four patterns of beliefs that can be used to describe how Americans think about democracy, and we supply the details with how we arrived at that decision in the appendix to this chapter. Understanding what these classes *mean* and *who* belongs to them, however, is still an open question for us to answer. To appreciate the practical meaning of each set of “meanings” of democracy, we opt for a simple, visual approach. Figure 4.2 displays the average value associated with a given survey question (on the vertical axis) for members assigned to each of the four groups. As the reader should see, there are distinct “patterns” of responses across the groups in this typology. Taking the shape of these responses together, we then settle on a name for each class that we think faithfully represents the substantive nature of responses to these survey instruments.

Respondents in Class 1 ( $n = 215$ ) exhibit apathetic attitudes toward these six characteristics of democracy. Their attitudes toward the meanings of democracy are characterized by an *indifference* toward it. Persons in this category display no real valence in their beliefs regarding majoritarianism. They are mostly indifferent toward free speech, equal treatment, inequality, and the provision of basic necessities. Even the core feature commonly associated with democracy—participation—receives no meaningful support. Demographically, the indifferent class of democracy is the most racially diverse by a wide margin; it also contains more women than men.<sup>20</sup> On balance, this group of persons possesses the least amount of wealth, which probably isn’t a surprise given that it is the youngest (average age is about 43 years old) and the least well-educated class.

In contrast to these individuals, respondents assigned to Class 2 ( $n = 392$ ) are considerably more supportive of the *procedural* elements of democracy. These individuals connect equality before the law, participation, and speech to democracy. Yet, because they express little support for reducing gaps in wealth or providing basic necessities to citizens, we label

that the typology is no longer a useful way of thinking about the data. In that case, there may be so many groups that the typology doesn’t provide much insight into broader trends. Readers interested in the details associated with this analysis may consult the appendix to this chapter for more information about these analytical decisions.

20. Due to the small sample size of persons identifying with nonwhite racial groups (a ratio that becomes more extreme when we split that sample among the typology’s classes), we group other racial and ethnic identities together in the “other” category. This decision is not ideal, but it is probably the best we can do to avoid making any generalizations about sparse cells.



**Fig. 4.2. The democracy typology**

(Note: Model constructed from 2016 and 2017 CCES data. Values on input items range from 0 (not essential) to 10 (essential). Mean values associated with respective class across the six input items are superimposed onto bars. Small bands at the end of bars are upper 95 percent confidence intervals. For technical details associated with this analysis, we point interested readers to the appendix to this chapter.)

persons assigned to this group as “procedural democrats.” Like classic minimalist approaches, these persons see little value in democracy engaging in the production of welfare goods.

Demographically, this class comprises the most lopsided distribution of white to nonwhite members. The class is also more male than female, which differs from the other classes that are more balanced on gender. It is also the oldest, with a mean respondent age of about 54 years old. Persons with procedural views of democracy report higher than average wealth among the members of other classes, and members display higher-than-average levels of education.

Class 3 ( $n = 594$ ) is more *moderate*, as their support for the various characteristics of democracy sits proximally between the procedural and social democracy classes. These persons exhibit modest support for political and welfare goods across the six items, with some caveats. These respondents endorse the most positive views regarding “majoritarianism” among the classes. They have a general propensity to accept the idea that the rights of a majority should supersede those of the minority—even if that means limiting the rights of the minority. They exhibit tempered support for “absolutist” free speech and much less support for both equal participation and equal treatment. This places them at a distance from the social

democracy class. Finally, individuals in the moderate class are indifferent about redistribution, though modestly more positive about the provision of basic necessities.

Demographically, white respondents in this group outnumber non-white ones by a ratio of about two to one. The class comprises an even share of men and women, and age is somewhat bimodal—although not pictured here, there are large shares of younger and older people in this group, which results in an average age of 46 years. Income among members of this class trends toward the wealthy, while educational attainment is slightly lower than either the procedural or social democracy classes.

Finally, we turn to our last and largest group of respondents in Class 4 ( $n = 799$ ). These persons balance the importance of civil and economic political goods, such that this combination of preferences resembles a preference for *social* democracy. Members of this class are modestly supportive of unrestricted free speech, but highly supportive of participatory rights and equal treatment under the law. They also believe that democracy should play a role in the production of welfare goods. There is robust support for both reducing material inequality and providing basic necessities—things conventionally associated with European-style social democracies.

Racially, this group is more balanced on race. Women are more likely than men to exhibit social democratic preferences, and the average class member is about 49 years old. The distribution of income is slightly more modest for members of this class compared to the procedural and moderate classes of democracy, but, like persons in the procedural democracy group, these persons are also well educated.

## Summary

As we take stock of this chapter, we are confronted with several findings. Democracy involves electing representatives by free and fair elections. But it can *also* be understood as the sum of its outputs and whether and how it regulates well-being. In this chapter, we applied a data reduction technique known as latent class analysis to our survey responses to impose structure to the way that Americans think about these ideas. This functionalist approach—that is, defining something by what it produces—has obvious merit. Democracy, after all, is inescapably *ideological* in nature.

Here, we attempt to balance a holistic view of democracy against the

demands of parsimony in order to operationalize how ordinary citizens think about democracy. Taking measure of our typology, we find that the four groups depicted here represent very different ways of thinking about democracy and conform surprisingly well to Merkel's (2014) review of the large literature on types of democracies, which juxtaposes minimalist and maximal approaches. Persons in the indifferent category appear disaffected about democracy and exhibit dispassionate views about its features. The procedural and social democracy classes share strong beliefs that democracy is associated with civil goods but diverge sharply about whether democracy bears any responsibility to the material well-being of its citizens. Moderates sit somewhere in-between these two groups, exhibiting measured support for civil goods and idiosyncratic support for welfare ones.

In the forthcoming chapters, we take this typology and explore what social, economic, and political preferences sort people into these groups (chapter 5), and how this typology shapes beliefs about political representation (chapter 6), democratic support (chapter 7), and, finally, beliefs about political norms (chapter 8). As we will show, there are significant differences among our typology's classes with respect to how American citizens view core political debates in American politics. These differences involve more than simple ideological sorting—instead, the groups of our typology think about populism, representation, and support for democracy in starkly different ways. But, as we will show in later chapters, these views are often lost in or obscured by the *partisan scrum* for political power.

## CHAPTER 5

# The Correlates of the Democracy Typology

How citizens form their views of democracy is likely the result of a multiplicity of factors operating at the individual and societal levels.

—Damarys Canache (2012)

The previous chapters laid out a rationale for studying public beliefs about democracy's outputs together. Not only can democracy be understood in terms of the political goods it produces, but these beliefs connect to form a multidimensional way of thinking about democracy. What, then, contributes to the combinations that these attitudes take?

We begin with the admission that the democracy typology is inescapably political. This is not surprising. As outlined in chapter 2, the grafting of liberalism onto democracy imbues democracy with a distinct, liberal-procedural political character in the American context. While New Deal programs expanded the imagination of Americans to include social safety net guarantees as essential features of the state, capitalism, with its focus on free markets, has nevertheless been the predominant economic lens through which citizens understand democracy (McClosky and Zaller 1984).

Still, it is less clear how other social, economic, and even political beliefs and demographic features contribute to how people think about democracy. Our task in this chapter involves analyzing how the democracy typology overlays onto the social and political cleavages that structure American politics. Drawing from chapter 2, there are several factors that might predict one's view of democracy: (1) partisanship, or the political group with

which one identifies, (2) ideology, or one's views about the appropriate role that the state plays in managing an individual's labors and freedoms, (3) beliefs about social groups, which are a primary source of political strife in American political history, and (4) various demographic features associated with respondents, ranging from income to political knowledge. In exploring how these elements contribute to one's views of democracy, we are careful to admit what we cannot produce: evidence that any one set of features or characteristics is the "cause" of one's view of democracy. Views about democracy, much like the overarching political system, are socialized at a young age and are likely somewhat durable over time. However, while our survey cannot determine the causal ordering of these beliefs, this analysis is valuable because it gives us a window into the inventory of attitudes and group memberships that are associated with how citizens think about democracy. In turn, this information helps us better understand the hidden meanings of democracy.

### **Partisanship and the Democracy Typology**

We begin by considering the relationship between partisanship and our democracy typology. The traditional view of partisanship draws from the early work of Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) in *The American Voter*, which conceptualized partisan identification as "an affective attachment to an important group object" (143). These emotional attachments to the parties were both durable and encompassing. Not only is partisan identification mostly stable over the course of an individual's lifetime, but it shapes political and nonpolitical preferences alike. Indeed, it seemingly shapes everything from favored foods to the romantic partners people choose.

Today, our group-focused understanding of partisanship draws much of its force from social identity theory (Greene 1999; Huddy, Mason, and Aaroe 2015). Social identities involve the incorporation of a particular group membership into an individual's self-concept, a process social psychologist Henri Tajfel (1981, 255) described as seeing the world through the lens of one's group membership. The foundations of social identities are driven by a need for positive distinctiveness, or the desire to protect or advance the status of one's group against other competing groups. In this way, a social identity is a highly valued group membership that structures

how people think about and behave within their immediate environment (Huddy 2013).<sup>1</sup>

For many citizens, partisanship fits this description. Not only do partisans intensely favor group members over non-group members (Mason 2015), but partisan identification filters how individuals interpret many different types of information (e.g., Bartels 2002; Leeper 2014; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Graham and Svolik 2020). In turn, partisans engage in behaviors consistent with and on behalf of their party.

Despite this view, it is not immediately clear that partisanship would be a primary source in constructing citizens' views of democracy. Both parties profess a love for the procedural elements of democracy. It is possible that preferences for procedural and social democracy might tap into the underlying left-right framework that structures American politics with respect to democracy's production of welfare goods, but there are several complicating factors. First, the Democratic Party is a loose collection of social groups that are not bound to a singular vision of democracy. Indeed, much of the present tension in that party involves not just right-sizing economic relief to Americans but the appropriate mechanisms for funding it. Second, while the GOP may express a more consistently antagonistic approach toward voting rights access, Republicans could plausibly fit into either a moderate or a procedural understanding of democracy based on their preferences for government redistribution. Finally, it is unclear how the indifferent and moderate classes might overlay onto the existing party structure.

Panel A in figure 5.1 depicts partisanship across the democracy typology. On balance, we find that partisans are pretty well-sorted in the procedural and social democracy classes. Republicans make up about 38 percent of the procedural democracy class, while Democrats comprise about 53 percent of the social democracy class; these shares obviously increase when we account for partisan "leaners," but it is interesting to observe that the

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1. This understanding of partisanship, which focuses on psychological needs to maintain power, dovetails with an older view of parties as being primarily motivated by the accumulation of power. Schumpeter (1942) argued that the classic (Burkean) stylization of parties as groups of individuals bound together by common principles was naïve. Acknowledging that parties will, of course, be associated with certain principles that are vital to their success, his claim was simple: a "party is a group whose members propose to act in concert in the competitive struggle for political power" (238). Thus, what it means to be a Republican or Democrat is not so much contingent upon *what* the parties stand for, but that these groups absorb conflict opportunistically.

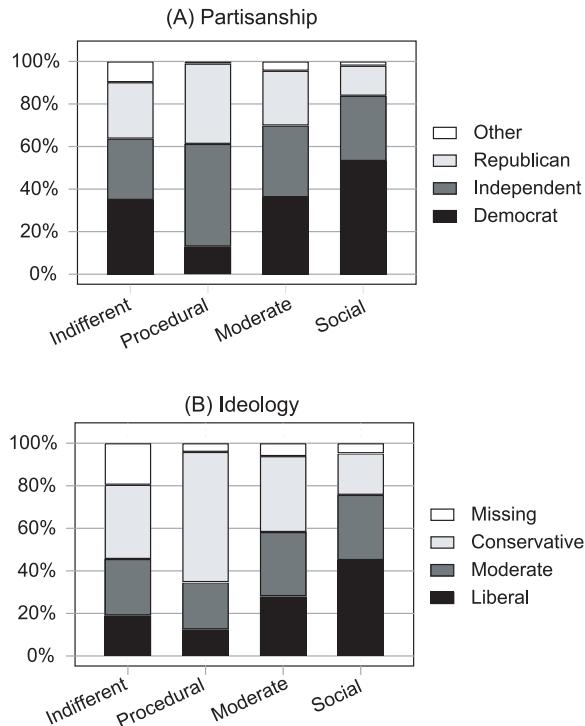


Fig. 5.1. Political memberships among the democracy typology

(Note: Partisanship is measured using the traditional seven-category instrument. Independent leaners are not coded as partisan here because their initial self-categorization involves not selecting a partisan group, even though such leaners often exhibit partisan affinities. Ideology is also measured using a seven-category instrument. Unlike partisanship, there are no “leaners”; instead, moderate is the true midpoint of the response scale.)

social democracy group is “better” sorted than the procedural one. Still, there is some modest variation across classes. Ten to fifteen percent of partisans belong to a counter-stereotypical class (e.g., Republicans assigned to the social democracy class), and Independents make up a large proportion of the procedural democracy grouping (nearly 50 percent). In contrast, the moderate and indifferent classes contain a somewhat balanced mixture of partisans. For those classes, partisanship seems to offer less of a window into how individuals think about democracy.

## Ideology and the Democracy Typology

While partisanship structures many of the political divisions in American politics, ideology is the material that gives this conflict its meaning. What it means practically to be a Republican or Democrat involves ideas about whether and how the state ought to regulate individual freedom and well-being. Although some scholars question the notion that the mass public's preferences are meaningfully structured around popular ideologies (Converse 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017)—that is, whether their belief systems exhibit meaningful consistency among preferences—people still hold some sensible combinations of beliefs (Azevedo et al. 2019; Fishman and Davis 2021). On this point, Jost (2006, 667) supplies a reasonable and helpful middle view: while “ordinary people by no means pass the strictest tests imaginable for ideological sophistication, most of them do think, feel, and behave in ideologically meaningful and interpretable terms.”<sup>2</sup>

In its contemporary American use, ideology frequently invokes a general tension between “left” and “right” or “liberal” and “conservative.” FDR framed his New Deal programs in the vernacular of “liberal” priorities, so chosen for the word’s positive connotations—free from any link to more-authoritarian concepts like fascism, socialism, and communism that were both threatening and unpopular (Rotunda 1986). Over time, however, the general popularity of the liberal project waned. Social upheaval in midcentury America is partially responsible, as the 1950s and 1960s were filled with racial tensions, student unrest, and acute foreign policy tensions (Stears 2007). The religious right also played a prominent role in these developments, wedging a distinct vernacular of social propriety and morality to economic conservatism (Thorne 1990). Finally, a rapidly changing media environment also helped entrepreneurial (right-leaning) elites successfully bundle this unrest and disorder together, which stigmatized the liberal label and popularized the conservative one (Åsard 2009). Thus, today, the conservative label is generally more popular than its liberal counterpart (Ellis and Stimson 2012).

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2. Several findings bolster this statement. Research shows, for example, that there has been an increase in sorting over time (Levendusky 2009; Davis 2018; Davis and Dunaway 2016; Park 2017), which suggests that citizens are more likely to match their policy preferences to their partisan affiliations. Issue alignment—the strength of the correlation among political attitudes—is higher now than any period over the past 70 years (Kozlowski and Murphy 2019; Wattenberg 2019). Preferences about neoliberalism are also organized coherently (Azevedo et al. 2019).

While the promotion of free markets via minimal government intrusion in the marketplace is the rift that usually distinguishes these perspectives, the differences between these labels increasingly maps onto social, cultural, and racial conflict (Carsey and Layman 2002). Thus, modern American liberals largely reject individualism and propose that the assistance of the state is not only central to shaping and promoting the material and social welfare of a citizenry, but in redressing social and racial inequality. In contrast, conservatism emphasizes that private citizens, families, and communities are better judges of appropriate social norms than the federal government, is antagonistic toward integration and equality, and is predicated upon limiting government involvement in the marketplace.<sup>3</sup> Although a full accounting of the historical and discursive development of these ideologies in American political discourse is beyond the scope of the present project, the wedding of liberalism to democracy mentioned in chapter 2 reveals several reasons for why we wish to explore the relationship between ideology and our democracy typology.

### *Ideology or Abstract Values?*

To understand how ideology is associated with the democracy typology requires us to consider some of the tensions raised above: when someone self-describes as a liberal or conservative, they appear to be talking at once about the *group* to which they affiliate as much as they are describing the *philosophy* or *ideas* that give those labels their meaning. Thus, social scientists frequently distinguish between two “types” of ideology. Whereas symbolic ideology, or liberal-conservative identification, embodies how citizens think about themselves and their affinity for liberal or conservative groups (Ellis and Stimson 2012, 11), operational ideology involves the practical form that beliefs about how government should regulate society and the economy take.

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3. Though some may balk at that characterization, conservatives do not help their own case. Prominent conservative politicians have a history of offering bizarre and awkward public statements about race and slavery. From Goldwater’s reactionary campaign against Civil Rights, to Steve King’s (R-IA) flirtation with neo-Nazis, to Donald J. Trump’s statements about white supremacists, and to Tom Cotton’s (R-AR) belief that slavery was a necessary evil, conservatives have what can charitably be described as a poor record on such matters.

We begin by analyzing ideological self-placements across our four groups in panel B of figure 5.1.<sup>4</sup> Again, we observe some sorting with respect to the social and procedural democracy classes. Liberals make up a large share of persons in the former group (45 percent) and conservatives in the latter (61 percent). The distribution of ideological identification differs from partisanship, however, in two interesting ways. Conservatives make up a larger share of procedural democracy than Republicans (61 percent to 38 percent), which is partially a function of conservative-minded respondents preferring the Independent-but-lean-Republican label. In turn, liberals make up a slightly smaller share of the social democracy class than do Democrats (45 percent to 53 percent). This is perhaps not surprising when we consider these patterns alongside other political science research. Right-leaning politics in America is organized around a fairly simple set of conservative ideas, while left-leaning politics often involves a looser constellation of social groups with different ideological priorities and vernaculars (Grossman and Hopkins 2016).

Next, the moderate category of democracy contains a relatively even balance of ideological conservatives, liberals, and moderates. Recall from chapter 4 that these persons place modest value on civil freedoms and less value on democracy's role in producing welfare goods. To the extent that moderation implies a middle ground, this description is somewhat apt, although it is splitting the difference across separate dimensions of political goods. In turn, these class members are not individuals who necessarily take the "moderate" ideological label. Instead, they are a mixture of the different ideological groups.

Finally, among the indifferent class, there is significant variability in self-reported ideology. Persons who did not select an ideological group or who chose the liberal label each comprise about 20 percent of this class. In chapter 4, we found indifferent respondents held no discernable positive or negative views about democracy or democratic goods. If the democracy typology was simply a pure representation of liberal-conservative ideology, we might expect the indifferent to be either those individuals who could

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4. A thorny issue in the analysis of ideology involves what to do about respondents who cannot or will not place themselves in ideological space. There are varying perspectives about how to treat these "missing" or "don't know" responses. Some analyses simply drop these persons; others recode missing persons to the "moderate" categories; a third approach involves imputing the data using other demographic information to assign these persons to one of the other categories (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). Our approach allows for such data to remain "missing." We make no assumptions about who these people are or what they believe.

not place themselves in liberal-conservative space (i.e., “missing”) or, perhaps, ideological moderates, who slot somewhere between the poles. But these persons are neither, instead representing a nontrivial proportion of individuals across the ideological spectrum who are functionally indifferent or dispassionate about democracy.

While the distribution of ideological identification conveys some information about the political preferences of individuals, it is difficult to know how these labels map onto the ideas that presumably give ideology its meaning. For this task, we explore how preferences about governmental intervention are distributed among our classes. Given historical American political developments, classic liberalism—which usually manifests in the form of minimal governmental intervention in the marketplace—has been closely wedded to elite definitions of democracy. As a component of ideology, beliefs about state intervention are somewhat analogous to beliefs about individualism. As a concept, individualism involves the idea that people can succeed in life through their own agency and without relying on others or, importantly, government to equal the playing field. Limited government preferences, by extension, involve disdain for government overstepping its role in the lives of individual citizens.

Accordingly, we fielded a set of questions that tap into these tensions over whether government has too much or too little power in regulating the lives of individuals. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- The government is best that governs least.
- Government has too much say in the lives of ordinary Americans.
- Government should do only those things necessary to provide the most basic government functions.
- Government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses.

Exploratory factor analysis, a common method of assessing the relationship among multiple variables, conveys that these questions tap into a common dimension of preferences involving individualism and limited government. The instruments share high inter-item correlations (alpha: 0.88) and load together onto a single latent dimension.<sup>5</sup> Responses to these

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5. In other words, knowing something about how respondents think about item 1 tells us something about how they might score on item 2. Individuals who agree with the idea that *the*

questions were condensed into a single scale in which low values convey that government does not have too much say in the lives of Americans; in contrast, high values are associated with the belief that government does too much or that it infringes upon individuals' efforts to get ahead.

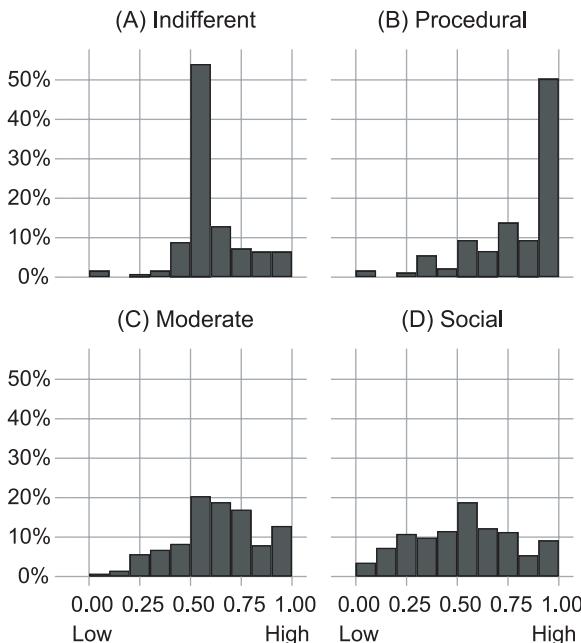
The distribution of responses within each class is illustrated in figure 5.2. Predictably, persons with a procedural understanding of democracy are extremely well-sorted with respect to limited government preferences. After all, procedural democracy involves the barest or most minimal production of democratic goods. While moderates display some skew toward believing that government "does too much," such attitudes are normally distributed for persons with a social view of democracy, which indicates that individuals in this class have diverse beliefs about government. Unlike proceduralists, there is little sorting on this scale for persons who exhibit a preference for social democracy, which perhaps reveals how deeply beliefs about limited government run even among even persons who believe the democracy should produce more equitable levels of civil and welfare goods. At least for a subset of individuals in the social democracy class, limited government, as opposed to an active one, may be perceived as the best mechanism for providing for basic necessities and assuring economic equality—even as such persons broadly like and prefer government programs traditionally associated with the welfare state (a disconnect we address more fully in the final chapter).

### Race and the Democracy Typology

To this point, we have focused on how several measures of political preferences relate to the democracy typology. We turn next to a different, though not unrelated, set of preferences: how Americans think about matters of race. For most of American history, "partial" democracy has been the norm rather than the exception. While state-sponsored segregation formally ended with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, racial hierarchies persist. These legacies are deeply embedded in the nation's institutions and structure inequalities across several domains. For example, African Americans

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*government is best that governs least* (item 1) would also be likely to agree that *government has too much say in the lives of ordinary Americans* (item 2). Combining responses to these questions provides us with a more precise way of operationalizing our underlying quantity of interest (here, limited government preferences).



**Fig. 5.2. Beliefs about limited government across the democracy typology**  
 (Note: Scale comprises beliefs about whether government does too much or too little in the lives of individuals. See text for full question wording. Higher values convey more dissatisfaction toward government intervention.)

are less likely than white Americans to own their homes (Zonta 2019), possess less equity in the stock market (McKernan et al. 2014), and face higher unemployment (Williams and Wilson 2019). In health care, African Americans have higher rates of diabetes and heart disease, and the mortality rates of Black mothers in the United States is substantially higher (Mays, Cochran, and Barnes 2007). Disparities are rife throughout the criminal justice system as well. Stop and frisk rates vary by race (Goel, Rao, and Shroff 2016) as do the length of criminal sentences (Mustard 2001) and police killings (Ross 2015).<sup>6</sup> As Kraus et al. (2019, 900) observe, “although there has undoubtedly been some progress toward racial equality since the nation’s founding, the American racial-progress narrative . . . overestimates the successes and underestimates the setbacks, resulting in an unfounded optimism about racial equality in both the present and its prospects for the future.”

6. Data on police encounters and discharges of weapons are notoriously bad, which, as Knox and Mumolo (2020) show, occasionally lead to deeply flawed conclusions that there are no racial disparities in police shootings (see Johnson et al. 2019).

Given this current state of affairs and that the democracy typology embodies beliefs about access to civil and economic equity, how individuals think about racial groups might shape such beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Surveying racial attitudes, however, can be tricky. Subsequent to the Civil Rights era, social norms governing how people talked about race shifted (Schuman et al. 1997). Overt forms of racism were less acceptable to express publicly, and polling from this era saw a shift in the proportion of people who displayed explicit or “old-fashioned” racism. In turn, survey researchers shifted to alternative survey items that reflected beliefs about racial groups’ cultural or social habits rather than biological features (Sears and Henry 2003). This “modern racism” involved two interrelated ideas that presumably represent negative or harmful racial affect: the (1) perceived failure of African Americans to work hard enough to remedy inequalities; and (2) denial that institutional discrimination is prevalent (Kinder and Sanders 1996). These ideas are embodied in the “racial resentment” and “symbolic racism” scales that have been frequently used in academic studies over time (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1996; Tesler and Sears 2010; Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012).

Although there are significant debates about the measurement of racial beliefs (e.g., Carmines, Stimson, and Easter 2011; Carney and Enos 2017; Bobo et al. 2012), we do the best with the measures at our disposal.<sup>8</sup> First, we collected responses to the traditional racial resentment battery, which asks whether respondents agree or disagree with the following statements:

- Many other minority groups have overcome prejudice and worked their way up. African Americans should do the same without any special favors.
- It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough: if Af-

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7. Our focus here is on African Americans because of available measures, but attitudes toward other racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Hispanics, Asians, or Native Americans) likely shape these views as well.

8. Kinder (1986, 156), for example, writes that measuring non-explicit forms of racial affect involves a mixture of “prejudice *and* values” (emphasis added). Bobo et al.’s (2012) magisterial review of a half-century of survey research on (white) Americans’ attitudes acknowledges the broad difficulties of surveying beliefs that are impolite or awkward to share. They write that “core accounts or explanations of black-white socioeconomic inequality have moved decisively from biology to culture. Hence a core element of what might be labeled racial prejudice remains but has undergone a noteworthy qualitative shift to a more porous and potentially modifiable stance” (75).

rican Americans would only try harder, they could be just as well off as whites.

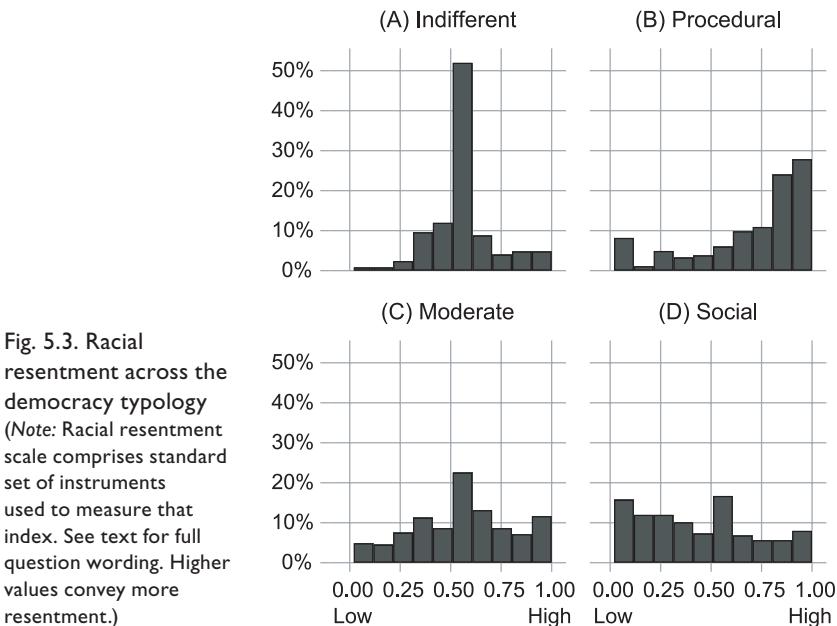
- Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for African Americans to work their way out of the lower class.
- Over the past few years, African Americans have gotten less than they deserve.

Much like responses to our governmental intervention index in the prior section, these instruments are highly correlated ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ). They also load onto a single factor, which we use in subsequent analyses.

Figure 5.3 illustrates the distribution of racial resentment across our four classes. Past research suggests that racial resentment increasingly corresponds to conventional liberal-conservative ideology (LeCount 2018), and we find some evidence of this pattern here. While we acknowledge that racial resentment is an imperfect measure of racial affect, a core feature of this attitudinal profile seemingly involves beliefs about justness or fairness—that is, whether or not certain groups of citizens face challenges that other groups do not (Carney and Enos 2017). Although procedural views of democracy view rights and liberties with high regard, it is worth pondering the extent to which those commitments might generalize to historically underrepresented groups. In contrast, persons with social views of democracy are more likely to be sympathetic to the idea that some Americans have historically been disadvantaged. For their parts, indifferent persons and moderates are normally distributed around the neutral midpoint of the scale. For these classes, beliefs about racial resentment likely play a small part in how these group members think about democracy.

Additionally, we also explore the relationship between the Fear, Institutional Racism, and Empathy (FIRE) battery and the democracy typology. As an alternative to the racial resentment instruments, this battery of questions assesses beliefs about the persistence of and emotional reactions toward racism (DeSante and Smith 2018). Individuals are asked whether they agree or disagree with the following items:

- I am angry that racism exists.
- White people in the United States have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.



**Fig. 5.3. Racial resentment across the democracy typology**  
 (Note: Racial resentment scale comprises standard set of instruments used to measure that index. See text for full question wording. Higher values convey more resentment.)

- I find myself fearful of people of other races.
- Racial problems in the United States are rare, isolated situations.

Unlike the racial resentment items, these survey questions do not load onto a single factor and exhibit low inter-item correlations. As such, we analyze their relationship to the democracy typology separately.

Turning to the FIRE battery depicted in figure 5.4, there are several interesting differences among the groups. Members of the social democracy class are nearly uniformly “angry” about racism (panel A), convey that white people have structural advantages (panel B), and are least likely to say that racism is an isolated problem (panel C). Moderates sit between those in the procedural and social democracy classes; the primary difference is that a larger share of moderates convey that they are fearful of other races. Indifferent persons are interesting in that they are quite similar to moderates, save for moderates’ fears of other races. On balance, there are modest but persistent differences in how the members of the different groups within the democracy typology think about race and racism that seem to track with whether one believes that democracy is little more than a minimalist method of generating representation or bears responsibility to matters of equity and freedom more broadly defined.

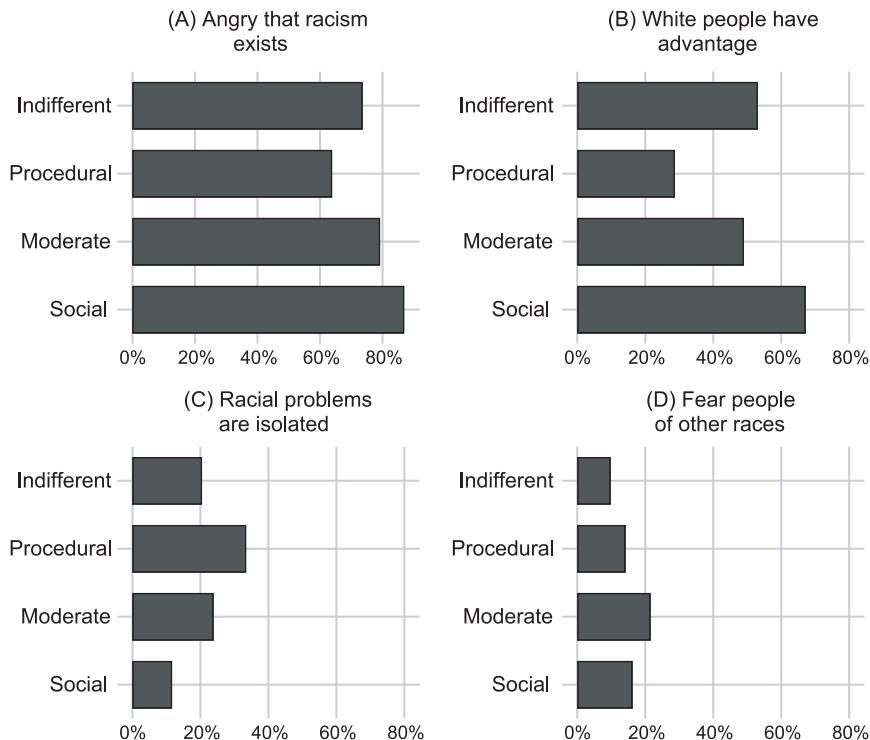


Fig. 5.4. FIRE and the democracy typology

(Note: See text for full question wording. Data drawn from 2017 CCES sample.)

### Political Awareness and Interest

Finally, we conclude with a brief discussion of two additional respondent-level characteristics that are perhaps relevant to the nature of democratic preferences: political interest and political knowledge or acumen. Because past research makes clear that people who follow politics are more likely to possess consistent, interconnected beliefs (Kalmoe 2020; Fishman and Davis 2021), we expect that these measures of political awareness might affect whether individuals exhibit well-defined views of democracy.

Political interest is a straightforward, though important, person-level feature that reflects the extent to which someone follows politics. Respondents were asked how closely they followed what goes on in government and public affairs, which ranged from “hardly ever” to “most of the time.” We illustrate the distribution of these responses by class in panel A of figure 5.5. Procedural democracy members are most deeply invested in following

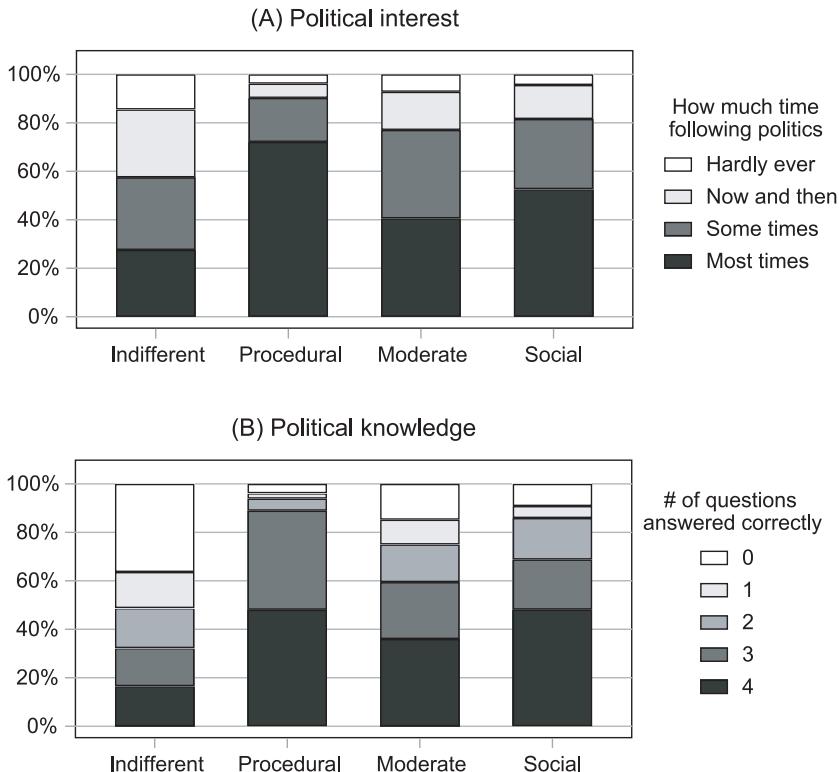


Fig. 5.5. News interest and political knowledge across the democracy typology  
 (Note: See text for details on the construction of political interest and knowledge. Data drawn from 2017 CCES sample.)

politics. Nearly 70 percent of members confess to following politics most of the time. Social and moderate views of democracy exhibit high levels of general interest, while indifferent views toward democracy predictably exhibit the lowest levels of political interest.

In addition to this instrument, several questions in the CCES provide the material necessary to construct a political knowledge index. As past research shows, political knowledge helps citizens understand “what goes with what.” In other words, it is related to reliable and consistent political preferences. Four survey questions form this index: whether respondents knew the correct majority party in (1) the House of Representatives and the (2) Senate, as well as the correct ideological label that corresponds to the (3) Republican and (4) Democratic Parties. Correct answers were

coded 1 and otherwise 0, and they were added together into a simple index ranging from no correct answers to all correct answers. Panel B of figure 5.5 illustrates a pattern similar to political interest: procedural views of democracy are associated with the highest levels of factual information about politics. Individuals assigned to the social democracy category exhibit the next highest levels of knowledge, though they are approximately similar to those persons in the moderate class. Indifferent persons, as we might expect, exhibit the lowest levels of knowledge.

### The Correlates of the Democracy Typology

While the bivariate analyses in the previous sections unmask differences among the classes of the democracy typology, it is difficult to know whether they *predict* an individual's probability of being assigned to a given class of democracy. For this, we need a more flexible modeling approach that incorporates a more full set of respondent characteristics like age, education, and gender, alongside the attitudes detailed above. To accomplish this, we estimate and report visually the results of a multinomial logistic regression in figure 5.6.

In layman's terms, this model predicts how the variables we have reviewed here are related to the probability of assignment to the given classes of our typology. We opt for a visual approach to the presentation of the modeling results, which allows us to show the marginal effect of a given variable on the probability that a person will be assigned to a particular group of democratic meanings. Because all variables are normalized—recoded to range from 0 to 1—point estimates produced by this model convey the effect of moving from the minimum and maximum values on a given variable on the probability of assignment to the class associated with that panel. The solid bands around this point estimate convey uncertainty. Those bands that cross the dotted vertical lines in each panel signal that the coefficient associated with that variable is indistinguishable from zero or "insignificant." Practically, that means that the relationship between a variable and class assignment is too noisy to draw any firm conclusions.

Here, we have chosen to only present variables that produce a coefficient that is distinguishable from zero for at least one category of our typology. This decision means that there are several variables included in our model that do not appear here because their relationship to democracy

is too noisy for us to be confident that they are related to these preferences. For the full modeling results, which contain all variables and coefficient estimates, we point readers to the appendix accompanying this chapter (see fig. A5.1).

First, we begin with several of the political instruments discussed in the first section of this chapter. We find that partisanship is unrelated to class assignment to either the indifferent or moderate classes. Likewise, while moving from strong Democrat to strong Republican, identification is associated with a positive change in the likelihood of being assigned to the procedural class of democracy, the point estimate narrowly misses the conventional  $p < 0.05$  threshold ( $p = 0.056$ ).<sup>9</sup> However, we do observe that identifying as a Republican is associated with a lower probability of being assigned to the substantive democracy class. Across the models, then, partisanship is a weak predictor of views of democracy.

Ideological self-placements are also mostly unrelated to class assignment. Due to the categorical nature of our liberal-conservative identification variable, the reader should compare point estimates for “missing,” “conservative,” and “liberal,” against the category of “moderate” identification (i.e., the excluded category).<sup>10</sup> Across all four classes of the democracy typology, identifying as a liberal or conservative does not sort respondents into any one class compared to moderate identification. However, not supplying a response to this question—conveying that one “doesn’t know” which group best describes them—is related to being assigned to the indifferent category of democracy. This confirms our suspicion that these are persons for whom politics and, by extension, democracy is remote or uninteresting. In addition, not selecting an ideological identity (i.e., someone who “doesn’t know”), is associated with a person being less likely to be assigned to the moderate class of democracy—that class is “ideological,” but it involves a mélange of people belonging to different ideological groups.

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9. For readers unfamiliar with this language,  $p$ -values are a source of consternation in statistical analyses because they can be difficult to interpret. At the risk of over-simplifying their nature, they are a threshold intended to reasonably protect against false positive results—discovering something that is, in fact, not true. A common, though imperfect, way of thinking about this involves the likelihood that you would find this result by chance less than 5 percent of the time.

10. This is necessary because the variable has mutually exclusive categories, and we must compare values of some categories against a category that is not explicitly modeled. If we were interested in the difference between liberals and conservatives, we could, in contrast, exclude the liberal label and our coefficients for the other ideological labels would be interpreted as comparisons against the effect of that particular value.

Instead, when it comes to ideology, it appears that perceptions about limited government are strongly associated with class assignment. Respondents who favor limited government are more likely to be proceduralists and less likely to be assigned to the social democracy class. This relationship is interesting in the sense that, while limited government preferences are skewed in the procedural category of democracy, they are normally distributed among those with a substantive view of democracy. In other words, a preference for a more expansive government could be described as a sufficient but not necessary condition for being classified into this group of democratic preferences. These relationships help confirm the meanings of these two democracy classes: procedural views of democracy prioritize the protection of rights and liberties (and even then, perhaps narrowly defined), while social democracy is often associated with a rejection of the assumptions of such minimalism. However, we again find little evidence of any clear relationships among these preferences and moderate and indifferent views of democracy.

To that end, we observe that racial attitudes help shed some light on what predicts inclusion in those groups. First, being fearful of people of other races is associated with a modest increase in the probability of being assigned to the moderate class of the democracy typology. Second, perceptions about the nature of racial problems in the United States also pushes people to some classes and not others. Persons in the social democracy class understand that racial problems are not isolated; if we relax our significance thresholds to the  $p < 0.10$  threshold, then we find a corresponding relationship between those attitudes and assignment to the moderate class of democracy. These persons are more likely to not perceive the persistence of racial problems in the United States, all else equal.

We pivot next to the two instruments under the “system awareness” category. Here, we find that people who know something about politics and who are interested in it are much less likely to be classified in the indifferent class of democracy. This relationship suggests that indifference to democracy is often, in some sense, related to not being familiar with it. We also find that both more interested and more knowledgeable persons are more likely to exhibit a procedural view of democracy. While the coefficients for knowledge among those in the moderate and social democracy class narrowly miss conventional thresholds of significance, they bear out the bivariate relationships we highlighted above.

Finally, we observe that only a few demographic features are related to

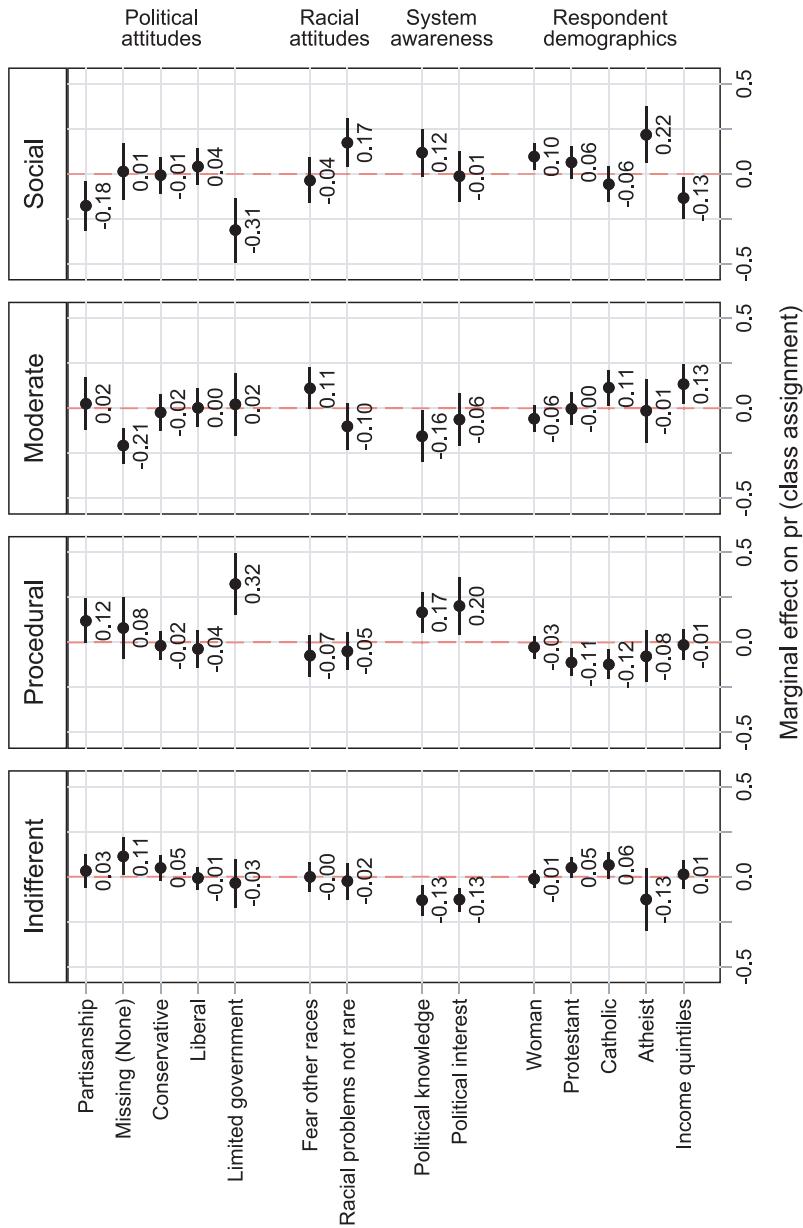


Fig. 5.6. The correlates of the democracy typology

(Note: For presentational purposes, only estimates significant at the  $p = 0.05$  level for at least one category of democracy typology are depicted here. The full models include the following additional variables: anger about racism, believing whites have advantages, racial resentment, education, race, and age. For full modeling output, we point interested readers to the appendix accompanying this chapter.

Data drawn from 2017 CCEES sample.)

class assignment. Women are statistically more likely to exhibit a social view of democracy than men, an effect that is unique to that class. Income is related to the probability of assignment to both the moderate and social democracy classes; wealthier persons are modestly more likely to exhibit a moderate view of democracy and less likely to exhibit a social view of democracy. These differences are perhaps not surprising—if democracy involves equity in material well-being, then those with the most at stake to “lose” via the levers of redistribution are understandably less interested in doing so. Lastly, religious affiliation has a modest effect on class memberships, where moderate views of democracy are slightly more Catholic, social views associated with atheism, and indifferent views Protestantism.

## Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to analyze the beliefs and preferences associated with different views of democracy. This task is an important one for two reasons. First, it helps us validate the labels we’ve assigned to the groups of our democracy typology. By looking at, say, beliefs about the appropriate role of government, we can assess whether our intuitions about procedural or social democracy accurately embody those labels. In turn, understanding the distribution of partisanship, education, or political knowledge among the typology’s classes supplies information that can help us flesh out our understanding of what membership in these groups means. On balance, it seems that (1) indifferent persons care little for politics or don’t know much about it; (2) proceduralists are knowledgeable and interested in politics and prefer a minimalist version of democracy; (3) moderates are wealthier, evenly spread among various ideological traditions in American politics, and more uncomfortable with people of other races; and (4) social democrats are slightly less well-to-do and recognize that government should be doing more to ameliorate racial and economic problems in the United States.

Second, this task reveals some of the tensions that may impede policymaking in the United States today. Procedural democracy is a relatively homogenous class—these individuals are reliably conservative, Republican, view state intervention with suspicion, and do not believe that racism is a widespread problem. In contrast, both the moderate and social democracy classes are not only more diverse demographically, but, com-

bined, appear to support the welfare state. While it seems clear that social views of democracy are associated with stereotypically “left-leaning” preferences, a non-trivial proportion of Americans belonging to this class exhibit right-leaning associations. Ellis and Stimson (2012) might view this as thematically similar to their own paradox: citizens are symbolically conservative and, yet, on balance prefer center-left policies. We find a somewhat similar pattern with respect to attitudes toward democracy in the sense that some right-leaning persons nevertheless prefer “progressive” views of democracy. Perhaps these persons believe that democracy ought to provide for basic necessities, for example, but are ultimately suspicious of government as the delivery mechanism for these welfare goods or believe limited government is the best mechanism for providing basic necessities and assuring equality.

In turn, this disconnect has implications for thinking about the current state of American democracy and the ossification of the American party system. American politics, according to popular accounts, is hopelessly paralyzed due to polarization. Not only do partisans dislike their opponents (Iyenger et al. 2019), it is unclear that citizens share much in common. And, yet, we find that not only does the modal American prefer “social” democracy, but that such preferences cross-cut stereotypical political group memberships. To the extent that Americans want more democracy, however, they are not necessarily getting it. Why is this the case? Perhaps for two reasons. Although demands for maximal democracy can be found among those on the right and left, the prevailing pressures of partisan loyalties seem to overwhelm these preferences—for better or worse, democracy itself has been grafted onto ordinary political conflict, even if partisanship does little to predict one’s view of it.

To the extent that there is social sorting in American politics—that is, racial, religious, and partisan group memberships are more aligned than in the past (Mason 2018a, 2018b)—this complicates consensus-making. The mismatch between democratic preferences and political group memberships may suggest that there is room for “common ground” about what democracy ought to look like. However, while increasingly aligned group memberships may be sufficiently strong to choke this prospect, we suspect that a combination of gerrymandering, an undemocratic Electoral College system, and a wildly disproportionate Senate contribute to a scenario in which one party is largely insulated from the penalties associated with ignoring popular policies that might expand the contours of democracy.

More generally, the parties rarely frame discussions about policy using democracy frames. Proposals like the Green New Deal and the infrastructure proposals put forth by the Biden administration have obvious stakes for equity, which is a major component of democracy. And, yet, party elites seem disinclined to frame how such policies affect the nature of democracy in these terms. In Przeworski's words, we are left with a political "language that does not extend beyond a program for the next election, a language that does not guide the society toward long-term goals" (Przeworski 2021). Individualism and neoliberal values are so deeply ingrained in American society that democracy, to some extent, has become a simple shorthand for rule-by-popular-election. But, as we have demonstrated here, many citizens associate democracy with a broad set of political outputs that involve both civil and material well-being. While such preferences are somewhat absorbed by the prevailing social and political tensions of the present, it would seem to be the case that many Americans believe in and desire a democracy that looks qualitatively different than the one they endure.

## CHAPTER 6

# Compromise and Representation within the Democracy Typology

Pursuing the common good in a pluralist democracy is not possible without making compromises.

—Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2013)

Our argument in the preceding chapters boils down to this: democracy involves more than access to a ballot. Still, while chapter 5 illustrated that people have different expectations regarding democracy's outputs, it remains unclear what competing visions of democracy imply about the *processes* by which such outputs are produced. What do Americans think about the proverbial sausage-making that keeps government running? Does the democracy typology affect expectations about how politicians navigate the policymaking processes within democracy?

Political competition, bargaining, and negotiation are vital to the process of turning mass inputs into policy outcomes. In turn, political compromise is usually required to achieve desirable outcomes in democracy. In theory—if not practice—elected representatives must be willing to recognize, acknowledge, and accommodate different points of view for meaningful, deliberative policymaking to occur. For their part, citizens should reward compromise-based solutions rather than unyielding and counterproductive, ideological stands (Gutmann and Thompson 2013; Wolak 2020).

The bargaining and negotiation inherent to democratic policymaking processes are the province of political parties and elected representatives. Although much has been written about public opinion on these subjects,

it is not clear whether expectations about democracy shape how Americans think about institutions that structure their democracy. In this chapter, we treat democratic meanings as a possible lens through which citizens think about political parties, the party system, and the policymaking process. We begin by investigating how individuals think about the value of political compromise, party actors, and political representation across the democracy typology. We also discuss the connection between democratic meanings and populist attitudes, which includes antipathy toward elected officials, policy experts, and other political elites that are presumably necessary for democracy to function smoothly. In doing so, we unpack some of the expectations that different views of democracy have for the actors, processes, and institutions that allow democracy to function.

### The Politics of Political Compromise

While compromise is vital to the stability, sustainability and legitimacy of popular self-governance, contemporary politics falls far short of idealized notions of collaborative, bipartisan policymaking.<sup>1</sup> In an era of divided government and partisan polarization, legislating often grinds to a halt. The growing reluctance of parties to make concessions is evident in government shutdowns, but it is also reflected in the more general growth of executive, unilateral governance by presidents (Chiou and Rothenberg 2017; Bolton and Thrower 2016; Reeves and Rogowski 2016, 2018). This situation presents us with a puzzle: If the public perceives compromise as a necessary ingredient to democratic governance, then why is there so little of it in contemporary politics?

The Madisonian design, defined by separation of powers and checks and balances, makes compromise difficult. The contemporary polarization of political parties and a political system crafted to protect the rights of political minorities make compromise nearly impossible (Mann and Ornstein 2016). At the elite level, congressional votes across a wide range of topics are increasingly and sharply divided along partisan lines (Layman and Carsey 2002; Lewis et al. 2018; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal

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1. To be clear, this ideal has never been realized. It assumes fair—rather than lopsided—competition between groups. In practice, however, pluralism is biased to favor the organized. Hence, E. E. Schattsneider's (1960) observation, "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent."

2016). Congressional Republicans are now more conservative and congressional Democrats more liberal than at any time in the recent past. When combined with the structural contours of the American political system that was designed to frustrate political majorities and empower political minorities (Gutmann and Thompson 2010, 2013; Abramowitz 2010), the result is a democracy that is not very effective at addressing pressing public concerns like economic inequality and stagnant wages, climate change, or growing public disaffection with institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Given this backdrop, it may be surprising to learn that the American public is more supportive of compromise than ideological rigidity. In a Gallup poll conducted in September 2017, for example, 54 percent of Americans said it was more important for political leaders to compromise than to stick to their beliefs (Newport 2017). Only 18 percent of Americans preferred representatives who stick to their beliefs rather than compromise with the other side. Similarly, according to a McClatchy/Marist poll conducted in December 2016, 65 percent of Americans said it was more important for “government officials in Washington to compromise to find solutions.”<sup>3</sup> Only 28 percent of respondents said it was more important to “stand on principle even if it means gridlock.” While attitudes toward compromise are sensitive to question wording and context (Wolak 2020), they are mostly stable over time (holding question wording constant) and reveal general support for political compromise as an abstract principle (Davis 2018).

As in the literature on political tolerance, however, abstract support for compromise does not neatly translate into support for specific compromises or across contexts (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982). Opinions shift when individuals are asked if a given political party should compromise, if leaders or parties are compromising “too much,” or if individuals support compromise on a specific issue (Davis 2018; Bauer, Yong, and

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2. There is also the matter of a growing difference between the two parties on matters of democracy itself. In this case, “polarization” is often a sloppy description for the divisions that result when one party refuses to engage in the normal processes of electoral turnover. Allegations of election-rigging and legislating power away from duly-elected public figures is not, strictly speaking, “polarization.” Rather, the party system has become bitterly divided upon something even more fundamental than policy disagreements—the integrity to concede to the rules of the game. Under these conditions, compromise may not only be unworkable but actively undesirable.

3. McClatchy, McClatchy Poll: December 2016, Marist College Institute for Public Opinion (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2016).

Krupnikov 2017). These differences are exacerbated by a generalized distrust of others that makes voters skeptical of *any* compromise (Gutmann and Thompson 2010; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), alongside asymmetric governing preferences among partisans. Democrats seem to prefer compromise in the abstract more than Republicans (Davis 2018), possibly because defending the status quo frames policy compromise as a loss rather than a gain (Glaser and Berry 2018).

### *Views of Democracy and Attitudes toward Compromise*

Where previous work has emphasized the link between partisan preferences and compromise, the implicit assumption is often that, while compromise may be critical to the functioning of democratic governance, it is not “essential” to how people think about democracy, *per se*. Yet, given how compromise is structurally embedded within democratic institutions, this lack of scrutiny leaves room for exploration of this prospect. Do the meanings that individuals assign to democracy constrain how they think about such exchanges?

We used three survey questions from our CCES modules to measure attitudes toward compromise. The first two ask respondents about their level of agreement (or disagreement) with the following statements:

- What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles.
- Openness to other people’s views and willingness to compromise are important for politics in a country like ours.

These statements were selected because they reflect a practical dimension to compromise (compromise as selling out) and an abstract consideration (compromise as important for the political system) and because they are part of existing scales gauging attitudes toward democracy. The first statement comes from the work on stealth democracy (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), while the second statement comes from the sunshine democracy work (Neblo et al. 2010).

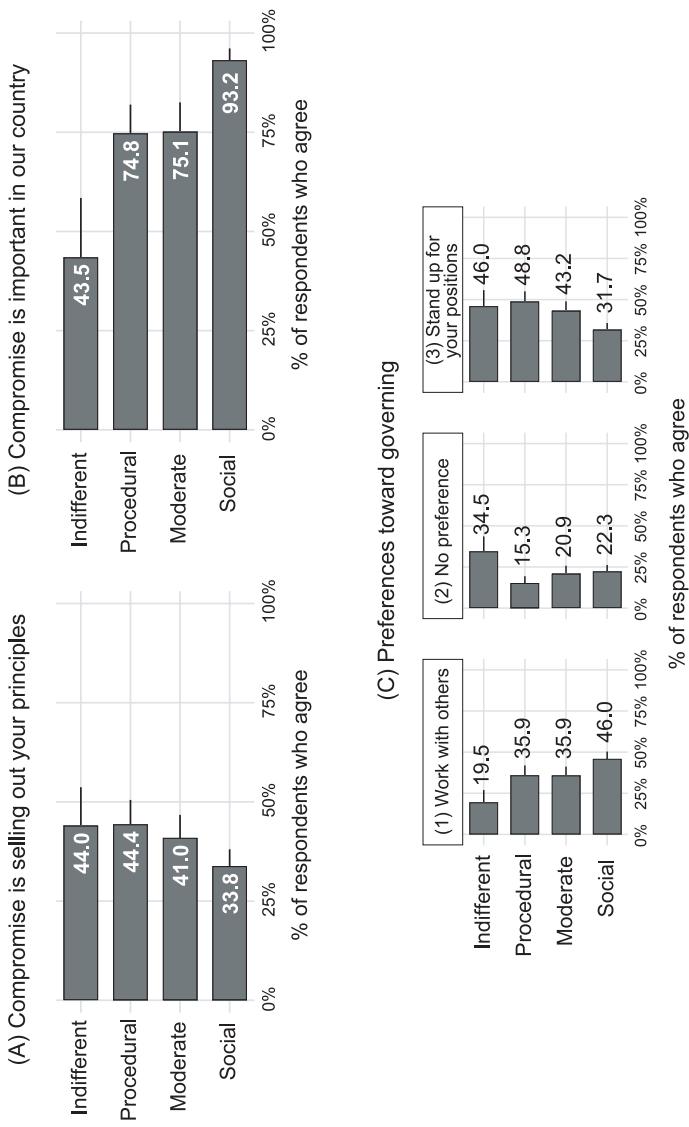
Overall, we found that Americans were divided on the practical question of whether compromise in politics is the equivalent of selling out their beliefs. Slightly more Americans agree or strongly agree that compromise

is “really just selling out” (38 percent in total, compared to 30 percent who disagreed). There is nearly consensual agreement (80 percent) that a willingness to compromise is important, however, “in a country like ours.” At an abstract level, Americans recognize that compromise is necessary for democratic governance, even as they regard it with some suspicion.

As further evidence to this point, we asked respondents to make a trade-off between elected representatives “standing up for their positions even if it means little gets done” versus “working with the other side even if it results in less preferred policies.” Again, Americans are nearly evenly split between the substantive two options. There are slight differences across years with more respondents preferring “standing up for principle” in 2017 than in 2016. This difference across years likely reflects partisan differences in support for compromise that result from changing from a Democratic president (2016) to a Republican one (2017), and the willingness to support compromise when one’s preferred party is in power. Compromise is an easier pill to swallow when you believe the other side is (or should be) making concessions.

Do the groups in the democracy typology vary in how they think about these issues? In figure 6.1, we break out respondents who support political compromise across the classes. Support for political compromise is strongest among Americans with the most expansive understanding of democracy. A social view of democracy is associated with rejecting the idea that compromise is selling out, and these persons believe compromise is critical to the U.S. political system and are willing to trade standing on principle to work with the other side. Perhaps surprisingly, the differences between more libertarian views of democracy and a moderate one is fairly trivial. Americans operating with a process-based understanding of democracy, which presumably ought to include a recognition that compromise is a necessary feature of the policymaking process, do not seem to hold it in high regard.

It is possible that these differences are simply the result of the underlying partisan or ideological qualities of the groups. As we discussed in chapter 5, these composite understandings may, by definition, reflect ideology, but they are not a mere substitute for it. Among the three questions, we do find that differences among the groups withstand multivariate analysis for two of the three questions: substantive views of democracy relative to other classes are associated with greater importance placed on compromise, while persons with a substantive view of democracy are also more



**Fig. 6.1. Beliefs about compromise across the democracy typology**  
 (Note: In panels A and B, bars convey percentage of class members who selected agree or strongly agree with the respective survey question. In contrast, in panel C, each subpanel conveys a response option to the survey question, “‘Which comes closest to your view?’” In panel C, the percentages listed across subpanels for each class on the y-axis should sum to 100. Data drawn from 2016 CCES sample.)

likely to desire to work with others relative to those in the procedural class of democracy. (For readers interested in the full modeling output associated with these findings, we point them to the appendix accompanying this chapter.) Perhaps this finding helps explain public apathy over Democratic elites' insistence that bipartisanship is more important than changing procedural rules to achieve policy outcomes and, in turn, Republicans' unwillingness to bargain with their opponents.

### **Political Parties and the Party System**

In 1942, E. E. Schattschneider articulated an enduring conventional wisdom of political science: "The political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties." Parties shape vote choice, engage and mobilize voters, and serve as a democratic counterbalance to business and industry within a capitalist economic system (Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Masket 2016). In the United States, where power is fragmented and divided by constitutional design, political parties make governing possible.

It is ironic, then, that although scholars recognize the importance of political parties to a democratic political system, citizens, activists, and even elected representatives frequently treat them as a nuisance. According to this perspective, political parties interfere with policies that more genuinely reflect the public will (broadly defined), divide citizens into groups who perceive policies and processes through a zero-sum lens, and undermine the potential for meaningful and productive deliberation. Political preferences, some worry, are the result not of careful deliberation but of motivated reasoning guided by elite partisan cues. It is a short step to conclude that parties corrupt, rather than aggregate, citizens' preferences and distort, rather than reflect, public opinion. To repurpose Schattschneider's blunt phrasing, the political parties undermine, rather than sustain, democracy—a problem that is particularly acute in first-past-the-post voting systems like the United States, which effectively locks citizens into parties that opportunistically absorb bad-faith actors (Drutman 2020).

Given public antipathy toward the parties (Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018; Klar and Krupnikov 2016), it is not surprising that political parties are frequently the target of major reform movements designed to reduce partisan corruption and increase democratic responsiveness within party

organizations (Masket 2016; McCarthy and Santucci 2021). Parties may be necessary within a democratic system of government, but they also provide a convenient punching bag for lamentations on democracy's shortcomings. During the Progressive Era, the adoption of civil service systems limited political patronage, the secret ballot undermined the ability of parties to reward loyal voters, nonpartisan elections removed parties from local governance, and direct primaries gave the party-in-the-electorate greater control over nominations. The result was an increase in *intraparty* democracy but weakened and less effective party organizations—a tradeoff from which the ramifications are still felt today.

Ironically, the public's attempts at reforming the parties exacerbated these tensions in the modern era.<sup>4</sup> After the fractious 1968 Democratic National Convention, the McGovern-Fraser Commission democratized the process for selecting party nominees. McGovern's disastrous 1972 campaign and landslide loss to Richard Nixon, however, pushed the pendulum in the other direction, leading to the creation of "superdelegates" and reclaiming a role for party elites in deciding the Democratic nominee. In turn, the role of party elites has been the subject of ongoing controversy, particularly within the Democratic Party. In 2016, superdelegates arguably, but controversially, worked as reformers intended—helping "party insider" Hillary Clinton at the expense of "party outsider" Bernie Sanders. In 2020, coordination among Democratic primary contenders dropping out of the presidential race helped to restructure the election to a one-on-one contest between Sanders and Joe Biden, which had the effect of consolidating support for the latter. Despite efforts to limit the role of the party establishment relative to party voters, party insiders continue to influence, if not decide, the nominating process (Cohen et al. 2008).

In turn, populist movements are often born from the resulting anti-party sentiment. The Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders campaigns, respectively, targeted their campaign appeals at the "party establishment" for corruption, election rigging, selling out to corporate donors, and falling out of touch with rank-and-file partisan identifiers. The Tea Party Movement, which preceded these campaigns, was notable not only for its extreme disdain for liberal groups and causes but also for its deep distrust

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4. Masket (2016) examines party reforms at the state level and finds reform efforts typically fail to understand the adaptability and inevitability of partisan organizations. As unintended consequences, reforms often decrease transparency and accountability.

of the Republican Party establishment and RINOs (Republicans in Name Only; see Parker and Barreto 2013). More generally, Democrat Barack Obama successfully ran as an outsider against Hillary Clinton in 2008, while Republican John McCain was a “maverick” in the 2000 primary before he was the Republican nominee in 2008.<sup>5</sup>

Taken together, the parties present a complicated institution—one that politicians disparage as easily as ordinary voters bemoan. In particular, confidence in the Democratic and Republican Parties, respectively, and in political parties as political institutions remains remarkably low. In an age defined by partisan polarization where issues and events are interpreted largely through a partisan lens, voters generally lack confidence in political parties as organizations. This has not always been the case. In 1936, in the midst of the Great Depression, Gallup asked if it was time to give up our existing parties for new, more ideological parties.<sup>6</sup> Only 30 percent said yes.

Second, although Americans have generally been skeptical of ideological parties (and particularly of the opposition), they have traditionally embraced the idea of greater intraparty democracy—that is, democratizing access to political power within the parties. Across multiple surveys conducted in the wake of the McGovern-Fraser reforms, more than two-thirds of Americans supported a nationwide primary to decide on party nominees.<sup>7</sup> In the 2016 American National Election Survey, for example, 53 percent of Americans said the choice of party nominees should be made entirely by the voters, and 25 percent said the choice should be made “mostly by the voters with some help from party leaders.” Only a handful of Americans prefer a system where nominees are selected mostly or entirely by party elites without little or no public input.

Perhaps unintentionally, increases in intraparty democracy have coincided with partisan sorting and elite polarization. The result has been more ideological political parties, though the consequences of these more ideo-

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5. Of course, rare is the “true” outsider—most candidates enjoy some support for party apparatuses no matter how they try to sell their unique brand of outsider appeal.

6. Gallup Organization, Gallup Organization Poll: May 1936, Gallup Organization, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1936).

7. This is consistent with surveys conducted from 1952 through 1988. Support ranged from a low of 56 percent in 1956 during the Eisenhower reelection year to a high of 76 percent just after the Democratic Convention in 1968 (Panagopoulos 2004). While primaries became the principal tool for selecting nominees, they remained scattered across the calendar, slated by the states as opposed to holding a single national primary.

logical parties did not fully take shape until 1994 when Republicans won control of the House of Representatives for the first time in over 40 years. Under the leadership of Newt Gingrich, Republicans won the House by targeting and winning congressional districts held by conservative (mostly southern) Democrats. Further, and not coincidentally, the ideological sorting of the major parties corresponds with increased support for a third party. Support for a third party reached its peak in 2021 with 62 percent of Americans saying a third party was needed (Jones 2021). The increase was mostly attributable to divisions within the Republican Party between Trump Republicans and establishment Republicans, both dissatisfied with the current state of the GOP. It also highlights the challenges of creating a political party that would reflect the public demand for a new party. In response to a 2018 survey, a plurality of respondents (37 percent) expressed a preference for a centrist political party while 18 percent preferred a more liberal party, and 23 percent preferred a more conservative party (Drutman 2018; Drutman, Galston, and Linberg 2018; Rapoport and Stone 2008).<sup>8</sup> While public support for a third party as expressed in opinion polls does not appear to be directly linked to the emergence of third-party or independent candidacies, this trend seems to reveal a general decline in the confidence that people have in the American parties.

### *Linking Parties to the Meanings of Democracy*

How does one's composite understanding of democracy relate to attitudes toward political parties? Our modules from the 2016 and 2017 CCES contain data to address this question. In 2016, respondents were first asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: *Political parties do more to confuse the issues than to provide a clear choice on them.* This question has

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8. When George Wallace challenged the two-party system in 1968, there was little national support for a third-party. Twelve years later in 1980, only 22 percent of Americans agreed that "the truth is we probably don't need political parties in America anymore." This is consistent with polling throughout the 1980s as Americans equated additional parties with greater confusion at the ballot box and greater difficulty in governing. John B. Anderson's independent presidential campaign in 1980 notably floundered, securing just 6.6 percent of the popular vote. By 1992 when Ross Perot ran for president, opinion had shifted dramatically such that 63 percent of Americans favored "the formation of a third political party that would run candidates for President, Congress, and state offices against the Republican and Democratic candidates." Perot subsequently secured 19 percent of the vote during the 1992 presidential election.

a long history, beginning with Dennis (1966) who reported the measure as an indicator of diffuse support for the two-party system. In that study, 54 percent of Wisconsinites agreed that political parties confuse rather than clarify the issues. Subsequent studies find declining diffuse support for the party system, though on the question of whether parties confuse (or clarify) issues, the findings have been relatively stable over time (Dennis 1975; Owen and Dennis 1996). Each time the question has been asked in subsequent surveys, approximately two-thirds of Americans agree that parties confuse the issues rather than provide a clear choice.<sup>9</sup>

In our 2016 survey, 71 percent of respondents agreed that parties confuse, rather than provide a clear choice, on the issues. Less than 10 percent disagreed with this statement. This is a remarkable level of consensus and an unfortunate indictment of the party system. Likewise, from our 2017 module, respondents were asked their level of agreement with the following statement: *Traditional parties and politicians don't care about people like me.* Consistent with existing surveys, we found that more than two-thirds of Americans agree or strongly agree with this statement.<sup>10</sup> On balance, Americans simply don't have much faith in parties' effectiveness.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, respondents were also asked to evaluate the overall party system. The specific question wording was as follows: *Which of the following best describes your view of the two-party system?* Respondents supplied agreement with one of three statements: the party system (1) works fairly well; (2) has real problems, but with some improvements it can still work well; or (3) is seriously broken, and the country needs a third party. In previous surveys, as well as this one, respondents typically split between believing the party system "has real problems" but is in need of some reform versus believing the two-party system is "seriously broken." Relatively few respondents ever say that the party system "works fairly well."<sup>12</sup>

Overall, the picture that emerges regarding attitudes toward political

9. There's an interesting irony with that interpretation, given that elite polarization presumably *clarifies* the issues of the day for ordinary citizens (Levendusky 2009).

10. A November 2016 Reuters/Ipsos Poll, for example, found that 68 percent of Americans agreed with this statement.

11. Of course, it is possible that the party object that respondents have in mind is the opposition one, but even 78 percent of pure independents agree that parties confuse the issues.

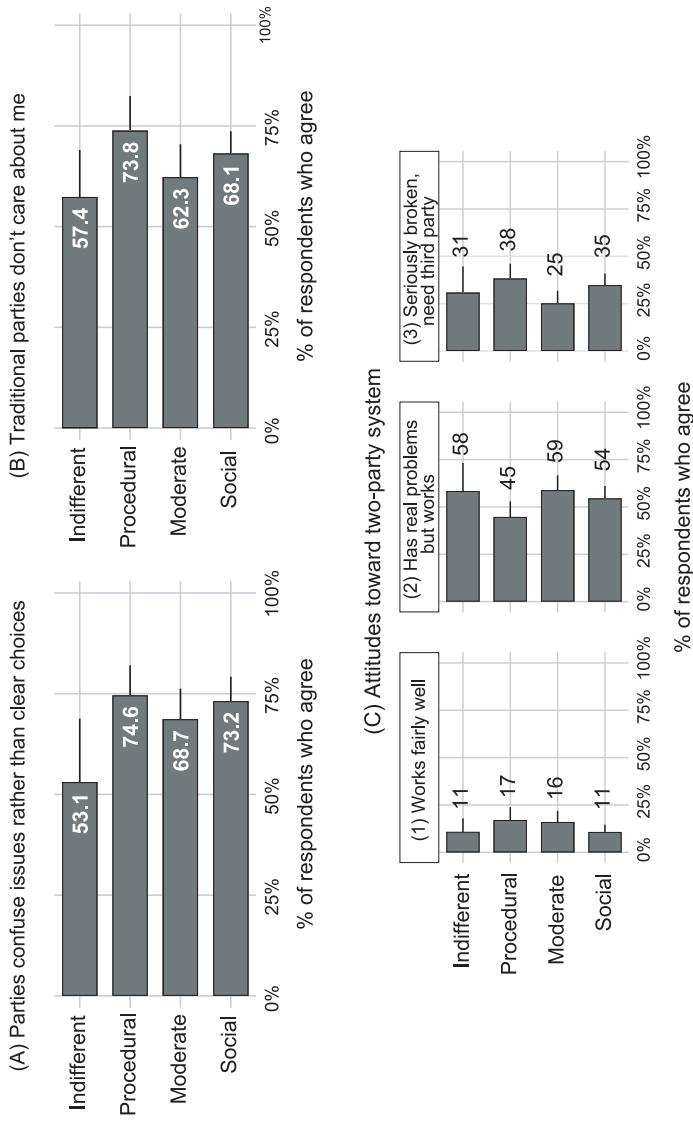
12. For example, in an AP-NORC Survey conducted in September 2016, 44 percent of respondents said the two-party system has real problems but with improvements can still work well, 42 percent said it is seriously broken, and 13 percent said it works fairly well. This is consistent with responses over time.

parties is fairly consistent with past literature. Public opinion is highly critical of the political parties; people believe that the parties do more to confuse than clarify the issues and that they do not care about “people like me.” However, Americans are not quite ready to throw the baby out with the bath water, and they are more inclined to believe that parties can be reformed so that they work reasonably well within the existing system.

How do beliefs about the parties align with composite views of democracy? Not particularly well. First, while there are notable differences about whether parties confuse or clarify issues (panel A, figure 6.2), the differences are mostly reflected in the intensity of agreement. Recall that historically, on this question, there was broad consensus that parties confuse rather than clarify the issues. Looking at differences across levels of agreement, individuals with a minimal or procedural understanding of democracy are most likely to strongly agree, perhaps because they perceive parties as unnecessarily complicating political decision-making. In contrast, persons whose understandings of democracy fall between procedural and substantive definitions—moderate democrats—are least committed to this particular viewpoint, perhaps because they are the most flexible or pragmatic in their understanding of what democracy entails. Still, these differences are minor and largely insignificant when viewed against other respondent characteristics (see the appendix accompanying this chapter).

On the matter of feeling like the parties don’t care about respondents, again, we find minimal differences among the classes. Indifferent persons are oddly the most bullish about parties, whereas persons with procedural views are the most likely to convey that the parties have left them behind—a somewhat ironic sentiment given that liberal-procedural democracy prevails.

Regarding views toward the two-party system specifically, we find modest differences among the groups regarding these beliefs. In panel C, figure 6.2, we find that the primary difference among the groups on questions about whether parties confuse or care about citizens involves the indifferent class. Respondents with a procedural view of democracy are the most likely to say that traditional parties don’t care about them, but these differences are modest. Correspondingly, views on the party system do not vary much across the typology. Procedural viewers of democracy are less likely than other groups to say that the party system “has real problems but works,” but when it comes to demands of a third party, they are about as likely as persons with a substantive view of democracy to say that a third party is the solution.



**Fig. 6.2. Perceptions of the parties across the democracy typology**

(Note: In panels A and B, bars convey percentage of class members who selected agree or strongly agree with the respective survey question. In contrast, in Panel C, each subpanel conveys a response option to the survey question, "Which comes closest to your view?" In Panel C, the percentages listed across subpanels for each class on the y-axis should sum to 100. Data drawn from 2016 CCES sample.)

Overall, this leaves us in a curious place. Public understandings of democracy are weakly related to political parties, in part because the public consistently thinks the parties are suboptimal vehicles for representation. Given a long history of ambivalence, at best, or antipathy, at worst, these findings should perhaps not be too surprising. Yet, they also present something of a dilemma. If individuals who adopt an expansive definition of democracy do not embrace political parties as a mechanism for expanding economic equality and for providing for public goods, where is the path to substantive democracy? If not the political party, what other political institution can advocate for (or achieve) a more equitable distribution of economic and political goods?

Given the broad spectrum of ideological preferences among elected Democrats, this is particularly vexing for persons with social views of democracy. The Democratic Party is the singular institutional vehicle available to such persons to enact change, yet progressives are frequently frustrated by moderate Democrats. It's not simply that there are aesthetic differences among leftist and moderate Democrats. Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) have played the spoiler role in the early days of the Biden administration. While both have professed loyalty to procedural rules, neither seems eager to expand the welfare state given home-state pressures. Proponents of social democracy are thus stymied, without much recourse other than to agitate where they may. The "Overton window"—the range of policies politically acceptable to the mainstream public—shifts slowly, but it seems implausible that an expanded welfare state could be achieved without a serious shift in party leadership to pull Democrats leftward.

More generally, the party system is cracking at the seams to contain a brewing racial authoritarianism. Writing in 2001, Jack Dennis and Diana Owen concluded that "if there is a crisis of representative democracy in the United States today, it is centered as much on the parties as on any other institutions." Americans, they argued, were frustrated because the political system seemed inattentive to their demands, with much of the blame for this inattentiveness attributed to the political parties and the party system. In the aftermath of the January 6th insurrection, one might have anticipated that a new cleavage regarding support for democracy would manifest. Steve Schmidt, a Republican consultant for the John McCain presidential campaign and a founder of the Lincoln Project argued that "at the end of the day, there is now one pro-democracy political party in

the United States of America.” Indeed, subsequent to the historic turnout that marked the 2020 elections, Republican party elites at the state and federal level have been actively working to make voting more difficult in future elections. And less than six weeks after the January 6th insurrection, former President Trump returned to the Conservative Political Action Conference as the headline speaker to reclaim his role as the leader of the Republican Party. While the actions of (Republican) party elites at the national and state level indicate a divergence on the very concept of democracy in its most fundamental form (i.e., passing laws making it more difficult to vote), this development neither appears to repulse a large portion of the electorate nor worry more conservative Democrats in Congress that such actions are a material threat to a future of peaceable self-rule.

### Populism, Representation, and Democracy

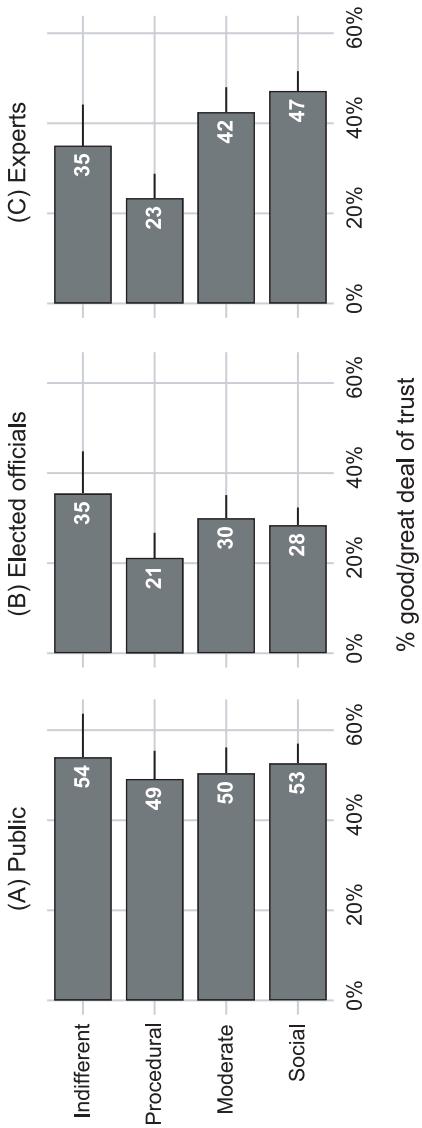
Our final set of analyses consider whether composite views of democracy encompass the role of elected representatives, the public, and policy experts in governing. Does an expansive definition of democracy allow room for elected representatives or unelected expertise in decision-making? Or are these democratic meanings inherently populist, valuing the everyday wisdom of ordinary people over elites? If the public views the average politician with the same disdain they reserve for political parties, then what does this tell us about the capacity for representative democracy?

Populism is itself an alternative understanding of democracy rooted in the idea that, while the will of the people should primarily guide policy decisions, it is routinely undermined by manipulative, entrepreneurial political elites (Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014). It is a “thin ideology,” found in American politics on the left (e.g., Bernie Sanders) and on the right (e.g., Donald Trump; see Mudde 2004; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016). Indeed, populism crosses ideological boundaries, regardless of country, because it is less an ideology than a general commitment to the idea that the world would be better off if everyday people, rather than political elites, governed. It remains vague (or thin) in that neither the people nor the elites are ever particularly well-defined, and it is often expressed through generalized anger or frustration that political decisions are being made outside of the control of the democratic citizenry (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen 2018; Magni 2017).

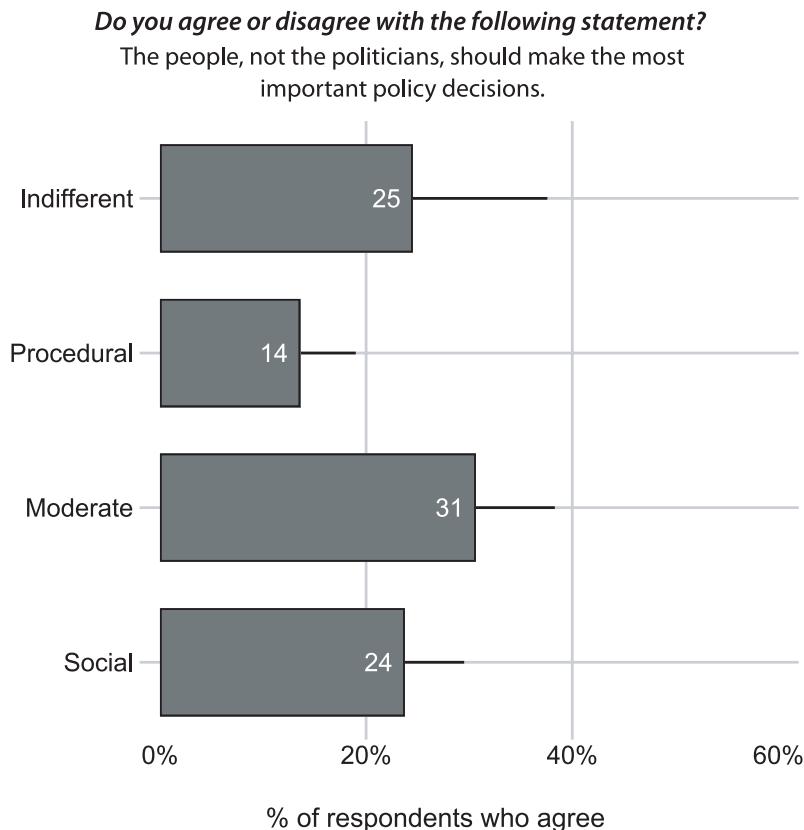
If it seems obvious, at least at a glance, that an expansive definition of democracy should be inherently populist, the reality is more complicated. Cass Mudde (2004, 558) observed, “What [populists] demand is responsive government, i.e., a government that implements policies that are in line with their wishes. However, they want the politicians to come up with these policies without bothering them, i.e., without much participation from them.” This theme finds resonance in the work on “stealth democracy” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Stealth democrats prefer elected officials do their jobs and solve problems without requiring too much of their time or attention. When politics demands their attention, their trust in government decreases and their cynicism grows. Governing, stealth democrats believe, would be easier absent the incompetence and corruption of political elites, and would, in turn, yield policies that better serve the public.

To explore the overlap between how Americans think about democracy and the confidence that they have in the public, elected representatives, and policy experts, we begin by exploring beliefs about who the public trusts to make political decisions. In both the 2016 and 2017 CCES survey modules, we asked the following question: *In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in each of the following groups when it comes to making political decisions?* Responses to each question ranged from “none” (1) to “a great deal” (4). Those surveys present a mixed picture regarding who Americans trust to rule. Just over half of respondents said that they trust the public when it comes to making political decisions. They have less confidence in policy experts (more than 60 percent have either “not very much” or “no” trust) and even less confidence in their elected representatives (almost 70 percent convey that they do not trust politicians). Perhaps it could be said that many Americans trust none of these actors, which is a perilous place for democracy.

This conclusion is true regardless of whether persons possess a procedural or substantive understanding of democracy. Figure 6.3 reveals that differences across the democracy typology arise in the confidence Americans place in elected officials and policy experts. Individuals who adopt an expansive, social view of democracy have the greatest confidence in policy experts. We might think of this as an “enlightenment” model of democracy where trust is placed not just in democratic institutions but also in science and rationality. In contrast, individuals with a procedural understanding of democracy express little trust or confidence in either elected officials or policy experts. They also do not have more trust in “the people”;



**Fig. 6.3. Trust in different groups across the democracy typology**  
(Note: Responses convey percentage of class members who selected "good" or "great deal" of trust in respective group.  
Data drawn from authors' 2016 CCEES module.)



**Fig. 6.4. Beliefs about policy decision-making across the democracy typology**

Text above image: *Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The people, not the politicians, should make the most important policy decisions.*

(Note: Responses convey percentage of class members who selected “agree” or “strongly agree” with statement. Data drawn from authors’ 2016 CCES module.)

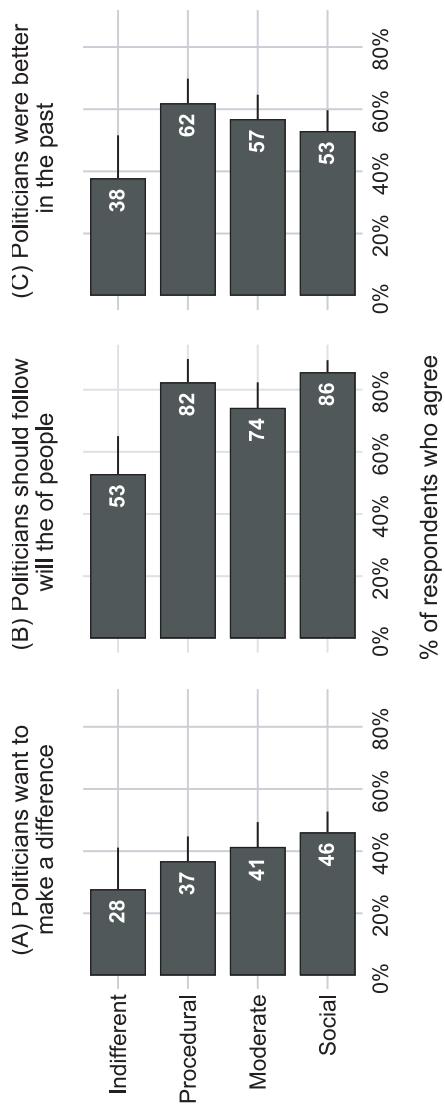
they simply have less trust in political elites—a finding that also holds up to multivariate analysis (see figure A6.3 in the appendix).

This point is made even clearer when we consider responses to the following statement: *The people, not the politicians, should make the most important policy decisions* (see figure 6.4). This survey question hints at the value respondents might assign to the principles of direct democracy; that is, whether citizens ought to be more involved in making choices among policies rather than via channels of republican government. Ironically, individuals with a minimal understanding of democracy are most likely

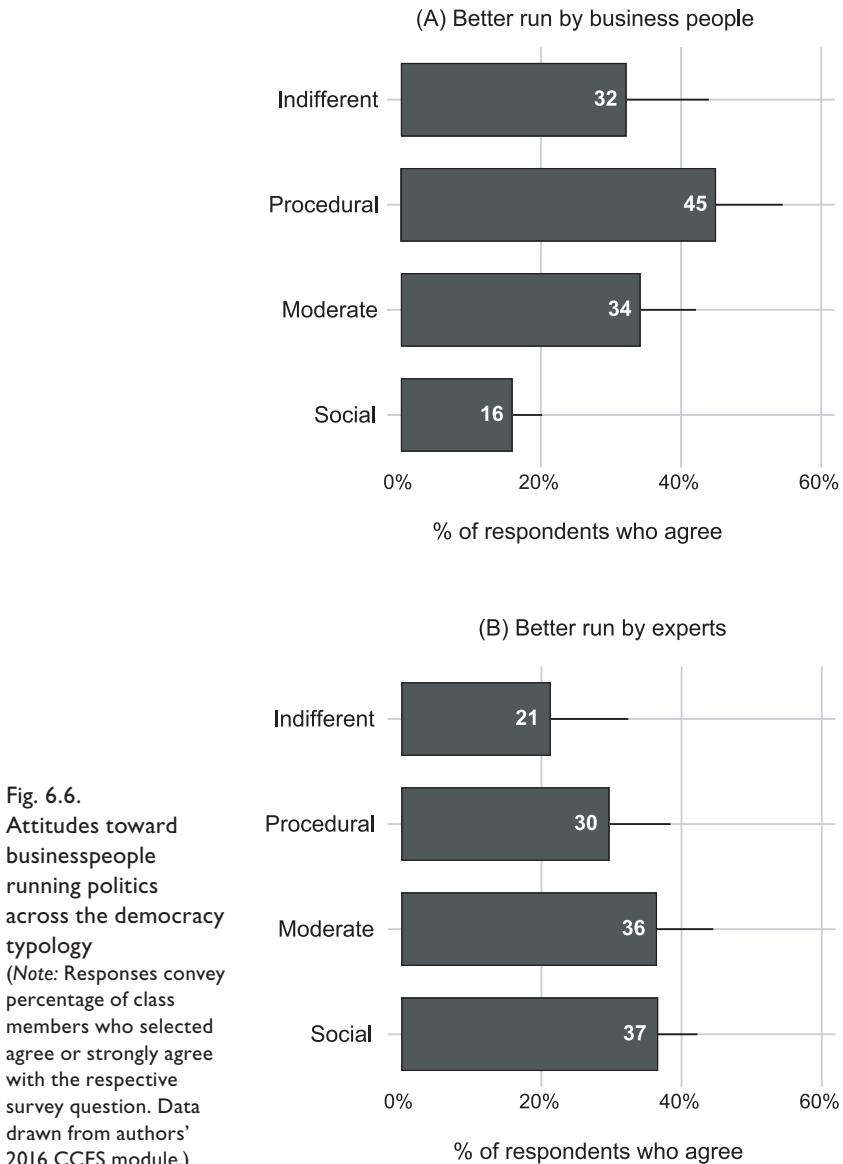
to disagree that the people should govern. Whatever distrust they have in contemporary elites does not easily translate into a broader distrust of representative democracy, *per se*, but contradictions abound.

In fact, the problem seems not to be the system, but the people who run it. While people want politicians to follow the will of the people (over 75 percent in agreement), respondents mostly believe politicians are apathetic (40 percent say politicians don't want to make a genuine difference) or perform poorly (more than 50 percent of people think politicians in the past were better than those in power now). These attitudes vary in modest ways across the typology. Proceduralists are less likely to believe that politicians want to make a positive difference than those with social views of democracy (panel A, figure 6.5). Curiously, procedural democrats also hold more nostalgic views of politicians, believing that contemporary politicians are worse than politicians from bygone eras. The differences, however, are mostly in intensity; they are not significantly different from moderate views of democracy but do hold significantly more positive views about yesteryear politicians than persons with social views of democracy. Finally, we observe an interesting similarity between procedural and social views of democracy with respect to politicians following the will of the people (panel B, figure 6.5). Both groups believe that people give politics its legitimacy; while moderate views of democracy are still in line with these views, they do differ from these groups, as do persons in the indifferent category, in which only one in two members believes that politicians have any duty to follow the will of the people.

There is one final caveat to these beliefs about who ought best to be involved in pulling the levers of government. We noted previously that procedural democrats were more distrustful of political elites. As figure 6.6 illustrates, there is one area where this is not true. Forty-five percent of people with a procedural view of democracy, compared to just 16 percent of persons with a social view of democracy, believe the country could be better off if it was run more like a business. The contrast with independent experts is striking. Americans who prefer social democracy trust policy expertise *but not financial interests*. For Americans with a minimal or procedural understanding of democracy the reverse is true. Private sector interests are more trusted than independent experts.



**Fig. 6.5. Attitudes toward politicians across the democracy typology**  
(Note: Responses convey percentage of class members who selected agree or strongly agree with the respective survey question. Data drawn from authors' 2016 CCES module.)



## Summary

In this chapter, we set out to explore whether perspectives about the actors and processes involved in self-governance vary across the democracy typology. On balance, this polling is consistent with older stealth democracy research: Americans believe that democracy should be easier and hold the systems' actors in modest regard. We find some differences across democratic views that belie traditional cleavages based on partisan affiliation and ideology. Americans with an expansive understanding of democracy are most likely to embrace compromise, while those with more limited understandings are more skeptical. In this sense, expansive definitions of politics are more deliberative, believing conversations about politics and policy should continue beyond an election or a vote. They are not, however, more populist. Adherents to substantive democracy place more trust in independent experts to guide policy decisions, presumably reflecting an enlightenment understanding of democracy that values rationality and reason. Within this context, it is perhaps worth recalling Diana Mutz's (2006) observation that you can have a participatory democracy or a deliberative democracy but not both.

Across our understandings of democracy, procedural democrats are decidedly anti-elite, expressing distrust in elected representatives and experts. They are, however, no more trusting of "the people" and express the greatest distrust in political parties as mechanisms for aggregating and representing public preferences. If this seems like an apparent paradox, it is easily resolved in that they are least inclined to believe that politicians want to make a positive difference and are most inclined to have nostalgic views of politicians from bygone eras. The problem with contemporary politics, they believe, is not the system, but the elites who get elected and the so-called experts who guide their decision-making. Yet, if they lack trust in the political system, they express greater faith in successful businesspeople, presumably because they value the efficiency and fairness of economic markets over the vagaries of politics—for many, the connection between capitalism and democracy runs very, if not perilously, deep.

## CHAPTER 7

### Support for Democracy

If scholars aim to explain citizens' support for democracy, it . . . is imperative to assess not only citizens' support for democracy, but also to examine what exactly they are supporting when they answer questions containing the word "democracy."

—Siddhartha Baviskar and Mary Malone (2004)

In the latter half of the 20th century, democracy appeared to flourish throughout much of the world. So much so, in fact, that prominent academic voices heralded “the end of history”—an idea that suggested that the appeal of liberal democracy was so persuasive and its spread so thorough that it would displace other forms of (authoritarian) government. In many countries that were previously antagonistic to democracy, it seemed that the promise of self-rule was not only possible but likely. This claim proved short-sighted.<sup>1</sup> The closing years of this era was bookended by a period of intense democratic backsliding. Autocratic governments sprung up in places where the seeds of democracy were just sprouting, and authoritarian tendencies began to creep into the speech and behavior of elites in mature democracies (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

These developments lay at the core of a persistent anxiety regarding the long-term sustainability of the democratic project. Historically, this concern involves the idea that citizens are either too capricious (Plato) or

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1. Francis Fukuyama (1992) was the most prominent of these scholars, authoring *The End of History and the Last Man*, which declared widespread liberal democracy and free market capitalism to be the final evolution of human governance.

too ignorant to hold public officials accountable (Brennan 2017). Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) describe a more banal path to democratic deconsolidation in their book, *How Democracies Die*, which outlines the roadmap that democracies take when they cease functioning as democracies. Entrepreneurial elites use cultural tensions and economic anxieties to consolidate power away from ordinary people. And this isn't something that just happens in young democracies. David Frum and James Anderson Foster's (2018) popular book, *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic*, along with E. J. Dionne, Jr., Norman Ornstein, and Thomas E. Mann's *One Nation after Trump* argue that, even in the United States, democratic commitments are under duress.<sup>2</sup>

In fairness, the list of symptoms ailing American democracy is not short. Voting rights have been curtailed in ways that adversely and disproportionately affect minority communities (Arthur and McCann 2018). Gatherings of white nationalists turned deadly in 2017, and FBI internal reports suggest that the presence of white supremacists in police departments across the United States is a systemic concern (Sotomayer, McCausland, and Brockington 2017). Family separations at the United States–Mexico border in 2018 violated basic human rights (Thomsen 2018). The use of extreme policing measures in response to Black Lives Matter protests across the United States in 2020 involved martial law-style curfews and federal agents pulling protestors into unmarked vans for interrogation (Levinson et al. 2020). More generally, these events occur against the backdrop of mixed public commitments to democratic principles and processes (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Jennings et al. 2017), long-term declines in trust and confidence in political institutions (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Hetherington 2005; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), and increased affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2012; Lelkes 2016). Small wonder that pundits and academics alike harbor doubts about the health of American democracy.

A glaring omission throughout much of the prevailing work on how citizens evaluate democracy, however, involves the lack of common eval-

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2. One of the contributors to this volume, Goidel (2014) offered an early warning that democracy was in crisis. His argument was that the social, economic, and political system had changed in ways that made public ignorance and misinformation more consequential to governing. A misinformed and uninformed public had always been a concern, but it became more so as polarization increased and social media served to confirm public misconceptions.

ative criteria by which to judge democratic support.<sup>3</sup> Although previous research has explored the linkage between representation (e.g., Anderson and Tverdova 2001; Anderson and Guillory 1997) and responsiveness and democratic support (Linde and Peters 2020; Magalhães 2014), this work offers few insights into whether views about the nature of democracy shape support for it. Thus, what others have referred to as democratic backsliding, or poor ratings of democracy, may instead reflect a gap or “deficit” between how citizens understand democracy’s obligations and the outputs that they observe in practice (e.g., Claassen 2020; Norris 2011).

In this chapter, we transition from views about political processes, representation, and governance, to evaluations of democracy as a political system. We begin by reviewing popular frameworks for understanding how people evaluate democracy and then connect our typology to democratic support. On balance, we find that while an overwhelming majority of Americans are dissatisfied with democracy’s performance, they nonetheless believe in the merits of democracy as an institution.

## Support for Democracy

We begin with a simple premise: public support is necessary for democracy to persist. From Plato to Lipset (1959), scholars agree that citizens supply democracy with the legitimacy needed for elected bodies to impose order upon society. Peaceful turnover in power, for example, is only possible if citizens agree to both (1) abide by the rules of selecting leaders, and (2) commit to following the demands of government even when they disagree with the outcomes of elections. The failure of a political system to maintain popular support for the system, independent of support for a particular set of leaders or policies, fails by its own conceptual definition.

Discussions regarding citizens’ commitments to democracy usually begin with David Easton’s distinction between assessments of a regime’s outputs and the value attached more generally to the democratic system (Easton 1965). This distinction is nontrivial—one might experience poor democratic outputs and be dissatisfied with democracy *at the moment*,

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3. While partisanship is important to understanding support for various democratic norms (Carey et al. 2019; Graham and Svolik 2020), it still does not address whether preformed expectations of democracy shape support for it.

while simultaneously believing that democracy is good and worth pursuing *despite those bad outcomes*. A presidential administration, for example, might publicly admit to pressuring a foreign government to investigate a private citizen, or breach normal patterns of bureaucratic behavior by assigning family members to important posts, or publicly disparage their country's allies. Asking Americans if they are satisfied with democracy during any one of these moments might generate negative responses that we could attribute to government performance rather than an indictment of the system itself. These attitudes, then, embody *specific* support, which incorporates how well democracy is or is not functioning.

Independent of these negative views, however, citizens may still feel warmly about democracy more generally. Those evaluations might withstand momentary lapses in performance that include unethical behaviors or the abuse of democratic principles. Democracy may not function in normatively or materially optimal ways, but one could still believe that, all else equal, democracy is preferable to nondemocratic alternatives. This *diffuse* support involves a sustained commitment to democracy, even in the face of serious flaws or short-run disappointments.

This distinction between specific and diffuse support has been validated across both cultures and time, including an impressive array of cross-national survey data, ranging from the World Values Survey (Klingemann 1999; Dalton 2004; Magalhães 2014), the Comparative National Elections Project (Gunther et al. 2007), and the Afro (Bratton et al. 2004) and Latino barometers (Lagos 2003). Still, while these two assessments are theoretically and empirically separable, they are, on some level, related mechanistically (Katz and Levin 2018). Where democratic governments repeatedly fail to meet their formal obligations or violate citizens' normative expectations, these democratic failures should erode legitimacy. Poorly performing institutions will undermine diffuse support when citizens realize that this dysfunction has become normalized and institutionalized (Easton 1965, 1975).<sup>4</sup> When antidemocratic outcomes become a feature and not a bug, as it were, diffuse support suffers.

So what sustains or undercuts this wellspring of goodwill? The literature on public support for democracy outlines different types of "outputs" that contribute to democratic support. First, institutional design matters.

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4. As Magalhães (2014) notes, this idea is new: Lipset (1959) and Dahl (1971) argue in some form or another that regime outputs (eventually) shape legitimacy.

Governments that produce “better democracy”—from protections of civil liberties, to low levels of public corruption, to the incorporation of diverse voices—enjoy higher levels of support (Norris 1999). Second, economic success is important. Governments that manage the economy well and meet popular demands for social goods exhibit higher levels of support at the polls (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000) and greater satisfaction in surveys (Naduea et al. 2020). In addition, some individual-level characteristics appear relevant when measuring political support. Ideology (Adler 2018; Rooduijn 2018), education (Dalton 2005), interpersonal trust (Mishler and Rose 2005), and ethnic prejudice shape the value that people assign to democracy (Miller and Davis 2020).

However, it is not entirely clear how the perceived *meanings* of democracy might relate to these attitudes. While it is true that both specific and diffuse support should be sensitive to the extent to which democratic institutions make good or fail to deliver on their promises to citizens (Norris 2011; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Jennings et al. 2017), there is an implicit assumption in past research that citizens possess a shared understanding of how democracies *ought* to function—that respondents evaluate democracy from a common set of expectations. Yet, when pollsters ask citizens to rate democracy, are citizens actually evaluating the same construct? If groups of citizens operate under different understandings of democracy, then the way in which they evaluate it may vary dramatically depending on whether or not their expectations are being fulfilled or violated. In the remainder of this chapter, we consider how different dimensions of support are measured, what they mean, how different views of democracy shape such attitudes, and the conclusions we can draw from such analyses.

### Specific Support for Democracy

One common method of capturing specific or temporal democratic support involves simply asking whether or not individuals are satisfied with democracy. This question was designed to quantify the level of public support expressed for democratic regimes during the period of global democratization. The conceptual “trouble” with satisfaction, however, involves the prospect that these attitudes could presumably offer information about one of three targets: (1) support for incumbent politicians and political fig-

ures, (2) approval of policy outcomes (or regime outputs), or (3) the store of goodwill that a democratic government has earned over time. Only the final piece seems most directly related to democracy as an institution, and yet even this description is bound up with the other two dimensions.

Disentangling how people respond to this survey question is tricky. On the one hand, Anderson and Guillory (1997, 70) argue that “the object of citizen support does not have to be, and probably cannot be, reliably separated in terms of the system and the system’s outputs” (see also Hibbing and Theis-Morse 1995; Craig 1993). Still, there is some consensus that, on the other hand, these attitudes “reflect a sort of emotionally biased running tally that citizens keep on the performance of a system” (Kuechler 1991, 280). In this sense, satisfaction with democracy seems to reflect the operating capacity of democracy to make good on its commitments (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Lane and Ersson 1999; Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995; Cutler, Nuesser, and Nyblade 2013).

The benchmarks that citizens use to arrive at their conclusions, however, are unclear. Although democracy may involve some combination of procedural and substantive expectations, the procedural elements of democracy are often taken for granted when democracy has historically been the only game in town. As a result, people may not weigh satisfaction against voting rights or political participation if “everyone” theoretically has the franchise. Instead, satisfaction may boil down to whether an individual’s *substantive* demands are being met by elected authorities. In that case, satisfaction may simply be an approximation for partisan approval. Anderson and Guillory (1997) show, for example, that individuals who are part of “winning” coalitions or parties in government exhibit greater satisfaction with democracy than losers—thus, when Republicans (Democrats) place a Republican (Democrat) in the White House, they are more satisfied with democracy.

Still, other research finds that when government delivers political goods to the public, citizens exhibit greater satisfaction with democracy. If democracy is conventionally associated with procedural equality, then the extent to which governments protect rights and liberties and produce conditions that are conducive to liberty can affect satisfaction with democracy. Heyne (2019) shows, for example, that a failure to meet citizen expectations for “liberal” democratic goods generates dissatisfaction due to the resulting democratic deficit. Meanwhile, research also indicates that the provision of substantive economic goods shapes satisfaction with democ-

racy. Citizens are more satisfied with democracy in contexts where government delivers policies that promote material well-being (Christmann 2018; Quaranta and Martini 2017; Nadeau, Daoust, and Arel-Bundock 2020). Where governments suppress inequality and protect the material well-being of citizens, satisfaction with democracy is usually high (Schäfer 2013; Sirovatka, Guz, and Saxonberg 2019).<sup>5</sup>

Curiously, surveys asking about satisfaction with democracy are rarer than one might assume in the United States, perhaps because scholars have historically taken for granted Americans' commitments to democracy. Perhaps the most recent and thorough look at such attitudes is associated with a cross-national survey project known as the Latin America Public Opinion Project or LAPOP. Since 2006, they have asked citizens from Latin and South America and the United States whether they were satisfied with democracy. This data is presented in panel A in figure 7.1. Given the ubiquity of the winner-loser framework, we have broken responses into whether or not American survey respondents belonged to the party of the sitting president during data collection. Irrespective of the presidential administration, it is true that "winners" are more satisfied with democracy than "losers." Curiously, there is a negative trend in Democrats' democratic satisfaction over the Obama presidency when they were the party in power. Their ratings were somewhat more positive in 2008 than 2014.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, in 2020, Republicans' satisfaction rebounded to 2006, Bush-era levels. Meanwhile in 2020, Democrats, now the out-party, exhibited the lowest satisfaction during this timeframe.

Panel B uses a ten-point scale to measure satisfaction, broken out again by in-party and out-party status dating back to the 2016 election. The 2016 data was collected as part of our CCES module prior to the election of Donald Trump. Compared to Republicans in 2016, Democrats (in-party) were more satisfied with democracy, although these attitudes are still not objectively very positive. In 2017 and 2018, after Mr. Trump's victory, they were slightly less satisfied with democracy after their loss of power, although the decrease in aggregate satisfaction is small

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5. To bring this full circle to the speech by former president Obama from chapter 1, indeed it appears that democracy's health is functionally related to the material well-being of its citizenry.

6. There are a variety of potential reasons for this ranging from the awkward rollout of the Affordable Care Act to slow economic recovery from the 2008 housing market crash, but these are largely speculations.

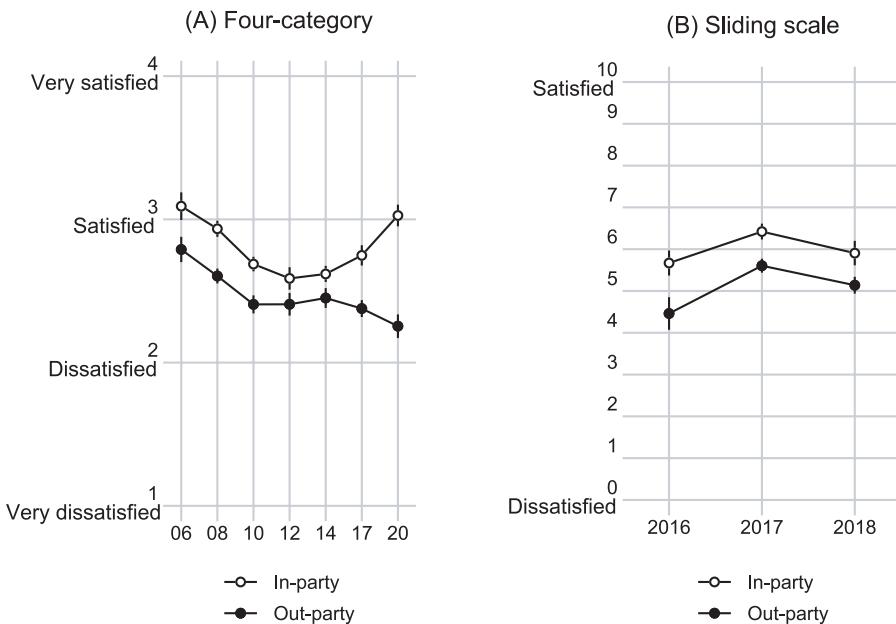


Fig. 7.1. Satisfaction with democracy (specific support) among Americans

(Note: Panels A and B involve two different ways of measuring satisfaction with democracy. In panel A, a four-category response option was provided to respondents. The 2006 to 2017 data was collected by LAPOP. The March 2020 estimates were collected by authors via YouGov. Panel B involves an eleven-point response scale. The 2016 data was collected as part of authors' 2016 CCES module; the 2017 and 2018 data were collected and generously shared by Bright Line Watch. The labels "in-party" and "out-party" simply convey whether a respondent was a "winner" or "loser," respectively—that is, whether they belonged to the same party as the sitting president at the time of data collection.)

in magnitude. In contrast, Republicans shifted almost two points in the aggregate toward greater satisfaction with democracy after the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Their in-party satisfaction cooled slightly in the 2018 Bright Line Watch survey, but the winner-loser gap persists.

So, what can we conclude from this data? Not much! Although we are sympathetic to the idea that democratic satisfaction tells us . . . *something* . . . it is ultimately a blunt way of evaluating democratic support. Its inclusion in surveys is as much justified by social scientists' commitments to continuing time series measurement as any theoretical or empirical

motivation.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most interesting observation we can draw is that even electoral winners in American politics are not particularly enthusiastic about democracy.

As an alternative to measuring temporal support, Bright Line Watch offers greater clarity to citizens' perceptions of the specific outputs of democracy. Rather than assuming that satisfaction reflects perceptions that democracy is performing poorly, they actually asked respondents whether or not democracy was meeting its obligations across 28 different measures of democratic performance. Much like basic partisan differences in democratic satisfaction, figure 7.2 illustrates that Republicans and Democrats perceive the current outputs of democracy very differently. Here, point estimates convey the share of respondents who agreed that the United States is mostly or fully meeting its obligations with respect to each of the standards listed on the y-axis; the remaining share of responses (not depicted) convey that the United States does "not meet" or only "partly meets" a given standard. These estimates, then, can be conceptualized as a grade on whether or not democracy is meeting its basic obligations.

Respondents from the two parties are split on many democratic outputs, although these differences are more modest on some features than others. Huge partisan gaps exist regarding the extent to which democracy sustains equal voting and legal rights, along with whether or not different branches of government effectively check each other. It is not surprising that a cornerstone of democratic governance—the idea that a country's leaders are not beholden to another foreign nation—produces sharply divided responses on the matter of "no foreign influence." Allegations of Russian tampering in U.S. elections and the question of whether or not President Trump knew about an alleged Russian bounty system on U.S. soldiers were prominently in the news during the survey's fielding period.

These partisan differences aside, on at least half the outputs collected here, majorities from *both* parties perceive that democracy is unwell. Democrats and Republicans believe that fraud is a problem in elections, do not see campaign funding as transparent, think that districts are biased due to gerrymandering, perceive that politicians privately gain from their public service, and are suspicious about whether citizens share even basic facts. If this survey data is a thorough way of thinking about specific support, then

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7. Once researchers begin collecting data using a particular instrument, it can be difficult to convince them to stop—over time, data is often valued more than noisy measurement properties.

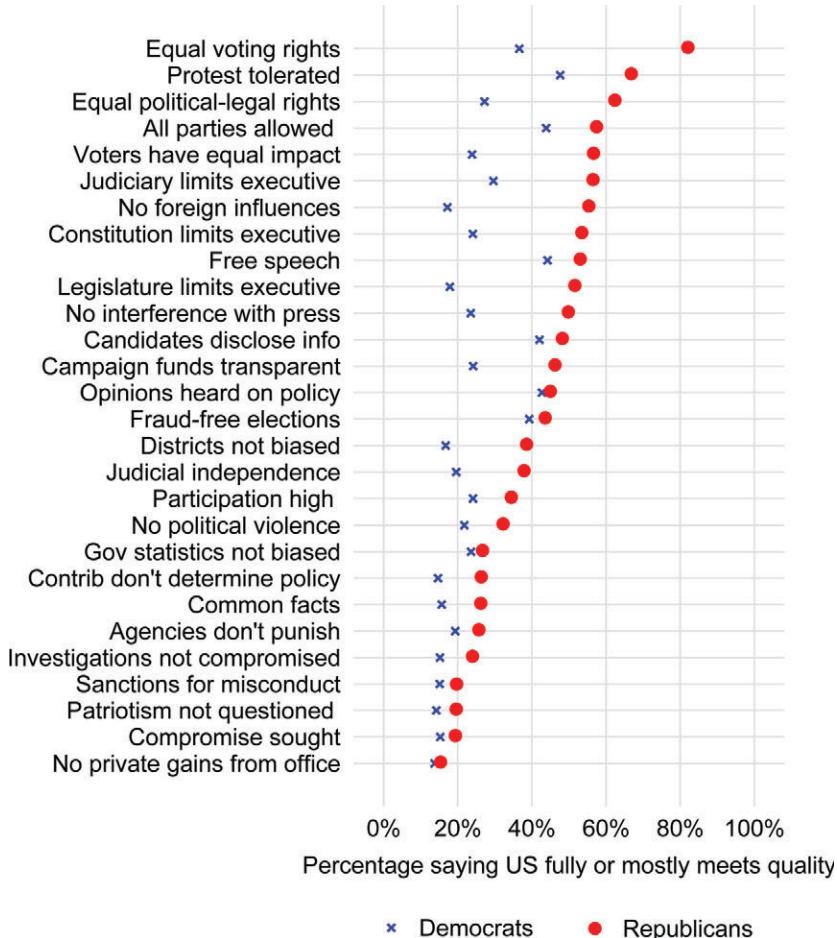


Fig. 7.2. Performance of U.S. democracy by partisan identity  
 (Note: March 2020 wave data was supplied generously by Bright Line Watch. Point estimates depict share of respondents that convey the United States “mostly” or “fully” meets standard on y-axis, conditional on self-reported partisanship.)

it is difficult to say that even electoral winners are particularly “satisfied” with the democratic status quo.

### Diffuse Support for Democracy

While measuring specific support tells us something about how individuals evaluate incumbent democratic governments, it tells us little about how

committed respondents are to democracy itself. Unlike satisfaction with democracy, research on diffuse support exhibits a less coherent theoretical framework regarding what predicts such commitments. This is perhaps because previous research has largely misread Easton's rendering of diffuse support. He defined diffuse support as an "attachment to a political object for its own sake" that "taps deep political sentiments and is not *easily* depleted through disappointment with outputs" (1965, 274 [emphasis added]). Usually, this is taken to mean that a government's outputs have no meaningful relationship to diffuse support. However, love for democracy is not impervious to poor regime outputs. Such a position would be nearly impossible to defend if citizens are, at least minimally, self-critical of the evidence before their own eyes.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, to argue that ineffective and unresponsive governments could not degrade diffuse support seems tenuous—presumably deep commitments can be shaken after serial violations of one's goodwill. Indeed, it violates Easton's own logic in that diffuse support is "a reservoir of goodwill that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed" (273). At some point, that reservoir may dry up. Indeed, low levels of diffuse support "may be a product of spill-over effects from evaluations of a series of outputs and of performance over a long period of time" (1975, 446).

There is some evidence that diffuse support shifts according to democratic outputs. Linde and Peters (2020, 301) write that "governments that are being perceived as responsive to short-term demands from citizens generate something like a 'responsiveness capital' that eventually allows governments to make important but non-responsive decisions." Even when governments behave in ways that counteract immediate public demands, democratic support may remain robust provided that there is sufficient evidence that government has previously made good-faith attempts to satisfy those public demands. To some extent, this corresponds with Magalhães' (2014) research on the relationship between government effectiveness and diffuse evaluations of democracy. When governments meet demands to provide services regularly, civil service is independent from political pressure, and government is credible in its commitments to produce responsive policies, diffuse support in a country is generally high.

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8. Motivated reasoning may abound, but citizens' beliefs are not totally vacuous or unable to be corrected by factual information (Wood and Porter 2019).

Social scientists poll thick or diffuse support for democracy in several ways. Like other forms of “durable” support (e.g., trust in government), respondents are usually asked about their affect for democracy using abstract and symbolic language, rather than for their perceptions about instrumental levers or principles involved in democracy. Past research describes three “types” of such measures: (1) *democracy-autocracy preferences*, which involve whether or not respondents prefer democratic to authoritarian rule; (2) *democratic performance evaluations*, which reflect how smoothly democracy is operating; and (3) *explicit democratic support*, which taps into whether individuals desire democracy over other alternatives (Ariely and Davidov 2011; Magalhães 2014). Conceptually, we might imagine both the first and third measures to be related—individuals who prefer democracy in favor of authoritarian alternatives ought to be more likely to desire democracy in a vacuum. Meanwhile, although the second measure conveys useful information about the functionality of democracy, it is not, strictly speaking, a measure of whether or not someone demands democracy, instead tracking too closely with how we might conceptualize specific support.

We possess several survey questions that might be useful in thinking about the distribution of diffuse support in the American mass public according to the above framework. We first asked respondents whether they thought that democracy was preferable to alternative forms of government. Participants conveyed whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement, and responses ranged from 0 (disagree strongly) to 4 (agree strongly).

- 1 Democracy in the United States may have problems, but it's better than any other form of government.

Next, we asked respondents to rate whether the following statements were good or bad ways of running a country:

- 2 Having a strong leader that does not have to bother with Congress or elections.
- 3 Having the army rule.
- 4 Having a democratic political system.
- 5 Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country.

Items 1 and 4 are conceptually analogous to explicit support for democracy. In contrast, items two and three involve the democracy-autocracy tradeoffs that are popular in cross-national research on democratic support. Both a strong leader who is not bound by inter-branch checks on power and army rule are antithetical to peaceable self-rule in a system of checks and balances. The first case may seem only like a mild breach of democratic etiquette, but “strong man” language is often used to describe autocrats like Turkey’s Recep Erdogan or Russia’s Vladimir Putin. President Trump’s statements about wanting to bypass Congress to get things done also fit this depiction and constitute a breach of established democratic norms. While we might give a pass to this language as a sort of “tough-guy” shlock that populist politicians use, it is still troubling.

Preferences for army rule are also worrying. As Miller and Davis (2020) write, a preference for army rule is a significant concern for democratic publics because it indicates a willingness to seize power via extrajudicial means. To the extent that the American military receives high marks from citizens in its effectiveness and capacity to keep the public safe, we might forgive respondents for thinking that military rule is an attractive option in an era of instability and fear. Yet military rule is conventionally associated with coups and mass unrest. To desire the military to rule is to ask for a complete breakdown in the normal operations of democracy. It constitutes a transition of power where democratic leaders are exchanged for autocratic ones unbound by public accountability. For both of these questions, citizens who voice support for these measures convey weak support for democracy. Finally, the question about expert rule reflects one of the stealth democracy items analyzed in the preceding chapter. Here, however, the survey instrument more plainly makes the case for replacing government with unelected bureaucrats.

Figure 7.3 illustrates the distribution of responses to these items. Beginning in panel A, respondents are split on whether or not elected officials or experts would supply a better way of ruling the mass public. This is not necessarily surprising. Offloading a nation’s problems on experts is a concept that has received support dating back to the mid-1990s (Hibbing and Thiess-Morse 1995). In an era of deep polarization, gridlock, and wild conspiracies about election-rigging, we can imagine that this option looks attractive to some citizens. Large majorities of respondents, however, reject both army (panel B) and strong-man rule (panel C). Moreover, almost 90 percent of respondents conveyed that democracy is good in

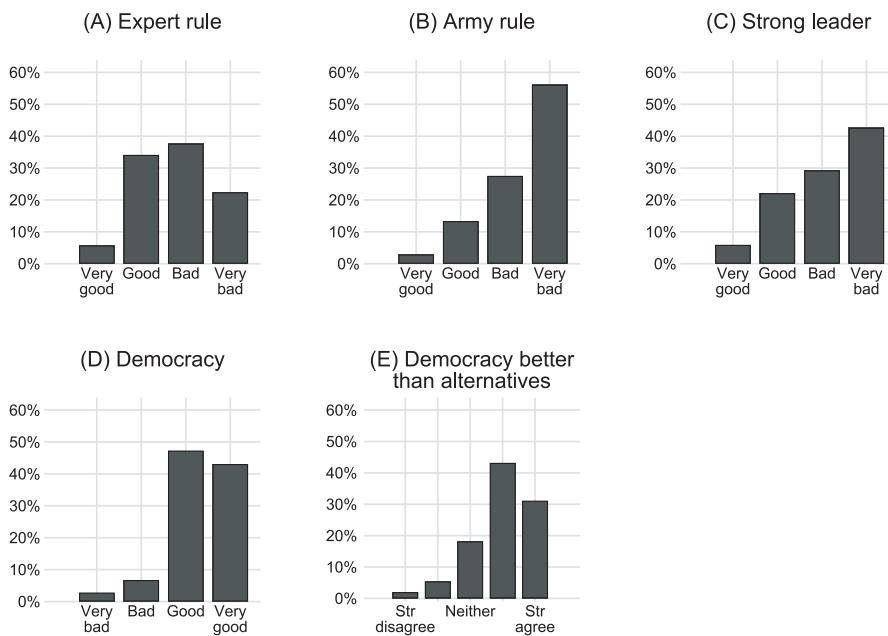


Fig. 7.3. Diffuse support for democracy

(Note: Data drawn from 2016 CCES module. Bars convey unweighted share of respondents conveying given response category. All response sets have been coded so that “pro-democracy” attitudes take higher values.)

panel D, while roughly three-quarters of respondents said that democracy was preferable to alternatives. Like other research that finds high levels of diffuse support (Drutman, Goldberg, and Diamond 2020), Americans overwhelmingly voice support for democracy. While there are limits to this finding—experimental research suggests that some citizens will gladly take power when they can get it undemocratically (Graham and Svolik 2020)—citizens nevertheless convey that democracy is important to them.

### Democratic Support and the Democracy Typology

Although specific and diffuse support clearly tap into different evaluative sources, they do share a common element: at some point, when expecta-

tions do not meet reality, support decreases. Given that our democracy typology involves expectations about the political goods produced by democracy, we suspect that these preferences ought to affect democratic support. In the case of specific support, we might imagine that, independent of partisanship, persons with a procedural view of democracy should be less satisfied with democracy when Barack Obama was president—as was the case when our 2016 survey was fielded. However, we might similarly expect that persons who prefer social democracy were also not satisfied. Obama was not—by any conventional definition—a social democrat. His public comments about democracy needing to do better by her citizens' material well-being notwithstanding, his tenure in office was much more akin to a moderate definition of democracy rather than a social one.

What about diffuse measures of democratic support? Although these attitudes are theoretically less sensitive to the whims of the political present, we would expect that people who assign high levels of importance to the liberal-procedural dimension of democracy—access to voting or equal treatment—should exhibit higher levels of diffuse support than individuals who do not. If both procedural and social views of democracy are associated with high values on those dimensions, then we would expect them to exhibit more positive views of democracy compared to moderate or indifferent class members, albeit for different reasons. For proceduralists, the historical emphasis placed on small or limited government and the production of limited social goods ought to satisfy their demands of democracy. For those with a maximal view of democracy, although the United States has performed poorly at living up to its promises of civil and material equality, it is the only game in town. Given the promises of democracy (however unrealized), individuals belonging to the social class of democracy may believe that democracy is comparatively better than alternatives. In that respect, such group members may value democracy for its *potential* to realize social protections rather than any concrete evidence that American democracy will provide such goods.

Figure 7.4 illustrates the mean value of various measures of democratic support across our typology. Beginning with panel A, we find that procedural views of democracy generate the lowest levels of satisfaction with democracy. This finding is not surprising given the ideological homogeneity of this group (i.e., it is overwhelmingly Republican and conservative) and for the fact that the survey was collected prior to the 2016 election. In panels B-F, however, we observe a different and remarkably consistent pat-

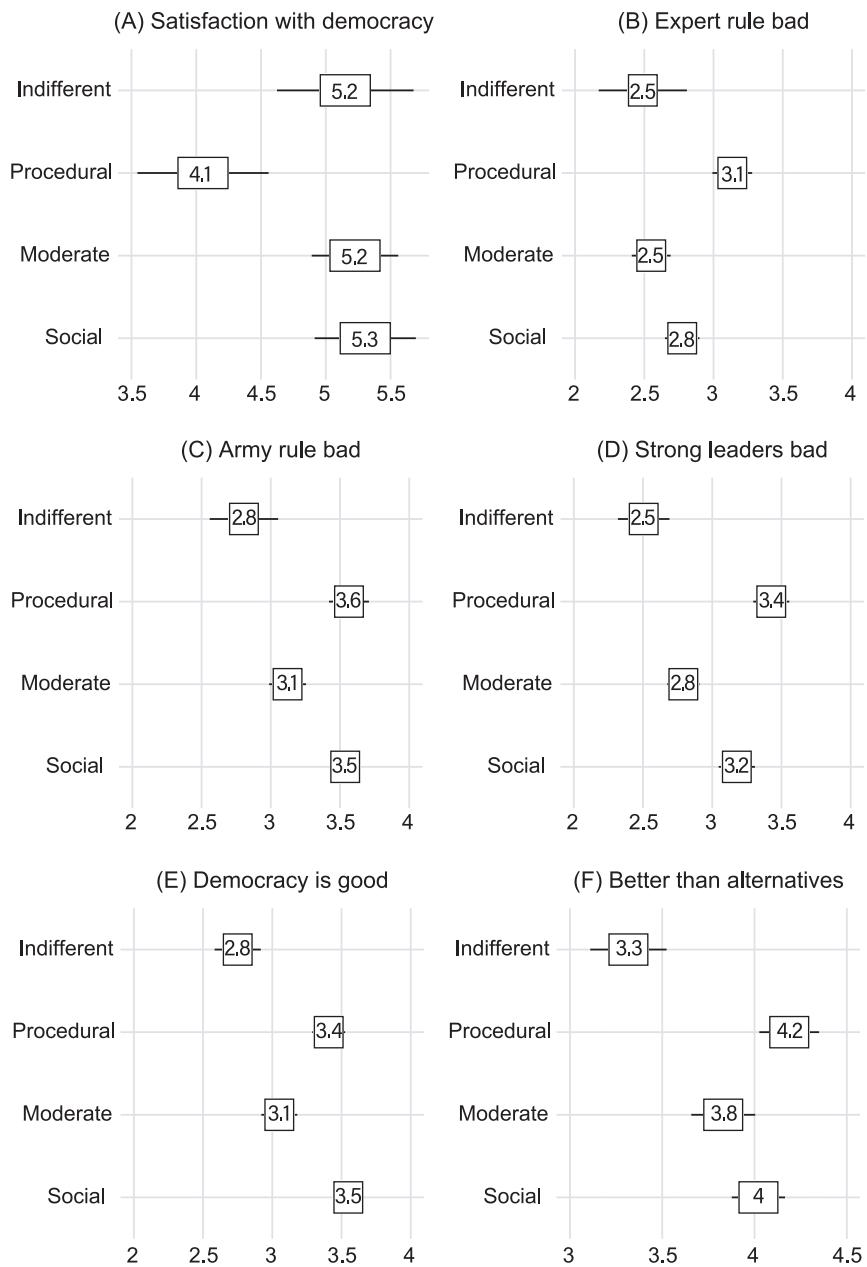


Fig. 7.4. Mean values of democratic support across typology

(Note: Data drawn from authors' 2016 CCES module. Point estimates and confidence intervals represent means for respective survey instruments across categories of democracy typology.)

tern of findings. Recalling the set of responses that participants can select, values for items in panels B-E can range from 1 to 4, while those in panel F can range from 1 to 5. Again, higher values always again communicate more support. We find that substantive and procedural views of democracy exhibit the most positive views of democracy, followed by moderates, and, finally, those in the indifferent category. The differences are modest, but apparent, nonetheless.

To test the durability of these relationships, we turn to a series of more thorough analyses. In figure 7.5, we model various measures of democratic support as a function of class membership and a series of standard political and demographic controls. Here, point estimates are the coefficient associated with a given variable, bracketed by a 95 percent confidence interval. A positive coefficient here, for example, signals more agreement with the statement in the given panel; in contrast, a negative coefficient is associated with less agreement with that statement. In the case that the confidence interval crosses the dashed vertical line, the coefficient estimate is not distinguishable from 0. Finally, there is one additional caveat. Whereas the coefficient for PID—partisanship—can be interpreted as the effect of moving from Democratic membership to Republican identification, the coefficients for our democracy typology are interpreted differently. Because this is a categorical variable, the excluded category here is “moderate.” This means that we are comparing the effect of being assigned to a given class (indifferent, procedural, or social views of democracy) against being assigned to the moderate class.

If this description sounds more confusing than it is, then an example will suffice. The negative coefficient for procedural democracy depicted in panel A can be interpreted as the difference in satisfaction that proceduralists feel toward democracy compared to persons in the moderate category. Why use this category as the omitted one? Recall that a core difference between moderates and members of the procedural and substantive classes of democracy involves lower rating to procedural goods like speech and equal rights. As such, this decision allows us to explore whether and how these differences may relate to support for democracy. Further, given that the indifferent group score lowest on those features, the choice of moderate as the baseline category of comparison is useful.

Beginning with panel A, persons with a procedural view of democracy are about a third of a standard deviation more dissatisfied with democracy

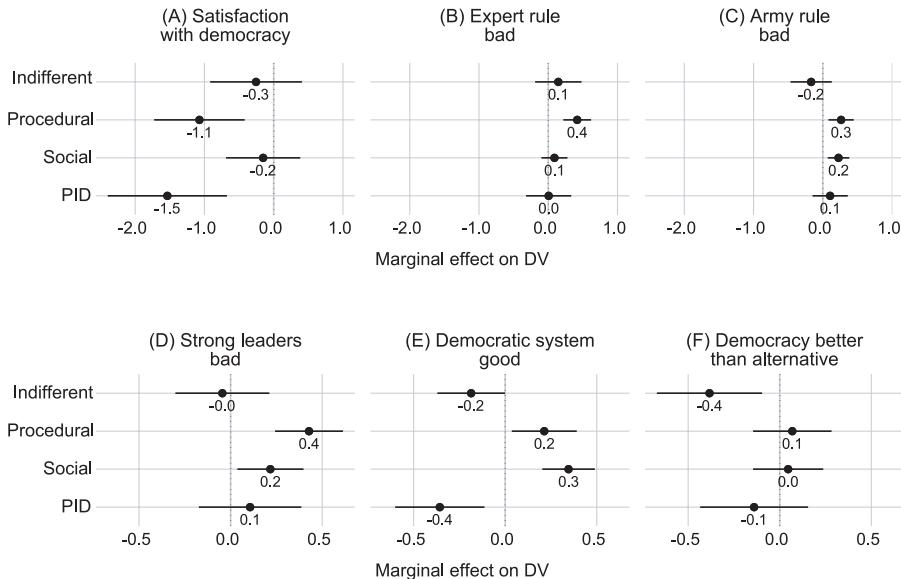


Fig. 7.5. Marginal effect of group inclusion on democratic support

(Note: Predictions derived from models including income, knowledge, education, race, gender, age, partisanship, and ideology. See figure A7.1 in the appendix for the full modeling output. Here, the marginal effect of moving from a strong Democrat to strong Republican is also included in each panel as a way to benchmark the magnitude of membership in the different groups of the typology. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals bracket each point estimate; where these cross the dotted vertical line at 0, a coefficient is not statistically significant.)

than those in the moderate class. This effect is modest but persists even after accounting for a respondent's partisan identity and a series of other demographic controls (although we note that moving from Democratic to Republican partisanship also has a modest effect on satisfaction as well). In other words, it is not just political affiliations that matter for these judgments but the views that respondents have about democracy's meanings as well. In contrast, members of the indifferent and substantive democracy groups do not differ in their satisfaction among each other (recalling figure 7.4), nor from the moderate class of democracy (per the overlapping confidence intervals).

Next, we find some evidence that people with procedural views of democracy are more likely than moderates to say that expert rule is bad. This question is a cornerstone of "stealth democracy," which we discussed

at length in the previous chapter. Although some Americans dislike government and would be comfortable delegating governance to experts, the procedural class of democracy is deeply suspicious of this approach. Next, in panels C-D, we observe that inclusion in both the social and procedural class of democracy is associated with anywhere between one-half and two-thirds standard of a deviation change in more “positive” views of democracy (relative to inclusion in the moderate class). Finally, we observe that, in panel F, there are no differences among procedural, moderate, or substantive views of democracy with respect to preferring democracy to alternatives, in part because most respondents uniformly report positive views of democracy on that question. In contrast, indifferent persons are slightly less likely to value democracy relative to their moderate counterparts.

Taking stock of these results, we find modest, though persistent relationships between the democracy typology and measures of specific and diffuse support. Controlling for political identities and a series of other demographic features, knowing something about the qualities that individuals associate with democracy gives us valuable information for understanding their affect toward it—an impressive finding when you consider ceiling effects for these variables. Because democracy is mostly beloved by respondents, these ratings have little variance or room to move. The fact that we uncover modest but consistent relationships between the meanings of and support for democracy is notable given that democratic support is so deeply ingrained and socialized in society.

Yet, these findings also reveal a peculiar irony given recent political events. In many Republican-held states, the quality of democracy—measured through a variety of “objective” indicators—is poorer than states with Democratically-controlled legislatures (Grumbach 2021). And, yet, despite partisan sorting among our typology, both procedural and social views of democracy are associated with love for it. Again, we would note that “everyone” loves democracy—that is, until you put a price on what democracy requires. Thus, to the extent that diffuse measures of democracy supply one way of thinking about democratic support, they ultimately are so abstract that they fail to identify what democracy requires, much less entails. Making that plain would likely produce differences in how our proceduralist and social democratic respondents assign diffuse value to it. As with much of social science, the devil is in the details, and understanding support for democracy during times of political unrest calls for greater attention to be paid to what “democracy” citizens imagine.

## Summary

In the United States, political scientists have often taken democracy for granted. Surely citizens love it; they fly their flags on the Fourth of July, talk openly about the value of freedom, and clamor for elections (with the caveat that only one-in-two people can usually be bothered to vote). Digging beneath this veneer, however, presents a more nuanced portrait of Americans' attitudes toward democracy's performance.

First, satisfaction with democracy is, on balance, poor. And it is much, much lower for political losers, who perceive that democracy is not meeting its obligations. From the Occupy Wall Street protests after the 2008 financial crisis, to demonstrations over the long-running wars in the Middle East, and to mass protests over police killings of African Americans, the public has often made clear that democracy's outputs do not match its promises. As Easton and others have predicted, those real-world events appear to spill into citizens' evaluations of democracy.

Second, there is a tendency for experts and scholars to view the Trump administration's tenure as both abnormal and worrisome with respect to his threat to the rule of law. American history, however, is replete with radically anti-democratic, state-sanctioned misbehavior. The rejection of Reconstruction and the re-institutionalization of racial authoritarianism throughout the Old South, for example, was a deeply undemocratic period in recent American history. Against that backdrop, it is probably not surprising that Americans have a high tolerance for undemocratic behaviors. They have not, we can say, thrown the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Thick or diffuse support for democracy as an institution remains high, irrespective of how we analyze the data. There is little evidence—either in our data or in data collected by other researchers (e.g., Claassen 2020; Drutman, Goldman, and Diamond 2020)—that Americans dislike democracy as a political system.

This, of course, has not stopped some scholars and pundits from worrying about democratic commitments. Although Drutman, Goldman, and Diamond (2018) uncover high levels of support for democracy, their follow-up report in 2020 includes an anxious rejoinder: "within a significant portion of the American public, professed support for democracy appears somewhat superficial and may be easily swept aside by partisan allegiance, outrage over the election results, or frustration with a corrupt or rigged political process." There is considerable evidence that partisanship shapes how people grade democratic performance and, to some extent,

diffuse support for democracy. Yet, across both the typology and the summary evaluations presented in this chapter, support for democracy remains robust. If anything, our analysis here isolates a smaller slice of the public—those with moderate and indifferent views of democracy—who have more “negative” views toward democracy than individuals with either procedural or social views. The majority of Americans view many normatively important features of democracy as essential and convey deep commitments to democracy—even as they acknowledge that it is not functioning well. We admit that this can be hard to square with the evidence that one party wants to make democracy *more* not *less* difficult for ordinary Americans, but this finding ultimately highlights how low levels of institutional accountability interact with the political impulse to conceptualize democracy for the few rather than the many—a theme we return to in the conclusion.

## CHAPTER 8

# Democratic Norms and the Democracy Typology

When voters confront a candidate or a policy proposal that violates a convention, they have to weigh the procedural importance they attach to the convention against their substantive preferences.

—Jon Elster (2009)

While abstract diffuse support for democracy is high in the United States, there are persistent concerns that democracy is in peril because ordinary citizens do not recognize or are unwilling to punish norm-breaking—or misbehavior by public officials that flouts informal standards of appropriate conduct. This anxiety stems from the notion that partisans inhabit such different worlds that they cannot agree upon what constitutes unacceptable behavior on the part of political officials, much less what to do about it (Graham and Slovik 2020; Carey et al. 2020; Bright Line Watch 2018). The “danger” is that both citizens and elites might renege on their commitments to procedural justice when it suits them.<sup>1</sup> Worse, if there is no punishment for norm violations, then the long-term consequence may involve the normalization of anti-democratic behaviors.

While elected officials breaking the law ought to generate widespread dissatisfaction among democratic citizens, ignoring the norms of politics—those informal rules that constrain how political actors should

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1. Indeed, in previous chapters, we have cited literature that shows abstract commitments to democratic principles (tolerance) are no guarantee that these principles will be supported within a specific context (Sullivan et al. 1993). That concern is several decades old, though it was only sporadically connected to the overall health of democracy.

navigate complex political decisions and interactions—is potentially less costly. Because they are informal, norms only weakly bind the behavior of conniving political actors. Worse, where enforcement is weak, there may be reelection or power incentives for violating them.<sup>2</sup> This is the danger of norms structuring socially and politically significant protocols: they can lead to a weaponization of institutional power that undercuts core tenets of democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Smith and Azari 2012).

In many such cases, *partisanship* filters the extent to which people view norm-breaking as problematic (Graham and Slovik 2020; Carey et al. 2020; Clayton et al. 2021). Public opinion polling exhibits wide differences in the extent to which partisans view Donald Trump's comments about election rigging or former Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke's chartering of private flights on the government dime as abnormal or important (Bright Line Watch 2020). Yet, much of the recent research regarding citizens' beliefs about norms has glossed over basic questions regarding what the public actually thinks about democracy, and, by extension, how core democratic values intersect with perceptions of norm violations.

This gap generates several questions: Do citizens understand political norms and possess shared concerns about breaches of appropriate behavior? In turn, do democratic expectations shape whether individuals think that certain behaviors are (in)appropriate? Or do such evaluations more neatly fall into line with their partisan preferences, motivated by elite cues as to what behaviors are acceptable and what behaviors deserve condemnation?

This chapter explores Americans' views toward norm-breaking and finds that, while there is broad consensus regarding what behaviors people think are inappropriate, the perceived severity of these violations varies considerably across composite views of democracy. In particular, while procedural and substantive views of democracy exhibit high levels of support for civil liberties, there are stark differences in how members of these groups think about the severity of norm-breaking that invokes recent events. These patterns have interesting implications for why democratic support remains high, even as American democracy overpromises and underperforms.

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2. Maine Republican Senator Susan Collins, for example, said that she believed President Trump learned a lesson from his impeachment trial. Indeed, the lesson he apparently learned was that the norms would be weakly enforced.

## Norms and the Public

At their core, norms are neither intrinsically good nor bad. They simply provide a guide for navigating a complex world. For their part, political scientists have spent considerable energy investigating how gaps in formal constitutions supply opportunities for political norms to guide international relations and domestic policymaking (Helmke and Levitsky 2006; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Mitchell 2002). Azari and Smith (2012, 38) describe such legal norms as vital to governing processes, writing that the “formal rules by which democracies resolve disagreement do not operate in a vacuum. Instead, they coexist with a framework of unwritten or informal rules that structure collective expectations about how disputes will be resolved.” Although norms *can* constrain political behaviors, this arrangement is not necessarily ideal. When process-norms are violated, like a lame-duck legislature limiting an incoming governor’s powers (as happened in Wisconsin with the gerrymandered GOP legislature in late 2018) or a legislature stripping away the power to enforce election rules (as happened in Arizona after the 2020 presidential election), substantive conflict over policymaking devolves into questions about the legitimacy of basic democratic practices. In that case, norm violations may undercut the public’s political support for democracy as a fundamental norm of fair play is violated.

In contrast, social norms involve behavioral rules prescribing the boundaries of acceptable behavior within a specific community and context (Bicchieri 2005, 2016). These norms are contingent on at least two requirements: (1) the belief that others will follow a given rule, and (2) that violating a rule will bring sanctions from others. Such norms are pervasive throughout society, and they constrain antisocial acts like corruption (Fisman and Miguel 2007), the abuse of welfare goods (Lindbeck et al. 1999), and discrimination (Barr et al. 2018), and sustain prosocial behaviors like collective action (Ostrom 2000). These rules are enforced relationally within and across social groups, and they draw their power from group members’ willingness to shun or ostracize misbehavior.<sup>3</sup>

*Political* norms are curious in that they take on some of the charac-

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3. This final piece—the threat of punishment—is critical because rule-breaking without sanctions conveys that something is not normative but convention. That may seem like a trivial distinction, but norms are more powerful than conventions, which are more like habit.

teristics of both legal and social norms described above and incorporate the prospect of both internal and external sanctions. First, politicians can break norms like the filibuster, the accepted, but unofficial way of conducting policymaking in the Senate. They may also mistreat each other, like in the case of Representative Lauren Boebert (R-CO) baselessly calling a fellow representative, Ilhan Omar (D-MN), a member of the “Jihad Squad.” Both instances are “norm violations,” but one is distinctly “legal” and the other “social.”

Second, consider how such norm violations may be punished. On the one hand, special actors (other legislators, ethics committees, independent agencies, or bureaus) may have jurisdiction to sanction politicians who behave inappropriately. On the other hand, politicians’ behavior is also bound by regular citizens—people observe political events and vote as a reaction to them. In other words, sanctioning misbehavior is often done *socially*. That is, political officials do not act within a vacuum; they are concerned about how the public will respond to their behaviors (Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). Presumably, in cases where they violate expectations by doing something wrong, officials would expect the public to become upset and clamor for retribution at the ballot box, which is the practical medium through which the public can usually punish behavior they dislike (hence the popular refrain, “vote the bums out”).<sup>4</sup> Yet, as we will see, this happens perhaps less frequently than we would hope—at the end of the day, some citizens have a high capacity for excusing wrongdoing, even as they recognize behaviors are inappropriate.

Political elites also play a role in this sanctioning process. Former President Nixon stepped down after Watergate when he lost support among congressional Republicans. Presidents Trump and Clinton, in contrast, avoided being removed from office after House impeachment trials by maintaining support within their congressional parties. Within this context, it is perhaps not surprising that prosecutions for political corruption are more common when the prosecutor and the target of the investigation

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4. On certain occasions of particularly stark wrongdoing, the public can clamor for a politician to be formally reprimanded and removed from office for misconduct outside of this narrow accountability mechanism. Richard Nixon’s impeachment was preceded by a sea-change in public opinion about the scope and severity of his wrongdoing (Lang and Lang 1980). The public played similar roles in the cases of Harrison Williams in 1982, Bob Packwood in 1995, and John Ensign in 2011, who were all eventually removed from their senatorial posts after their misconduct was made public.

are from opposite political parties, presumably because prosecutors need less convincing to pursue cases against political opponents (Gordon 2009; Meier and Holbrook 1992). However, given a certain amount of temporal distance to elections, politicians often adopt a combination of apology, denial, counter-accusations, and simply “waiting out” public calls for sanctions, assuming public attention will soon be diverted by other breaking events in a nonstop, 24/7 news cycle. Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, for example, outlasted calls for his resignation after pictures emerged of him in blackface in his college yearbook, while Senators Richard Burr (R-NC) and Kelly Loeffler (R-GA) ignored and outlasted calls for their resignations when it was revealed they sold stock based on insider knowledge prior to the pandemic-induced market crash in 2020.

To some extent, then, politicians are often insulated structurally from the immediate sanction of voting. Provided there is enough time between a transgression and the next election, the salience of a violation may subside, and a norm can be broken with impunity. When there is no external, social force to compel elected officials to preserve a norm, the political willingness to reprimand or sanction a transgressor by their peers is low. In fact, norm-breaking may even be strategic in that case. The result is that even legal norms often function as a sort of quasi-social norm in that the threat of sanction is really determined by the public, or at least by elite calculations of public support. R. Douglas Arnold’s (1990) work is helpful here, which explains that, when calculating their voting decisions, congressional representatives respond not to public opinion as it currently exists but *what they imagine it will look like after a political campaign*. Thus, norm violators may price in public apathy when they commit transgressions of inappropriate behavior.

The first impeachment trial of Donald Trump illustrates these tensions.<sup>5</sup> Several issues were at play within the articles of impeachment, but the overriding legal norm that President Trump violated involved whether he jeopardized U.S. national interests for personal advantage. By linking the delivery of U.S. foreign aid to an investigation of his chief political rival, Mr. Trump and his associates delivered an inappropriate *quid pro quo* (Bump 2020); one that his defense team argued he had the right to pursue

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5. Trump was later impeached by the House of Representatives a second time for inciting an insurrection on January 6, 2021. He was acquitted in that case as well, in part because GOP legislators argued that he was no longer in office when the U.S. Senate held its trial.

(Cummings 2020).<sup>6</sup> Such behavior violated the legal standards of such aid, which was not intended to be given with “strings attached.” Ironically enough, it also violated the social norm of reciprocity: an individual giving aid to ensure someone’s safety ought not offer that aid conditional upon the recipient doing them a favor.

While it appears that this political norm was violated, the institutional response died in the U.S. Senate. Nearly to a person (save Mitt Romney, R-UT), Senate Republicans rejected that such behavior was inappropriate, much less that the then-president ought to be impeached or removed from office. They did not arrive at that position in a vacuum. Polling of the issue broke sharply along partisan lines.<sup>7</sup> There was insufficient support among rank-and-file Republicans to force Republican Senators to hold the president accountable. Without consensus about the nature of the norm violation, there was simply no immediate threat of sanction.

This scenario illustrates how in a democratic system of checks and balances, partisan polarization and institutional complexity inhibit penalizing wrongdoing by providing perverse incentives to hold people accountable. Further, it shows how a political norm loses its bite when the (legal) rule at the heart of the norm is disputed *and* when there is insufficient public will to enforce it. And it highlights the give-and-take of elite cues and public opinion. Perhaps had Republican support for President Trump waned in public opinion polls, more than a single Senate Republican might have abandoned him. On the other hand, had more Senate Republicans abandoned Trump and denounced his behavior, his public support would have likely declined, thus making his removal from office more likely. Neither of these happened during the first Trump impeachment trial.

At any rate, while there may be relatively clear norms that guide officials’ behavior, it is possible for enterprising actors to effectively short-circuit the mechanisms of public accountability in democracy when they are sufficiently insulated from reproach. When elites cannot reach consensus on fundamental, guiding norms, much less the appropriate sanctions that are associated with violating them, the public is asked to play the simultaneous roles of judge and jury. Naturally, this puts ordinary partisans into

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6. Even his personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, admitted as much in a series of tweets from Kyiv (Rupar 2020).

7. Among Americans, 84 percent of Democrats, 42 percent of Independents, and a scant 9 percent of Republicans supported impeachment on February 12, 2020, the day before the impeachment vote in the Senate (Bycoffe et al. 2020).

an uncomfortable position. To restate Elster (2009, 213), one's personal political interests are a tough hurdle to overcome: "when voters confront a candidate or a policy proposal that violates a convention, they have to weigh the procedural importance they attach to the convention against their substantive preferences." In other words, how individuals think about the procedural value of the law may be overwhelmed by their sense of whether their substantive preferences are endangered when sanctioning a norm-breaker. This has obvious application for our work in chapter 4 on democratic meanings, which shows that there are effectively two groups of persons who highly value the procedural elements of democracy, even as they diverge in their support for other leveling features. And it raises several important questions: When presented with information about norm violations, will people with different views of democracy respond similarly? Do these individuals think about norm violations in ways different from moderate or indifferent persons, who are less committed to procedural democratic goods? Perhaps more fundamentally, do Americans even recognize norm violations when they see them? It seems clear that partisanship exerts pressure on beliefs about norms and norm-violations (e.g., Graham and Svolik 2020; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022; Clayton et al. 2021). Do the meanings of democracy matter, as well?

### What the Public Thinks about Norm-Breaking

To explore the relationship between meanings of democracy and assessments of norm violations, we contracted YouGov to survey 1,000 likely, registered voters in March 2020. This survey took place after the Trump impeachment, but prior to the intensification of policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our primary quantity of interest here involves survey respondents' evaluations of a variety of norm violations, all drawn from "real" events.<sup>8</sup>

A significant concern in collecting this data was external validity—we want the information and choices given to respondents to closely mirror "real" norm violations. Yet it is difficult to find recent examples of norm-

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8. As a technical note, we replicated the latent class analysis we presented chapter 4 in this data. The results revealed the same underlying structure of four classes—substantive, procedural, moderate, and indifferent.

breaking that cross-cut the partisan divide. For all the incoherent saber rattling among the pundit class about leftists and cancel culture (e.g., Lukianoff and Haidt 2018), the severity of norm-breaking is not systematically distributed across the American political parties. From Bill Clinton's impeachment, to congressional Democrats upending filibuster conventions for judicial nominations, to the expanded use of executive orders and budget reconciliation to make policy during the Obama years, Democratic elites have violated norms. Yet, it is difficult to generate a series of behaviors that are comparable on the merits or in frequency to what the Trump Administration produced during the period 2016 to 2020. This is not intended as a partisan statement. When it comes to norm violations, Just Security (<https://www.justsecurity.org/tag/norms-watch/>) catalogued nearly one hundred instances of inappropriate, anti-democratic behaviors committed by these officials—far outpacing any previous presidential administration.

Such a situation naturally complicates using descriptions of real political actors in vignettes about rule-breaking. For example, there is a delicate tradeoff between supplying real examples—President Trump financially benefiting from holding official government business at his properties—and a hypothetical example of an elected official benefiting financially from similar behaviors. The real-world example, because of its recency and visibility, invokes partisan reactions and would perhaps not capture more general beliefs regarding the underlying norm violation. The hypothetical example, in contrast, may capture abstract commitments without fully capturing how individuals would respond within a specific, well-defined context that invokes the real stakes of the in-group/out-group dynamics involved in politics.

These are real tensions, and there are merits to both measurement approaches. Our central quantity of interest here, however, is whether respondents can simply identify *any* norm-violating behavior. To assess citizens' capacity to recognize misbehavior, we anonymized twelve instances of norm-breaking behaviors that drew from real events. Table 8.1 details these vignettes, which include depictions of financial corruption, a lack of oversight, nepotism, calls to harass officials, violations of the emoluments clause, rejecting non-partisan bureaucratic norms, the role of foreign aid in elections, conformity to a subpoena summons, conflicts of interest, and the peaceable transition of power. In each case, we include a target (e.g., mayor, governor, congressperson) and a behavior (such as lobbying on behalf of a foreign government or profiting from bureaucratic decisions)

TABLE 8.I. Norm-breaking Vignettes

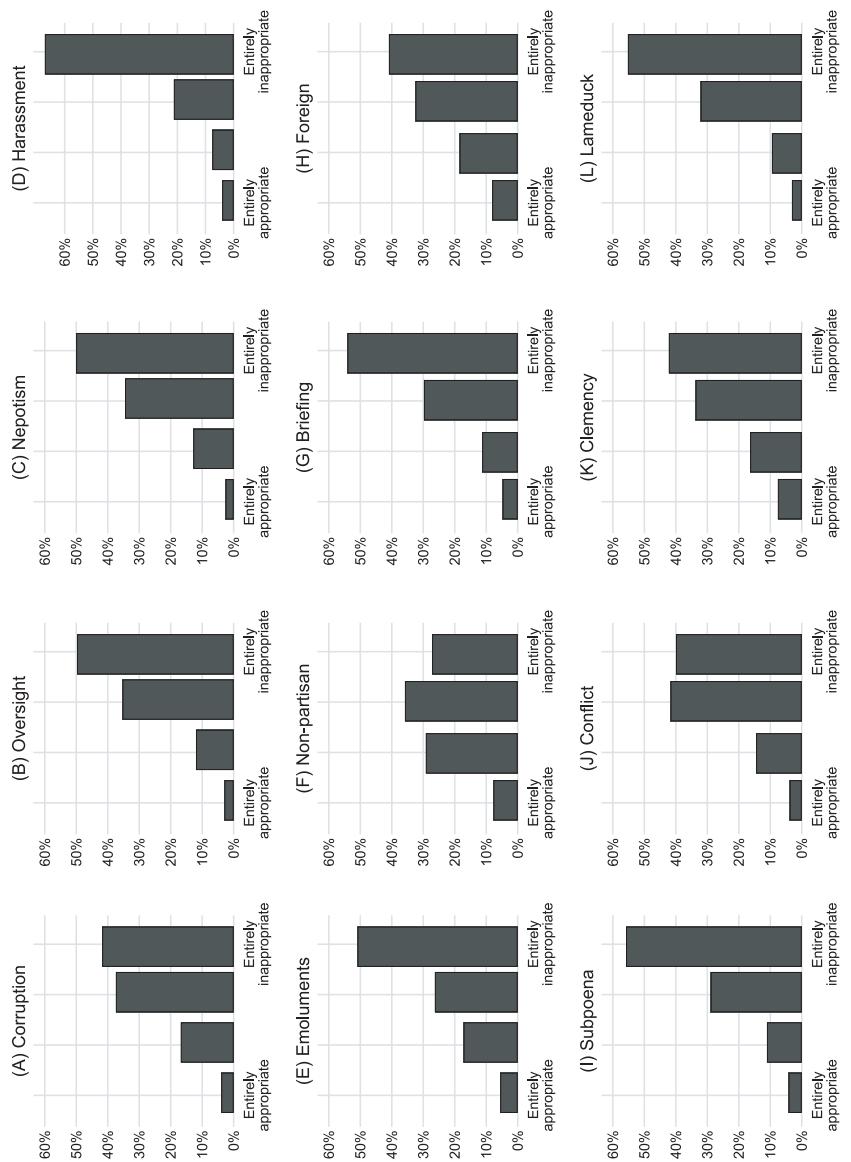
Norm	Statement
(A) Corruption	<i>The federal government recently had to pay for several flights that an administrator took on a private jet to visit his hometown.</i>
(B) Oversight	<i>A prominent legislator recently admitted that they had used a private email address in order to conduct business because it provided them more freedom to negotiate.</i>
(C) Nepotism	<i>Recently, a high-ranking government official's nephew collected speaking fees of \$100,000 from prominent Wall Street investors who will be working closely with the government.</i>
(D) Harassment	<i>A state senator encouraged their supporters to harass "off-duty" public officials, saying that it was an effective form of protest against policies they found objectionable.</i>
(E) Emoluments	<i>A prominent governor owns a large property that regularly hosts events ranging from weddings to concerts to business meetings of Fortune 500 companies. In late February, she convened a meeting of her state department of transportation at the venue, and the state was billed for the event.</i>
(F) Non-partisan	<i>Some elected officials solicited a study to be formed by a private think tank rather than use the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office to understand economic impact of a new law.</i>
(G) Briefing	<i>Officials within a gubernatorial administration recently communicated that public press briefings could neither be filmed nor recorded.</i>
(H) Foreign aid	<i>A candidate for Senate received some damaging information about their opponent that they suspected came from a foreign intelligence agency. The candidate did not report the situation to government officials and is planning on using the information—which is true—in a campaign advertisement.</i>
(I) Subpoena	<i>A high-ranking state legislator has refused to comply with a subpoena—a binding legal summons—and has stated that they will not cooperate with committee members in the legislature.</i>
(J) Conflict of interest	<i>A former American lobbyist associated with lobbying on behalf of a foreign government was appointed to a low-ranking government post in a previous presidential administration.</i>
(K) Clemency	<i>A governor recently pardoned a former mentor without either a public hearing or consultation with the state clemency board, which officials say is the first time something like this has happened in their history.</i>
(L) Transition of power	<i>Legislators who lost power after a recent election held a "lame-duck" session that produced many bills that would limit the powers of the new incoming majority</i>

that have been altered so as to not immediately trigger a memory of the real event. We do not doubt that some respondents saw through this anonymization, but we believe that it represents an important test of whether citizens are aware of normative political behaviors.

Respondents received each of the vignettes in table 8.1 and were then asked whether they thought that the described behavior was “entirely appropriate” (1), “appropriate” (2), “inappropriate” (3), or “entirely inappropriate” (4). To force respondents to make a choice, no neutral option was provided. Because each vignette constitutes a behavior that is actually a violation of a prevailing norm, the primary response that we are interested in is “entirely inappropriate.” Certainly, voicing that something is “inappropriate” is better than the alternative, but the distinction we are interested in for the purpose of our analyses involves the *total* repudiation of these behaviors.

Figure 8.1 illustrates the distribution of responses for the twelve items. Immediately, an important pattern emerges. In every single case, the modal response involves conveying that the described behavior is “inappropriate.” To be sure, there are nontrivial proportions of people who view certain behaviors with approval; yet, on average, approval of these behaviors never reaches above 30 percent, save for the “non-partisan” vignette in panel F. That vignette described a scenario in which an outside, partisan think-tank was used to score a bill. It is not surprising that a seemingly benign behavior like that might not attract much ire. In other cases, like harassment, corruption, and ignoring subpoena summons, norm-breaking is viewed with derision. At least superficially, we can conclude that most Americans know a norm-violation when they see it.

To what extent do these attitudes simply break along existing partisan cleavages? A discerning respondent, for example, might have recognized the behaviors of real elected officials in these vignettes. Do we observe that Republicans or Democrats are better or worse at recognizing norm violations? Figure 8.2 illustrates partisan differences in perceptions of norm violations. Specifically, the bars convey the percentage of respondents in a partisan group who rate a described behavior as “entirely inappropriate.” There are some notable differences across the range of vignettes. Democrats are somewhat more likely than Republicans to view taxpayers reimbursing government for private flights as a problem (panel A). Predictably, given recent history with Hillary Clinton’s emails, Republicans are much more critical of the use of private email accounts to perform government busi-



**Fig. 8.1. Distribution of responses to norm vignettes**  
 (Note: Data collected by YouGov in March 2020. Responses to each vignette range from “Entirely appropriate” (1), “Mostly appropriate” (2), “Mostly inappropriate” (3), “Entirely inappropriate” (4). For full item wording, see table 8.1.)

ness (panel B). In the case of nepotism, partisans are about equally likely to convey that nepotism in government is wrong. In panel D, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to view harassing elected officials in public as inappropriate. In panels E–L, however, a consistent pattern emerges: Democrats are more likely than Republicans to view norm violations as wholly inappropriate. From financially benefiting from government business (panel E), to accepting foreign aid for campaign purposes (panel H), to ignoring subpoena summons (panel I), to unilateral clemency decisions (panel K), and to the stripping of powers of incoming, duly elected officials (panel L), a greater proportion of Democrats view these behaviors as “entirely inappropriate.”

What are we to make of these findings? Recalling that the modal position on these behaviors is to rate them as “inappropriate” per figure 8.1, it is true that partisans reliably convey that these behaviors are not acceptable. But the distinction between “entirely inappropriate” and “inappropriate” is nontrivial. If something is completely unacceptable, then justifying such behavior seems difficult. If something is merely inappropriate, then one could imagine a partisan excusing away such behavior. “Yes, it’s inappropriate but . . .” is the sort of motivated logic that might explain why politicians are not necessarily punished for their misbehavior. To the extent that these rhetorical distinctions matter, we unfortunately cannot test the behavioral implications of them. Yet the data clearly illustrate more reluctance among Republican partisans to label norm-breaking in the strongest terms available. Meanwhile, although we have concentrated primarily upon partisans, Independents fall somewhere in the middle in many of these descriptive analyses.

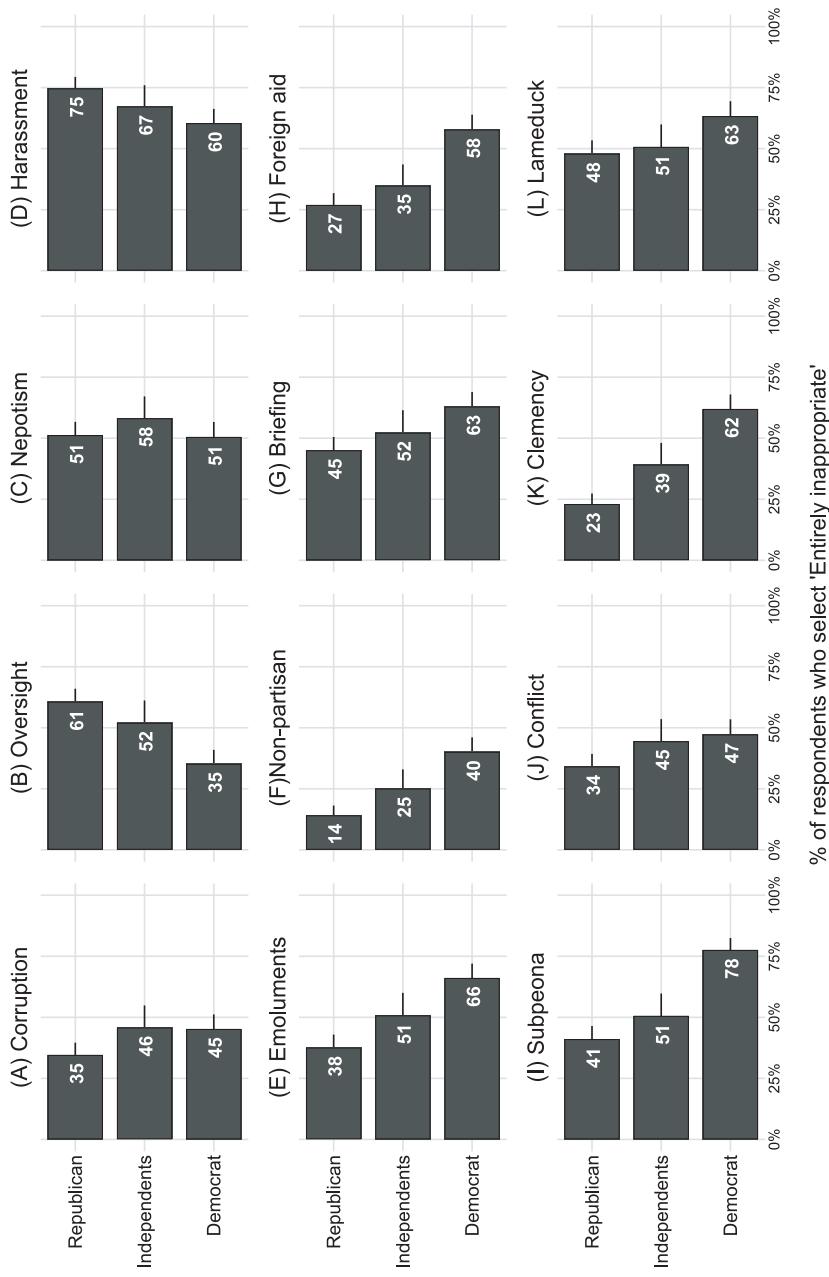
As an alternative way of parsing these analyses, figure 8.3 illustrates the relationship between evaluations of norm violations and the democracy typology. Across every panel, respondents sorted into the category of democratic indifference are highly unlikely to view norm-breaking behaviors as “entirely inappropriate.” Evaluations by those with procedural views of democracy conform closely to the distribution of Republicans in figure 8.2, but there are some intriguing differences. Proceduralists in the oversight (panel B), non-partisan (panel F), subpoena (panel I), conflict (panel J), and lameduck vignettes (panel L) are all more likely to convey that those violations are inappropriate than Republicans in figure 8.2. Those differences hint at the importance of factoring in democratic meanings when thinking about these attitudes—perhaps it is *not* just partisans

ship that is responsible for moderating views of norm-breaking but some combination of partisan identity and democratic views. Moderates display more willingness than proceduralists to label these norm violations “entirely inappropriate”; again, they slot somewhere between procedural and substantive views of democracy. Finally, with few exceptions, social views of democracy are associated with the highest levels of rejection of norm-breaking across the twelve vignettes.

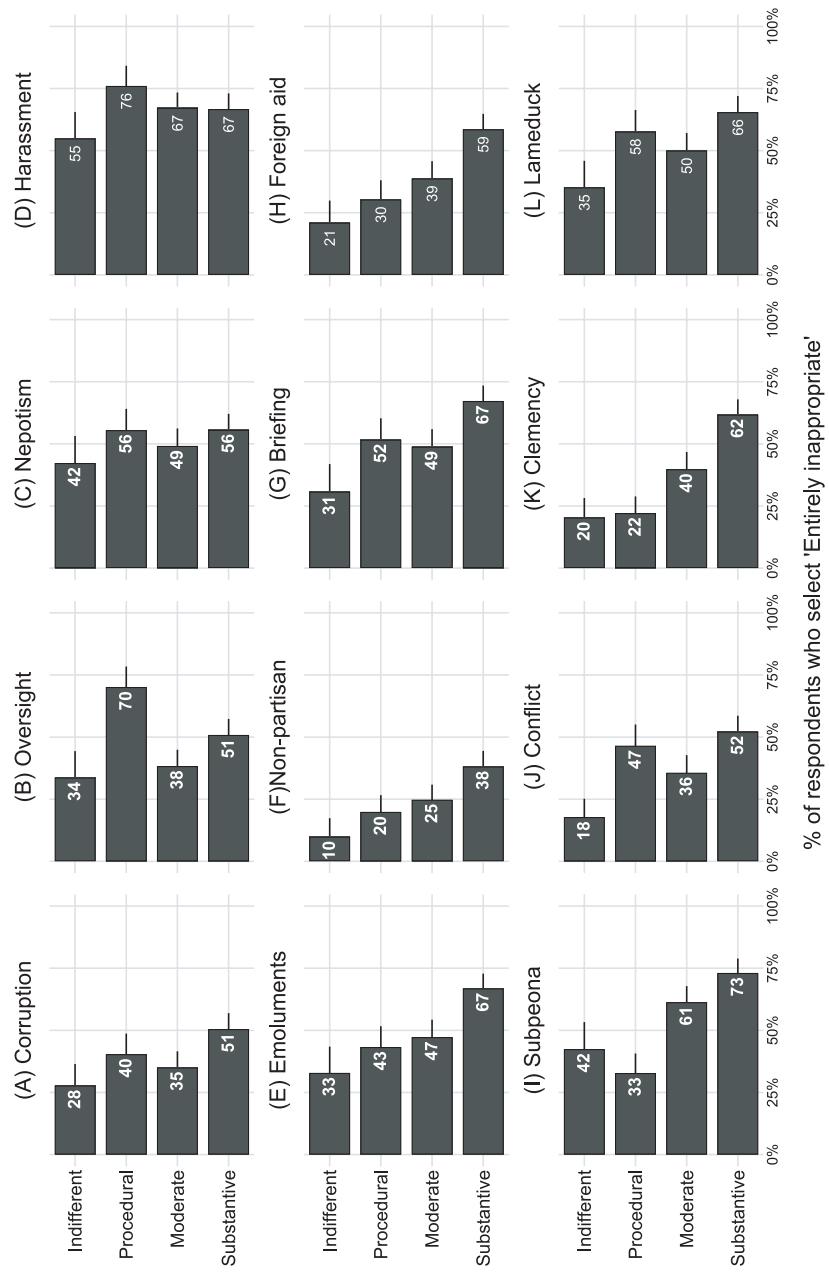
A careful reader will note that the distribution of responses here looks somewhat similar to the pattern of responses in figure 8.2. Absent the indifferent class, one could be forgiven for thinking that this simply looks like a reproduction of the left-right differences reflected in partisanship. Recall from chapters 4 and 5, however, that the democracy typology is neither a one-to-one reproduction of partisanship nor ideology. Indeed, among the classes of moderate and substantive views of democracy, there is significant underlying partisan and ideological diversity. Both the procedural and social meanings of democracy involve high levels of commitments to civil goods—things like equal rights, participation, and free speech. Yet, commitments to these *procedural* democratic goods do not necessarily translate into the repudiation of norm-breaking like we would expect *if such commitments were not sensitive to partisan influences*. Partisanship, as a growing body of research reveals, would often overwhelm such commitments (Graham and Svolik 2020; Carey et al. 2020; Clayton et al. 2021).

To unpack these effects, we again turn to a series of regression models, which allow us to compare the relative magnitude of the relationships between partisanship and the democracy typology and evaluations of norm violations. Here, we model the selection of the response “entirely inappropriate” as a function of a person’s views of democracy, partisanship, liberal-conservative ideology, and a series of demographic controls (full results appear in the appendix). The marginal effect of class membership and partisanship is presented in figure 8.4; as in chapter 7, the coefficients associated with categories of the democracy typology must be interpreted as the effect of class assignment relative to the moderate category. Point estimates convey log-odds coefficients associated with selecting the “entirely inappropriate” option and are bracketed by 95 percent confidence intervals. Again, intervals that cross the vertical dotted line are not different from zero.

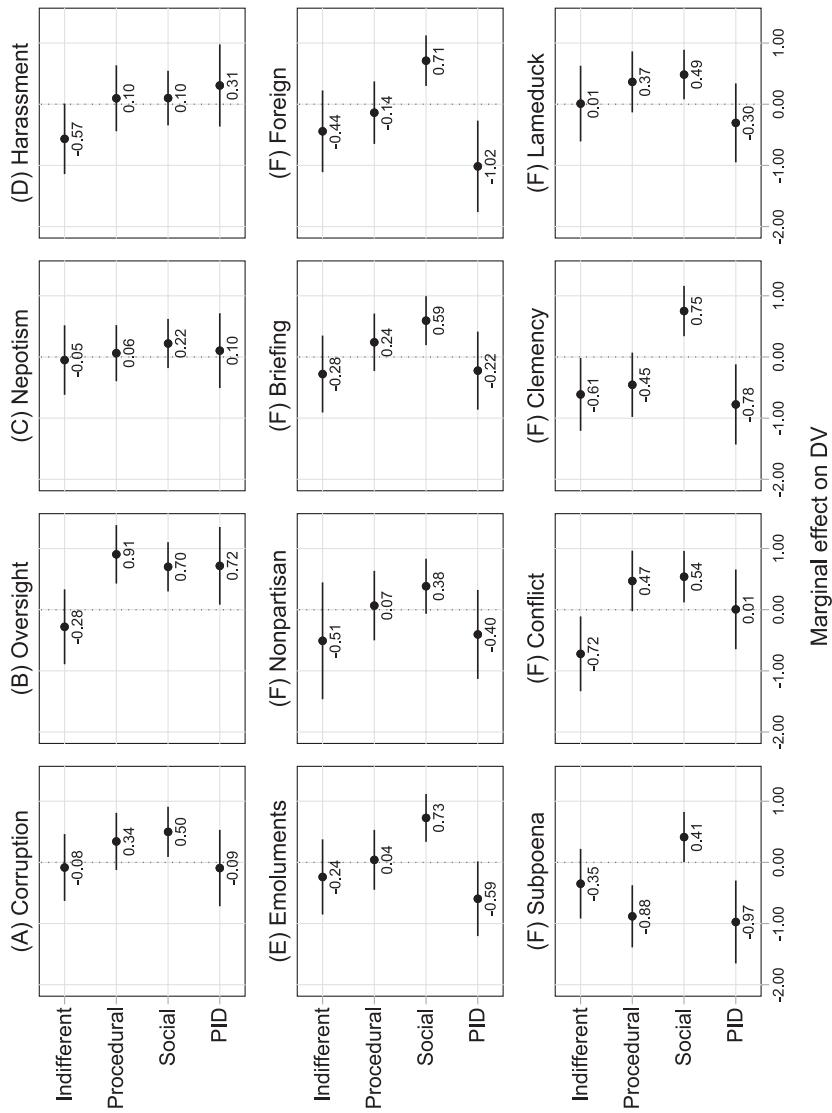
In 9 of 12 instances, individuals in the social democracy class are more likely than those in the moderate class of democracy to convey that a norm



**Fig. 8.2. Norm-breaking and partisanship**  
 (Note: Bars convey the percentage of respondents in a category that selected the "entirely inappropriate" response.  
 Horizontal bar is upper 95 percent confidence interval.)



**Fig. 8.3. Norm-breaking attitudes across the typology**  
 (Note: Bars convey the percentage of respondents in a category that selected the "entirely inappropriate" response.  
 Horizontal bar is upper 95 percent confidence interval.)



**Fig. 8.4.** The marginal effect of class membership and partisanship on norm-breaking attitudes  
 (Note: Point estimates convey coefficients associated with group membership and partisanship, bracketed by 95 percent confidence intervals. Full model contains additional demographics, including household income, knowledge, education, race, gender, age, and ideology. The excluded category of the democracy typology is “moderate”; the coefficients depicted here for indifferent, procedural, and substantive class membership must be interpreted in comparison to that group.)

violation is “extremely inappropriate.” In contrast, the difference between procedural and moderate views of democracy are more muted and idiosyncratic. On the matter of emails (oversight, panel B) and conflicts of interest (panel F), individuals in the procedural class of democracy are slightly more likely to convey that norm-breaking is “extremely inappropriate” (although the latter narrowly misses the  $p < 0.05$  threshold). In the rest of the cases, differences among indifferent and modest views of democracy are minimal and insignificant. For the most part, persons in the indifferent category of democracy—those with the lowest propensity to convey that norms were “extremely inappropriate” in figure 8.3—rarely differ from those with a moderate view of democracy.

It is not necessarily surprising that moderate views of democracy would differ from procedural or substantive views of democracy given the former’s (comparatively) weaker support for civil or procedural elements of democracy. Yet, from this analysis, it is not immediately clear whether differences among substantive and procedural views of democracy persist after controlling for a variety of other relevant respondent-level features. If we substitute moderate views of democracy as the excluded category for procedural views of democracy, then we can explicitly test how democratic meanings differ in comparison to that baseline. Re-running the analyses, which are available in the appendix to this chapter, several differences persist. On matters of emoluments, briefing, foreign aid, subpoena, and clemency, persons with procedural views of democracy are less likely to convey that those instances of norm-breaking are “entirely inappropriate.” Why? Consider that these are all behaviors exhibited explicitly by Trump administration officials in high-profile cases—scenarios where the truth of the matter peeks through the anonymized vignettes. Perhaps elite cues and the lack of accountability for these behaviors generates somewhat softer support for the idea that such norm-breaking is inappropriate—a case where partisanship overwhelms otherwise high levels of commitments to democratic values.

## Conclusion

Norms guide how people behave. In many cases, it is clear how one should act in a given setting. It is impolite, for example, to talk loudly and animatedly at a funeral, and one could expect reproach for loudly sharing

an inappropriate joke. In politics, there is not an explicit rule for everything, and norms help guide how politicians respond to a great many events. While we expect politicians to act according to the appropriate standards—whether obtaining input from the other side (e.g., passing laws with bipartisan public support) or avoiding talking disparagingly about elected officials (e.g., shitposting on social media)—norms are occasionally broken. What happens next, however, is crucial. If norm-breaking is not met with reproach or punishment, then this presents a tension: either the norm was insufficiently strong to compel “good” behavior or there is sufficient disagreement about the merits of a norm that breaking it carries few repercussions.

Consider a recent example that illustrates this tension. Historically, politicians speak to their colleagues and the public in measured terms. Former president Donald Trump, however, frequently disparaged politicians and public figures with whom he disagreed. He rarely faced sanctions from members of his own party; although several senators occasionally mentioned their displeasure at these social media screeds, there were no real penalties for calling his opponents losers, corrupt, low energy, or several other insults. This suggests that whatever behavioral norms exist to limit name-calling, they are relatively weak—indeed, even many Americans expressed admiration for such “straight-talk.” Not only were political norms sufficiently weak to compel Mr. Trump to speak in a certain way, but the actual merits of the norm were openly questioned by copartisans.

This scenario actually raises an additional problem that the Trump presidency makes clear. If elites cannot or will not sanction their colleagues for misbehavior, then this leaves elections as the primary way to compel public officials to behave. In effect, this arrangement decouples any sense of immediacy from the threat of punishment. Sanctions work best when they occur directly after a mistake; the absence of that immediacy frustrates the chain of accountability built into representative democracy. Given the insularity of elected officials from the public, norm-breaking can happen frequently and suddenly because the expectation of punishment is sufficiently low.

These tensions bring us full circle to Elster’s (2009) distinction between conventions and norms. In lieu of effective elite enforcement of political norms, one is left with toothless conventions. In the absence of norms, rule by conventions implies that the only standard that matters is, ulti-

mately, a legal one. Given the porousness of the American constitutional and statutory legal frameworks, the danger for abuse is pervasive. Far from the folklore of neutral umpires calling balls and strikes when disputes arise over “the rules of the game,” these legal interpretations are instrumental, rather than principled, and are determined by motivated partisans with a stake in the outcome (see also: the Supreme Court).

From a behavioral standpoint, this is worrying because serial norm violations may normalize misbehavior. People exposed to norm violation are more willing to suffer them (Bursztyn, Egorov, and Fiorin 2017; Bicchieri, Dimant, Gachter, and Nosenzo 2020), and some recent work shows that norm violations can decrease confidence in the very levers of democracy (Clayton et al. 2021). Although we know too little about how such dynamics function within the political realm, this research offers descriptive analysis useful for thinking through these dynamics. Procedural and social views of democracy are similar in their support for free speech and equality, so one might assume this heightened sensitivity to civil liberties would extend to perceptions of democratic norm violations. Yet, we find significant differences in how willing these groups are to recognize and tolerate norm-breaking. Given the partisan sorting exhibited by the procedural democracy class, it seems to be the case that even high levels of support for civil liberties are unable to overcome baser partisan allegiances. In politicizing norm deference, the persistent concern is that such commitments are insufficient to withstand the dynamic pressures of group-based political conflict.

Even so, we remain somewhat buoyed that, irrespective of democratic meanings, the average individual perceives that all twelve of the norm violations presented here are inappropriate. The mass public is not immune to norm violations, nor ignorant of their impropriety. They recognize when political behaviors have gone too far. Is there mass decommitment to the political values that are necessary for democracy to endure? Are pundits (and some scholars) correct in their dim conclusions about mass commitments to democratic principles? Not necessarily, in our view. Moving from the abstract—people like democracy (chapter 7)—to the specific—people recognize violations of core tenets of democratic self-rule (chapter 8)—does little to change the evidence that the majority of Americans support democracy. These attitudes are, naturally, sensitive to real contextual and partisan forces, but centering the “failings” of democracy—of which there

are many—on ordinary citizens rather than focusing on the role that elites and institutions play seems wrongheaded. Two-party democracy cannot function if one party effectively cedes ground upon which mutual norms of governance are built. And this is where the American public finds itself. If one party's elected officials cannot even voice unified disapproval of the events preceding the January 6, 2021 insurrection in the halls of Congress, then it seems unlikely that ordinary citizens will, in turn, bridge that gap.

## CHAPTER 9

### Conclusion

Democracy is a garden that has to be tended.

—Barack Obama, March 6, 2019<sup>1</sup>

Politics does not happen in a vacuum. Likewise, public opinion cannot be understood without carefully acknowledging the social and institutional conditions that condition it. With this in mind, we conclude by returning to the beginning.

The retelling of the American founding is usually done in the hushed tones reserved for religious catechisms or sepia-toned parables of noble virtues. Such accounts often mask the real existential and philosophic tensions that dogged the early Republic. In fact, the promise of democracy installed in the Constitution was so near-sighted that it barely scraped through a “rigged” ratification process that upended the Articles of Confederation. Among their objections, the opponents of ratification, the Anti-Federalists, expressed concern that the Constitution failed in its attempt to achieve balance between its aristocratic and democratic institutions. Arthur Lee, writing as Cincinnatus, wrote that the Constitution’s institutional design was “calculated to ensure a feeble Representative and a powerful Senate—that is to sacrifice the Democracy to the Aristocracy” (Cornell 2012).<sup>2</sup> Modern readers, reflecting on two centuries of slow and uneven democratization might concur.

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1. Former President Obama was speaking at a professional conference in Salt Lake City. The quote is from an NBC News story (Visser 2019).

2. The original source for the (prescient) quote was Cincinnatus [Arthur Lee], no. 4, “To James Wilson, Esq.” *New York Journal*, November 22, 1787. It would be a mistake to assume that the Anti-Federalists were “democrats” or that they shared a view of democracy that guided their objections to ratification.

In fact, the original stab at the Constitution required a series of amendments to shore up what was conspicuously absent from the first draft: a full-throated defense of individual liberties. Although these freedoms were mostly assumed, some rights were deemed so important that they needed to be explicitly placed beyond politics. The forthcoming Bill of Rights promised freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of association, and a defense of private property against government intrusion. The result is a poetic, though deeply ironic document: such democratic goods were in short supply for much of the mass public.

In this respect, the issue of slavery constitutes the singular rebuke against the promises of early American democracy. Even after the Civil War, the southern states quickly reinvigorated their “lost cause” by toppling the fleeting movement for equality provided by Reconstruction (Gallagher and Nolan 2000). White southern officials governed under a competitive racial authoritarianism, sustained by Jim Crow and endorsed by the US Supreme Court. Democratic institutions existed in form but not substance. From electoral to legislative to judicial systems, the Bill of Rights’ promised protections were undermined and denied to nonwhite citizens. This series of events might seem like ancient history to the contemporary reader, but 28 states introduced or pre-filed 106 bills after the 2020 election to restrict or limit who can vote by mail, modify the identification required to cast a vote, and change the rules that govern what volunteers can do to offset the burdens of long wait times for prospective voters (Mena 2021).

These are not the only failures of American democracy. Xenophobic and nationalistic fervors have produced other harmful outcomes. The detention of Asian Americans in internment camps during World War II, the indifference to the violence experienced by Muslim Americans after the September 11, 2001 attacks, and the Trump administration’s family separation policy of undocumented migrants from their children all represent callous repudiations of the spirit of goodwill depicted in the US Constitution and the clarion call for natural rights embodied in the Declaration of Independence.<sup>3</sup> Disability is frequently treated

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3. A careful reader will note anti-immigration sentiments began much sooner with the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798. Nativist sentiments similarly served as the foundation for the American Party (Know Nothings) in the 1840s. Prohibition was, at least in part, rooted in anti-immigrant sentiments as immigrants congregated and found social support in pubs and saloons (McGirr 2015).

as a nuisance, and sexual orientation a flashpoint for dehumanizing rhetoric. Discrimination does more than haunt the nooks and crannies of American politics. It is, instead, the plumb line that orients this country's democracy.

Even the lauded "pursuit of happiness" has not fared well in recent years. General income inequality has spiraled so far out of control that average real wages in the United States have stagnated, barely moving over the past five decades (DeSilver 2018). Politicians complaining about the minimum wage of yesteryear seem incapable of recognizing how inflation shapes such comparisons, all the while skimming their share off of passive sources of income (the median senator is, after all, a millionaire). More generally, wealth is increasingly and extraordinarily concentrated in the hands of the top one percent of Americans able to live off such revenue streams like interest, dividends, and other assets (Saez and Zucman 2016). Whatever the content of the American Dream (Mayfield 2020), stark levels of material inequality seem to flout it, laying bare the myth of the ubiquitous "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" meritocratic logic.<sup>4</sup>

This stilted and frequent lack of progress to produce procedural and material goods has not been lost on the American citizenry. They view political institutions, political actors, and political parties with a deep skepticism, having recognized that the democratic promises of self-determination, individual freedom, and economic prosperity have been broken. This disdain has grown for nearly three generations, and now political distrust is the deeply rooted norm in the United States. To scholars, these tensions may seem obvious. While there has been a surprising lack of inquiry in mainstream American politics research that squares growing distrust in political institutions with public understandings of democracy, there are several notable exceptions from which this book draws inspiration. Both McClosky and Zaller's (1984) and Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (1995, 2002) research on public attitudes toward democracy sought to qualify how Americans think about it. The former focused primarily upon economic attitudes and democracy, while the latter is known for think-

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4. Measuring economic mobility as the chance that a child born in the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution will reach the top 20 percent during their lifetime, the United States ranks poorly compared to other nations, while over time absolute mobility in the United States has also declined. And there are stark racial and regional differences in economic mobility (Chetty et al. 2017; see also Opportunity Insights, <https://opportunityinsights.org/>).

ing carefully about how and why process-based preferences matter. In turn, public-facing efforts by groups behind the Bright Line Watch and the Voter Study Group surveys have helped contextualize whether Americans perceive that democracy is bending under the pressures of polarized politics, racism and nativism, economic inequality, and elites who seem untethered from conventional political norms—the conditions underlying what Mettler and Liberman (2020) identify as the four “recurring crises of American democracy.”

What remains unclear is whether ordinary citizens think about democracy in a way that marries these various tensions together. Thus, the central question we set out to answer in this book was whether the American mass public connects both procedural and substantive elements of democracy together and how these views shape their perceptions of democratic processes, actors, and outputs.

### An Institutional Design in Existential Crisis

In the United States, what often defines popular depictions of democracy is the extent to which one believes classical liberalism ought to be wedded to prevailing political institutions. The basic thrust of liberalism involves distinguishing the appropriate or acceptable use of government power in service of promoting liberty, fairness, and equality. While some Americans balk at the prospect of the welfare state and a more inclusive democracy, other citizens favor economic and cultural globalization, and the attendant movement of people, goods, and capital that freely travel across countries. These social perspectives propose that the welfare state offers a more democratic alternative to the American experiment with liberal democracy. Although the word “socialism” is breathlessly uttered by pundits and right-leaning politicians as slander, the mass public increasingly equates it with equality and as a legitimate basis upon which democracy can be built.<sup>5</sup> Even among many of those who reject the label, the idea that government has a role in providing citizens with basic necessities and assuring economic equality is frequently embraced by the public.

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5. Geoffrey Skelley (2019), “Is Socialism Still an Effective Political Bogeyman?” *FiveThirtyEight*. Retrieved from <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/is-socialism-still-an-effective-political-bogeyman/>; and also the 2020 Harvard Youth Poll, accessed at: <https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/harvard-youth-poll>

The *political* result of these tensions has involved criticism not just levied toward liberalism but occasionally democracy itself. Consider white nationalist Richard Spencer's 2013 comments about the failures of American democracy: "We need an ethno-state so that our people can come home again, can live amongst family, and feel safe and secure . . . We must give up the false dreams of equality and democracy."<sup>6</sup> These sorts of sentiments are extreme and not widely shared, but they are not as fringe as some may think (Fording and Schram 2020). Indeed, ethno-nationalist and populist rhetoric are widespread across the "democratic" world. From the United Kingdom, to Hungary, to Brazil, populist reactions against the status quo have been successful in using democracy to deliver decidedly antidemocratic movements. In many of these cases, politicians have acted in ways that violate longstanding norms of democratic governance. These are difficult days for democracy, and understanding what the public thinks of it is critical.

### *Democratic Meanings and Political Conflict*

A significant motivation of this book involved uncovering how ordinary people think about the essential features of democracy. While it is possible to assess these qualities piecemeal, the functional form taken by democracy in the United States involves a collection of features that cascade across cultural, social, and economic domains. In this sense, democracy seems inescapably, well, political. Yet, as we have demonstrated, the meanings that individuals assign to democracy cut across traditional partisan and ideological cleavages. Although there is shared agreement regarding the importance of civil liberties, equality of the law, and free and fair elections, expectations about how democracy fosters material well-being and addresses the demands of minority groups diverge. Using semi-supervised machine learning, we were able to parse these differences through the creation of our democracy typology.

We would be remiss, however, if we did not acknowledge that even areas of seeming agreement hide much political conflict. Consider those democratic qualities on which we found consensus: civil freedoms, equal-

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6. Richard B. Spencer, "Facing the Future as a Minority," American Renaissance Conference, April 5, 2013.

ity of the law, and free and fair elections. The meaning and perception of each of these are the basis for deep divisions in American politics. “Civil freedoms” and “equality of the law” are supported by most respondents in the abstract. But, when activated by political partisans, those ideas are often the basis for disagreement. For example, the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” which gave meaning to an important social movement, was designed to draw attention to the shortfall of equality of the law within the context of race. The effort to gaslight this substantive argument and pivot to statements such as “all lives matter” or “blue lives matter” were a divisive counter to activate nationalism and partisanship. These phrases seek to transform the meaning of a demand for equal civil treatment of Black men and women into a demand for special treatment.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the widespread belief in free and fair elections is accompanied by a bitter partisan division over the substantive content of free and fair elections, and whether the 2020 election was, in fact, fair. The phrase “count every legal vote” was designed to call into question the legitimacy of Democratic Party ballots, and especially Democratic absentee, early, and mail-in ballots in urban areas with large African American populations. The subsequent litigation strategy of the Trump campaign and their allies to overturn ballots in six critical states was an attempt to demonstrate that the election was not “free and fair.”<sup>8</sup> These challenges were empirically defeated in over 80 lawsuits in state and federal courts ranging from state district courts to the United States Supreme Court. Nonetheless, there is deep partisan division between Republicans and other voters regarding whether the election of Joe Biden was fair and legitimate. A YouGov/*The Economist* survey of 1,500 adults and 1,250 voters found just 28 percent of Republicans thought the election was fair and legal, compared to 98 percent of Democrats and 65 percent of Independents. Even widespread agreement on the importance of free and fair elections (the democratic ideal) is accompanied by severe division regarding the actual health of democratic processes (the democratic practice).<sup>9</sup> Such divisions are deep-

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7. See, for example, Ashley Atkins (2019), “Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter? Color-blindness and Epistemic Injustice,” *Social Epistemology* 33 (1): 1–22.

8. See William Cummings, Joey Garrison, and Jim Sergent (January 6, 2021), “By the Numbers: President Donald Trump’s Failed Efforts to Overturn the Election,” *USA Today*, accessed at <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/elections/2021/01/06/trumps-failed-efforts-overturn-election-numbers/4130307001/> (January 29, 2021).

9. The Economist/YouGov Poll, January 24–26, 2021, accessed at <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/l1d46rgtldz/econTabReport.pdf> (January 29 2021).

ened when partisan political elites cynically manipulate public beliefs and actively undermine democratic legitimacy.

If democracy's meaning is contested, then so too are its "essential characteristics." As early works on democratic legitimacy concluded, any consensus on "the rules of the game" quickly falls apart once the rules are fully articulated and political actors seek competitive advantages via expansive or restrictive interpretations of those rules.

### *Democratic Meanings and Democratic Deficits*

Understanding the social, political, and economic preferences that constrain these views of democracy, in turn, provides insight into the contours of mass support for it. Although some have raised concern about a growing rejection of democracy, we find that many Americans are quite supportive of it as a form of governance. They are not at all satisfied with its outputs, but they still believe in the value of democratic self-rule and recognize when political actors have behaved in ways that flout appropriate expectations. Still, the disconnect between episodic and abstract commitments to democratic behavior is real. Individuals exhibit a reluctance to sanction non-democratic behavior, which suggests that our findings about *general* support for democracy and democratic principles may not override *specific* instances of norm violations.

The value of exploring these evaluations of democracy through the lens of how people conceive of democracy is that we can show that partisan preferences are only one part of support for democracy. There is a growing sense in American politics that partisan politics have overwhelmed how people think about democracy. This is not necessarily or always the case. Much like how political scientists have shown that "operational" ideology (i.e., the policy preferences people have) is distinct from "symbolic" ideology (i.e., the liberal or conservative identities that people assume), the meanings that people associate with democracy are also separable from ideological and partisan self-identifications. These beliefs, in turn, reliably shape core measures of support for democracy. If "democratic deficits" arise when citizens' expectations of democracy are frustrated by its performance, then understanding how citizens actually conceptualize democracy is essential to gauging the wellspring of diffuse support for it. For example, inclusion in classes of democratic understanding that place high values on civil liberties (procedural, social democracy) offsets some of

the “negative” relationship between political attachments and democratic evaluations that we observe in chapter 7. Although American politics has entered an era of seemingly intractable polarization on matters of policy, the delivery of democratic goods during times of political crisis may be sufficient to operate as a bulwark against anti-democratic elite messages—or so we hope.<sup>10</sup>

The finding that democracy is routinely associated with liberty goods is expected but also presents a peculiar conundrum. The history of the United States involves significant disenfranchisement at nearly every turn, and these tensions are, if anything, magnified today. How can groups that support civil freedoms and access to fair elections exhibit comparable support for democracy when the prevailing partisan cleavage in the United States involves differing commitments to democratic engagement and participation by Republicans and Democrats? The answer is that beliefs about the meanings of democracy are often aspirational rather than practical. How people think about the application of political power and the way in which governance is associated with the distribution of political goods may constrain their support for democracy, but these meanings are sufficiently malleable that they do not override how citizens think about ordinary politics *in practice*. Democratic meanings, then, are important, but they may be relevant to politics primarily in some abstract manner. This disconnect is dangerous in the sense that political preferences and identities can—and often do—override the otherwise good intentions of the democratic citizen.

It also presents us with several puzzles. First, if the most common understanding of democracy is social, combining the protections of individual rights *and* the provision of economic goods, then why do we not see more substantive democracy in the United States? Why, relative to other industrial democracies, is the United States less willing to provide a social safety net? And why are its economic policies exacerbating, rather than mitigating, rising economic inequality? Second, given the support for democracy across democratic understandings, why do we see evidence suggesting declining commitment from democracy as a political system and support for populist and authoritarian political rhetoric? Or perhaps stated differently, what do our findings reveal about the nature of the contemporary “crisis of democracy?”

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10. Perhaps against our better judgment.

## Where Is the Social Democracy?

The American political system struggles to meet citizens' basic economic needs. Its political culture, with a heavy emphasis on "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" individualism, is partly to blame (Feldman et al. 2020; Feldman and Zaller 1992).<sup>11</sup> When confronted with a range of problems, from poverty to unemployment to health care, Americans arguably look first to the individual.<sup>12</sup> What did they do wrong? What can they do to fix the problem? The tendency to look at economic issues through the lens of individualism has been assisted by the news media's reliance on episodic (as opposed to thematic) frames and the social contrasts to which they are exposed (Condon and Wichowsky 2020). It is unsurprising that, in turn, individualism has been frequently tied to race (Gilens 1995; Kam and Burge 2018; Huddy and Feldman 2009), providing a convenient rationale for not dealing with racial inequalities, no matter how pervasive or persuasive. For example, research finds that individualism as a rationale plays an even larger role when the recipients of government support are racial minorities (Federico 2006).

Yet, there is more to the story. In fact, as figure 9.1 illustrates, there is a substantial appetite for government to be doing more across a great many domains. While we observe some obvious differences among the classes—those who hold social views of democracy prefer government to do more than those holding procedural views—there is still widespread support for government to supply *more* assistance across a staggering array of policy areas.

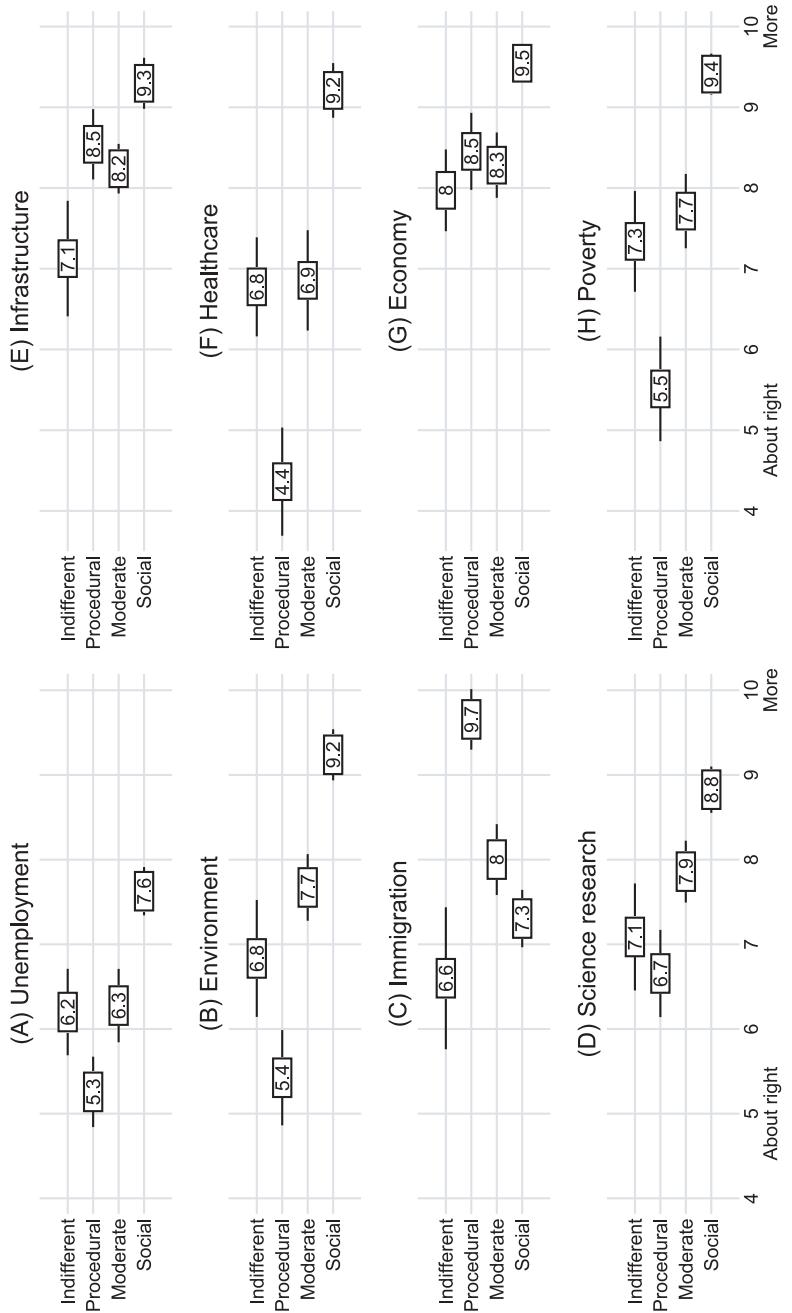
What explains the disconnect between the appetite for a more robust social democracy with current political outputs? Certainly, the unrepresentative Senate, which artificially protects minority political interests, is partly to blame. So, too, is the way in which Republican elites have not only stymied but racialized nearly all forms of public aid. Support for economic democracy expands when the economic goods are directly and widely received. It contracts when the recipients can be defined narrowly as undeserving (Goren 2003), especially when the recipients are defined by race or immigration status. Even programs not explicitly tied to race, like

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11. The phrase (and the myth) of reflecting individual hard work is not consistent with its origins, which reflected the absurdity of pulling oneself by their own bootstraps (Swanburg 2014).

12. Iyengar (1991) identifies episodic media framing as culprit. Episodic framing of issues like poverty increases the likelihood of individual attributions of responsibility.

**Q: Should government be doing less, more, or is it doing the right amount?**



**Fig. 9.1. Beliefs about whether government should be doing more across the democracy typology**  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2017 CCES. Each bar presents the average preference for the category in question. Responses range from “government should do less” (0) to “government should do more” (10).)

the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), become less popular when they are racialized (Tesler 2012). As Heather McGhee (2021) writes in her book *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, this is no accident. As the Civil Rights movement expanded access to public goods, white Americans' support for them collapsed. Ironically, not only did this hurt Black Americans, but it damaged the long-term material well-being of lower and working-class white citizens as well, who missed out on securing essential public goods supplied by a more generous welfare state.

This development has an important implication for thinking about support for a social view of democracy, which actually incorporates some of these tensions. As we showed in chapter 5, racial sympathies are an important predictor of preferring a social view of democracy, but, critically, *racial attitudes are normally distributed among members of that class*. Race is a ubiquitous, ever-salient feature of American politics, but for a more social version of democracy to succeed, elites will likely have to frame the delivery of welfare goods as beneficial to a broad, cross-sectional group of citizens. Framing, as with all matters of public policy, is vital.

To some extent, the American fascination with individualism also contributes to a limited social dimension to democracy. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Republicans and Democrats in Congress jointly provided stimulus checks to a majority of Americans, but securing longer-term unemployment benefits or rent assistance was met with resistance and suspicion, especially as former President Trump's refusal to accept the results of the 2020 presidential election came to dominate the political space. When elites communicate that economic downturns are the result of forces beyond the control of the individual and when the benefits are widely distributed, political support for substantive economic benefits increases, but, even then, such assistance is almost always temporary and contingent. Unlike the Great Recession, as the party-in-power, Republicans recognized that they would likely be held accountable for the economic downturn and a failure to act could cost them the presidency and their Senate majority.<sup>13</sup> As it turned out, both things came to pass. Yet even among Democrats, who hold unified though tenuous control of government in 2021, there

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13. As noted in chapter 2, elite understandings of democracy are often instrumental. Republicans recognized that adhering to a procedural view of democracy might cost them control of the Senate and expanded democracy to assure economic security. As additional evidence, consider that Republican opposition to a second stimulus came primarily from Senators Ted Cruz and Rand Paul, neither of whom was up for reelection.

appears to be little appetite for cementing temporary relief programs into permanent ones. Ideology notwithstanding, the party machinery in the United States is deeply committed to the status quo.

More generally, the American political process is responsive to its more affluent citizens and organized interests (Bartels 2018; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014). Advocates of substantive democracy have not only been poorly organized, they have been suspicious of party organizations (see chapter 6). In this sense, they are progressives who see the political parties as interfering with, rather than critical to, meaningful policy change. The 2016 and 2020 campaigns of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders serve as an example. While Sanders tapped into popular support for increased social welfare spending as a mechanism for attacking inequality, he lacked a formal and sympathetic political organization. Even in his second run for the Democratic nomination, Sanders largely ran against the Democratic Party establishment (in part because that establishment offered him little quarter). Yet, if Sanders and his progressive followers want to remake the American political and economic system, then they will need an organization to articulate their demands and mobilize voters. The field campaign they put together was impressive, but the lack of support from the formal party apparatus and the informal network of Democratic Party elites were (and will be) difficult hurdles to clear.

In fact, there is good reason for progressives to be skeptical of the Democratic Party in the post-realignment era. First as a candidate and later as president, Bill Clinton intentionally sought corporate money as a mechanism for competing with the Republican Party.<sup>14</sup> Relative to subsequent nominees, Clinton did well with white working-class voters, but his reliance on corporate support came at a cost. As the donations poured in, labor union influence and support withered under a Republican-led assault. Meanwhile, from Richard Nixon to Donald Trump, Republicans sought to separate working-class voters from Democrats on cultural issues. At the same time, they smartly undermined the organizational muscle that most directly connected the Democratic Party to its working-class base. Ironically, President Barack Obama, for example, received more contributions from the financial industry during 2008 than his Republican oppo-

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14. The change in the Democratic Party campaign finance began before Bill Clinton, however. Representative Tony Coelho made clear to political action committees and business interests that the Democratic Party controlled Congress and the committees that regulated business (Gaddie 1996; Goidel et al. 1999; Gaddie, Mott, and Satterthwaite 1999; MacLeery 2008).

ment, John McCain. During 2016, Hillary Clinton's relationship with Wall Street, including speeches that earned an estimated \$225,000 for a single speech, became campaign fodder and contributed to her image as a political opportunist (Chozik et al. 2016). Funded largely by corporate interests, the Democratic Party was not inclined to support progressive candidates and causes. In turn, it made progressive candidates and voters less trustful of the party establishment.

While these tensions within the Democratic Party remain, there are signs this may be changing. Younger voters are more progressive and more open to progressive issues and candidates and to fundamentally challenging the underlying assumptions of a capitalist, free market economy.<sup>15</sup> President Joe Biden, who could hardly be labeled a progressive, nevertheless ran on the most progressive party platform for a major party nominee in the history of American politics. The American Rescue Plan of 2021 may, in turn, be an important tipping point for the American welfare state. The stimulus checks notwithstanding, the expansion of the child tax credit provides direct cash payments and a guaranteed income, in the form of a refund, to households with children (Turner and Kamenetz 2021). According to an analysis by the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University, this could cut childhood poverty in the United States in half (Parolin et al. 2021). The temporary nature of the program gives ample reason for caution, but Democrats hope it will prove popular enough to become a permanent benefit for families with children. If it succeeds, it would be a "policy revolution," potentially redefining the provision of economic goods in American democracy as direct and universal benefits.<sup>16</sup>

While the extension of the American Rescue Plan of 2021 neither wholly transforms American democracy nor fulfills the broader demands of the progressive left, it gives younger voters, who are migrating into and pushing the Democratic Party left, something in short supply—hope. With this window of opportunity open, American democracy could be expanded to incorporate the demands of a more expansive social under-

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15. One 2020 poll found that 28 percent of young Americans identified as "capitalist" while only 15 percent identified as "socialist." Even as these voters walk away from a market economy, they do not identify socialism as their destination. See 2020 Harvard Youth Poll, accessed at <https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/harvard-youth-poll>

16. This is how it was described by Jason DeParle, "In the Stimulus Bill, a Policy Revolution in Aid for Children" *New York Times*, March 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/07/us/politics/child-tax-credit-stimulus.html>

standing of democracy.<sup>17</sup> To succeed in the long-term, however, social democracy-minded citizens will need more than a temporary rescue. They need a party organization that takes their demands seriously and effectively and continuously presses for those demands with elected officials.

The question we confront at the current moment, then, is not whether American democracy will change (it will), but rather what will it become? Will it more effectively meet citizen demands for greater economic equality by providing greater social democracy? Will it rise to the challenge of addressing declining economic mobility and stagnation? Or will it muddle through with incremental reforms aimed at curbing the worst abuses of the current climate while leaving the institutional biases and inequalities largely intact? The history of American politics would lead us to expect the latter. Regardless, we are at a moment of reckoning where there is need to realign American political institutions with public expectations about what democracy is supposed to provide.

If this moment feels more precarious and more urgent, so too do the opportunities for more comprehensive institutional reform. At a minimum, we would hope the moment calls for abolishing an undemocratic Electoral College, a malapportioned U.S. Senate, and an obstructionist filibuster. These institutions are antiquated and failing, no longer living up to their intent of filtering democratic passion into careful deliberation and considered reason (if they ever did). A new Voting Rights Act also seems necessary to expand voting rights and assure Americans the basic right expected in even minimal definitions of democracy—the right to choose between competing elites. Ongoing efforts to subvert voting rights in the name of preventing nonexistent voting fraud move us backward, away from the promises of American democracy. They are sure to exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the current crisis of American democracy.

More generally, the institutions of American democracy designed to thwart majority rule have been hijacked by a political minority intent on frustrating political change and maintaining an inequitable and unjust status quo. If James Madison correctly recognized the potential of democratic majorities to repress political minorities, he was incapable of imagining a political minority, motivated not by reason but by prejudice, misinformation, and ignorance, capable of manipulating an institutional design

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17. While cynicism is often well-grounded, it nevertheless requires calibration. And this is a significant moment for American democracy, despite the shortcomings of the ARP.

to thwart democratic rule. As one party increasingly loses battles in the court of public opinion, it is ironic that they find refuge in the Madisonian design of the US Constitution, designed to assure that reason, rather than passion, guided the political process. If procedural democracy is to be viewed as a legitimate prescription for self-rule, then proponents of it, at minimum, should work to ensure that the liberal values at the core of this view of democracy do not impose a misinformed and nostalgic vision of an America political system that never actually existed or roll back democracy by depriving racial minorities of their voting rights.

### Democracy in Crisis?

The tensions above bring us to a second question regarding whether democratic support is declining and what it means for democracy. As we have noted throughout this work, we see little reason to believe that public commitments to democracy *as a system* are weakening, *per se*. While our analysis is limited in its ability to speak to what has happened to democratic support over time, the evidence presented throughout the text confirms this more general conclusion. With the exception of the indifferent—a fairly small group of Americans—democratic support remains strong across our typology. Indeed, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that Americans want more, not less, democracy. The question remains as to what type of democracy they want, how they believe it should function, and what it should provide. The answers to these questions vary, depending on one's composite view of democracy.

To the extent that there is a crisis, it is a crisis not of support but of *meaning* and *understanding*. Most Americans want democracy that delivers social and public goods, yet their government largely produces procedural democracy. The current crisis, then, is rooted not in declining commitments to democracy as an ideal but in the realities of democratic governance. In fact, part of the problem with attempts to judge democracy and its development in the United States is that we are inevitably drawn to an unspecified ideal. Even something as simple as choosing a baseline against which to measure “progress” involves making a series of uncomfortable evaluations about the over-promise and under-performance of democracy in meeting its obligations. Democracy’s aspirational nature serves as a continuing and powerful reminder that more is possible.

Proclamations about the most recent “crisis of democracy” sometimes miss this important point. Our ideas about democracy continue to guide us, even if they are constantly changing and contested, and even if we remain uncertain about what democracy is supposed to be. Democracy’s promise has never primarily (or solely) been about institutions or processes, but instead resides in the quality of life that self-determination and individual freedom promise to provide and protect. In some sense, this is an imagined world. The meanings of democracy remain elusive because they are never static.

This crisis of meaning also manifests itself in anti-democratic episodes so profoundly disturbing that we are reminded of just how much can be lost when democratic legitimacy falters. Assaults on democratic institutions have, at least in recent history, been exceptionally rare. The storming of the Capitol in January 2021 was something new for most Americans, something qualitatively different than protests demanding equal protection of the law. It was, in the truest sense of the word, an assault on democracy.

Partisanship, as usual, scrambled how people processed these events. In the wake of the events of January 6, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found sharp partisan divisions in beliefs that “harsh and violent language in politics contributes to violent actions in society.” Nearly three in four Democrats (72 percent) said that harsh and violent language contributes “a lot” to societal violence compared to less than one in three Republicans (31 percent). Democrats and Independents were, not surprisingly, also more inclined than Republicans to say that former President Trump “shoulders a lot of the blame” for the violence at the Capitol.<sup>18</sup> So long as partisanship structures not just the meaning of generally agreed-upon concepts but also affects the willingness to enforce democratic norms and acceptance of factual realities and scientific truths, contests over the meaning of democracy will remain a crisis. The willingness of partisan elites to fan the flames of these divisions will only deepen and magnify the crisis.

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18. Overall, 57 percent said former President Donald Trump “holds a lot of responsibility for the violent actions of the mob that took over the U.S. Capitol.” Independents (58 percent) and Democrats (88% percent) were much more likely than Republicans to say Trump “shoulders a lot of the blame.” Based on a national survey of 1,019 Americans, conducted between January 15–18, 2021. See “Majority of Americans Blame Trump, White Supremacy for Capitol Riot,” January 29, 2021, accessed at <https://www.prri.org/research/majority-of-americans-blame-trump-white-supremacy-for-capitol-riot/>

The study of democratic attitudes offers one way of digging beneath these tensions by gauging how people understand democracy, how they believe it should function, what they believe it should produce, and where it has fallen short. Only then can we make broad pronouncements about the latest crisis of democracy. Our work suggests that citizens are frustrated with a political system that has failed to deliver the basic necessities that one expects to receive living in democracy, even as the nation's wealth continues to grow. For many Americans, democracy resides not just in process and protections but in the measurable outcomes of economic opportunity and equality that democracy promises to provide and in its ability to care for the least fortunate. For other citizens, however, the crisis of democracy instead involves saving the system from voter fraud and left-wing socialism—ideas delivered to them through a slick news ecosystem filled with mis- and disinformation. Given this state of affairs, then, it makes little sense to talk about a singular crisis of democracy. Instead, we should speak in the plural about the crises of democracy.

Yet, on this point, we are often prisoners of the present. Democracy has always existed in a state of crisis, reflecting the underlying tensions between its promise and its reality. A quick reading of American history suggests this is true. The exceptional periods were not when the United States was in the middle of a deep existential crisis, when the future of democracy seemed unclear, but rather in the periods of relative calm, peace, and prosperity. The present moment likely feels “more” like a crisis because this prosperity and calm are threatened for many Americans. At any rate, critically thinking about the recent turn in the health of American democracy and citizens’ reactions to it requires wrestling with the banality of a democracy that has struggled to produce the political goods it has promised.

## Moving Forward

As a research agenda, the study of American democracy has developed slowly over the last few decades. Arguably, the field of American politics *is* the study of American democracy, but this confuses the context in which studies take place with the focus of the research. Ironically, political scientists are fond of describing the American states as “the laboratories of democracy,” a phrase coined by former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis. Federalism, however, provides significant opportunity for the

*retrenchment* of democracy, as we discuss frequently throughout this book (see also Grumbach 2021). To be fair, there has been significant investigation of these issues and, importantly, their implications for democracy by scholars of state politics and academics studying groups that have historically been oppressed—to them, the prospect that American democracy is sick comes as no surprise. Yet, the discipline has been slower to consider that work as evidence of the real-time failures of American democracy.<sup>19</sup>

For their parts, scholars of comparative politics have not only discussed some of the tensions raised in this book but raised early concerns that the troubling undercurrents in American democracy are as real as they are common. American politics, it would seem, is becoming less exceptional. Curiously, within the American politics subfield, many streams of behavioral research have implications for democracy, yet they are not always couched as such. The study of tolerance—both in terms of support for concrete civil liberties and freedoms and the acceptance of racial and ethnic others that citizens display—has serious implications for democracy. So, too, does gender and politics research, which involves questions of descriptive representation and equality of access. Political communication seems especially relevant in an era of digital communication and information flows that early democratic theorists could have never foreseen. Given the power of the media ecosystems that entrepreneurial elites have constructed, misinformation, for example, is a critical disease that afflicts the best intentions of democracy.<sup>20</sup> It is impossible to think about democratic health without accounting for the ways that individuals search for and consume information. Finally, understanding how people respond to civil unrest, police misconduct, and the wider injustices rife throughout the modern American justice system offer important context for thinking about the health of democracy.

The findings presented here offer a snapshot into how people think about democracy that attempts to lean on some of this research, but this project is only one way of stylizing beliefs about democracy. Our hope is

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19. This does not answer *why* the study of the health of American democracy—as an object—has been slow to develop, but we humbly submit that the “crises” of American democracy have probably often missed the very people who have been trained to study it.

20. David Leonhardt (2020), writing in the *New York Times Morning Briefing*, observes: “There are multiple causes, but one of them is the size and strength of right-wing media organizations that frequently broadcast falsehoods. The result is confusion among many Americans about scientific facts that are widely accepted, across the political spectrum, in other countries.”

that scholars will pursue a more aggressive study of democratic attitudes that draws on the richness of the scholarly areas mentioned above in order to understand the different individual and institutional-level features that shape beliefs about democracy. At its core, democracy is associated with characteristics that behave like first principles, which means that such beliefs readily capture many of the conflicts inherent to politics. Thinking about democracy in terms of the civil and welfare goods that it produces, however, is one productive way to move beyond public opinion debates about the dimensionality of cultural, social, and economic attitudes. Given the flattening of elite conflict and the collapsing of issues via sorting, it seems to us that there is an opportunity to focus attention on how people understand whether democracy is fulfilling its promises on these terms.

In turn, unlocking how people think about these democratic goods requires moving from the abstract to the episodic, and there is much that we do not know regarding how citizens think about the instrumental methods by which parties and elites can achieve these ends. Indeed, a limitation of the present project involves the level of abstraction with which we conceptualize the constituent parts of democracy. Digging down into how people think about what comprises civil and material (in)equality is a natural extension of this work. In our view, the study of how Americans think about democracy and the meanings they assign to it remains rich with potential. Indeed, the history of American politics is, in no small part, defined by the struggle between those who want to remain in a past defined by what democracy was and those who want to move toward a future defined by what democracy might become if only we have the courage to take its promises of fairness, justice, and equality seriously. Even if democracy as an aspirational ideal remains out of reach, the efforts to reach it are not in vain. The American consensus resides not in who we are but in who we aspire to be.



# Appendix

## *Technical Details and Supplementary Analysis*

### Chapter 4—Modeling Output

While there are many appropriate (and inappropriate) ways to analyze survey data, the specific analytical technique chosen by the researcher should suit the nature of the available data. In the case of attitudes about democracy, the conventional approach to investigating public opinion often involves techniques that uncover whether a latent or “unobserved” variable satisfactorily encompasses different beliefs about democracy. While factor analysis is useful, our latent class analysis is different because it is a “person-centered” approach. That is, rather than paring down a set of variables into a single factor or scale, we attempt to sort persons into different groups of a potentially multidimensional construct (beliefs about democracy).

In order to create a typology from the six survey instruments detailed in chapter 4, we used the polCA package in the software program, R. LCA treats responses to the input items as conditionally independent and calculates a vector of estimated class membership probabilities that correspond to each individual (McCutcheon 1987; Collins and Lanza 2010). In turn, the prevalence of the various groups generated by this process is equivalent to the average of the respondent-specific posterior probabilities of class membership (Hagenaars and McCutcheon 2002; Muthén and Muthén 2008). Put simply, this technique allows the researcher to determine how many and to which groups respondents should be sorted.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Alternative configural approaches like, say, cluster analysis, are useful but present non-trivial drawbacks. Clustering techniques often split the data according to the mean or median

Although the “true” probability of a respondent’s membership in a given class is not known, the likelihood that a given person will be sorted into a given class can be obtained via the posterior probabilities of class inclusion, which are derived from the model. In other words, every respondent is assigned a probability of being assigned to a class, and we can compare such probabilities across the groups. An assignment rule is then utilized to discriminate which class “best fits” the respondent. In our case, we use modal selection: whichever class is associated with the highest probability of inclusion for the respondent is the class to which they are assigned.

### *How Many Classes?*

If the above describes how we sort people into groups, then the next task involves discerning how many groups sufficiently “fit” the data. To make this decision requires us to compare different estimates that describe how well different-sized models fit the data. There are a number of different metrics by which to evaluate these models. These include the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), entropy, and G-squared, which all provide different pieces for information to help us evaluate model fit. We can conceptualize each of these estimates as pieces of a puzzle that we attempt to fit together.

Settling on the appropriate number of classes that fits the data involves comparing these estimates across different-sized class solutions. It is important to note, however, that such estimates cannot, by their nature, communicate a “true” or “perfect” solution; instead, they are used to guide the researcher in making an informed decision. In some sense, we are balancing the fit estimates against the actual results—if the fit estimates justify many classes of small groups of persons, then the usefulness of the typology is low or, more technically, “oversaturated.” Thus, while this process is guided by a set of technical guidelines, researcher discretion also plays a role.

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distance among centroids (i.e., groups) in the data. Not only may this oversimplify differences (MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, and Rucker 2002), but the results run the risk of being sample-dependent. This prospect makes it difficult to forecast whether results in one sample replicate to others (Pastor, Barron, Miller, and Davis 2007). Perhaps more troubling, the decision rule for optimality in cluster size often requires “eye-balling the data” (Stanley, Kellermanns, and Zellweger 2017).

TABLE A4.1. Fit Statistics Associated with Iterative LCA

	AIC	BIC	G2	Residual degrees of freedom	Log-likelihood
1 Class	48901.5	49271.1	20103.6	1934	-24384.8
2 Classes	46596.3	47341.3	17664.4	1867	-23165.2
3 Classes	45765.6	46885.8	16699.7	1800	-22682.8
<b>4 Classes</b>	<b>45248.5</b>	<b>46743.9</b>	<b>16048.6</b>	<b>1733</b>	<b>-22357.2</b>
5 Classes	44909.1	46779.8	15575.2	1666	-22120.5
6 Classes	44750.6	46996.6	15282.7	1599	-21974.3

*Note:* LCA fit statistics associated with corresponding models. The bold cells (4 classes) correspond to best-fitting class. Data from 2016 and 2017 were pooled for this analysis, but running model separately produces similar results with respect to class size.

More technically, ascertaining the appropriate distribution of classes involves a series of tests where a  $k$ -class model is compared to a  $k-1$  model (Muthén 2002). If a  $k$ -class model represents an improvement in fit over a  $k-1$  model, then the researcher should expand the number of classes retained to  $k+1$  classes and then compare a series of goodness of fit statistics to the  $k$ -class model. In other words, we run our model serially and test whether the addition of one class or group is beneficial at each expansion—that is, whether it better reflects or captures important variation within the data. Settling on the optimal number of classes that sufficiently explain variation in the data is the delicate task of this procedure. We desire to sufficiently capture the correct number of classes (i.e., we want to capture nuance), but we also desire parsimony (i.e., we want to avoid over-fitting our model and retaining too many small classes). While there are few hard-and-fast rules with respect to parsing the correct “class solution” (Tein et al. 2013), mixture models are generally considered to be fully saturated or optimized when the  $k+1$  solution no longer improves model fit.<sup>2</sup>

As table A4.1 indicates, the four-class solution is optimal on the basis of the BIC reaching a low point at that setting.

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2. For our purposes, the optimal number of classes as selected jointly on the basis of the minimization of the Bayesian information criteria (BIC) index and the minimization of cross-classification probabilities.

*Is the Model Precise?*

Next, how “precise” is our classification method? A serious question that often hounds classification techniques involved in parceling or sorting subjects into groups is whether the modeling has effectively “done its job”—that is, whether the parametric test has correctly categorized persons into categories or is, instead, modeling a nontrivial amount of noise.

Table A4.2 depicts the probabilities of class assignment for each of the four groups in our typology, binned into quartiles. Recalling that LCA uses modal class assignment to parse respondents into groups, the lowest posterior probability technically possible for assignment to a given class is approximately 0.26 (e.g., a respondent might have class assignment probabilities of 0.26, 0.24, 0.25, and 0.25—all summing to 1.0). This scenario, however, would be problematic in the sense that it implies that the model cannot efficiently sort respondents if such persons exhibited uniformly divided assignment probabilities—i.e., their preferences are so disjointed that they could simultaneously be in all four classes! Thankfully, less than one percent of persons across the groups are associated with anything resembling a “split” assignment predicament, where they are pulled in nearly equal directions among the classes. In fact, the lowest modal assignment probability for any of the classes is 0.37 for a single individual in the Moderate class, who displayed modest assignment probabilities for the Minimal and Maximal classes (which we might expect given that the Moderate class is something of a middle ground between the two). Further, using a more conservative test of “majoritarian” assignment to the groups (i.e., the number of persons above 0.50), the proportion of people within each group who are associated with a probability of assignment to a group between 0.50 and 0.74 is also modest. Roughly 13 to 16 percent of respondents clear this threshold, implying that the vast majority of respondents exhibit assignment probabilities higher than 0.75—in no group does the proportion of persons who exhibit higher than a 0.75 percent chance of group assignment dip below 80 percent.

Thus, to the extent that our typology is capturing systemic differences among respondents, the model seems to perform well in parsing persons among groups. There are few respondents who are pulled in competing directions across classes. The balance of assignment probabilities cluster toward very high values. To the extent that our typology is emblematic of

TABLE A4.2. Posterior Probabilities Associated with Class Assignment

(1) Indifferent			(2) Minimal		
Probability of class assignment	Frequency	Percent	Probability of class assignment	Frequency	Percent
0.00–0.24 (low)	0	0.00	0.00–0.24 (low)	0	0.00
0.25–0.49	3	1.05	0.25–0.49	5	1.28
0.50–0.74	31	14.42	0.50–0.74	65	16.58
0.75–1.00 (high)	181	84.19	0.75–1.00 (high)	322	82.14
<i>Total</i>	214	100%	<i>Total</i>	392	100%
(3) Moderate			(4) Maximal		
Probability of class assignment	Frequency	Percent	Probability of class assignment	Frequency	Percent
0.00–0.24 (low)	0	0.00	0.00–0.24 (low)	0	0.00
0.25–0.49	4	0.67	0.25–0.49	8	1.00
0.50–0.74	92	15.49	0.50–0.74	107	13.39
0.75–1.00 (high)	498	83.84	0.75–1.00 (high)	684	85.61
<i>Total</i>	594	100%	<i>Total</i>	799	100%

*Note:* 2016 and 2017 CCES modules. Class assignment probabilities have been binned into four, equally spaced groups to allow for comparisons. The column “percent” conveys what percent of persons in a respective group fall into the associated category of class assignment probabilities.

a systemized way of thinking about politics, we are able to sort people very efficiently, which implies that the configurations that democratic preferences take are distributed quite systematically among respondents.

### *Class Means across the Essential Characteristics of Democracy*

In the main body of the text, we presented figure 4.2, which displayed the mean values of input items by class. This figure, however, may not sufficiently convey the distribution of responses to the various input items. Figure A4.1 illustrates the distribution of mean responses for each input item of the typology by class.

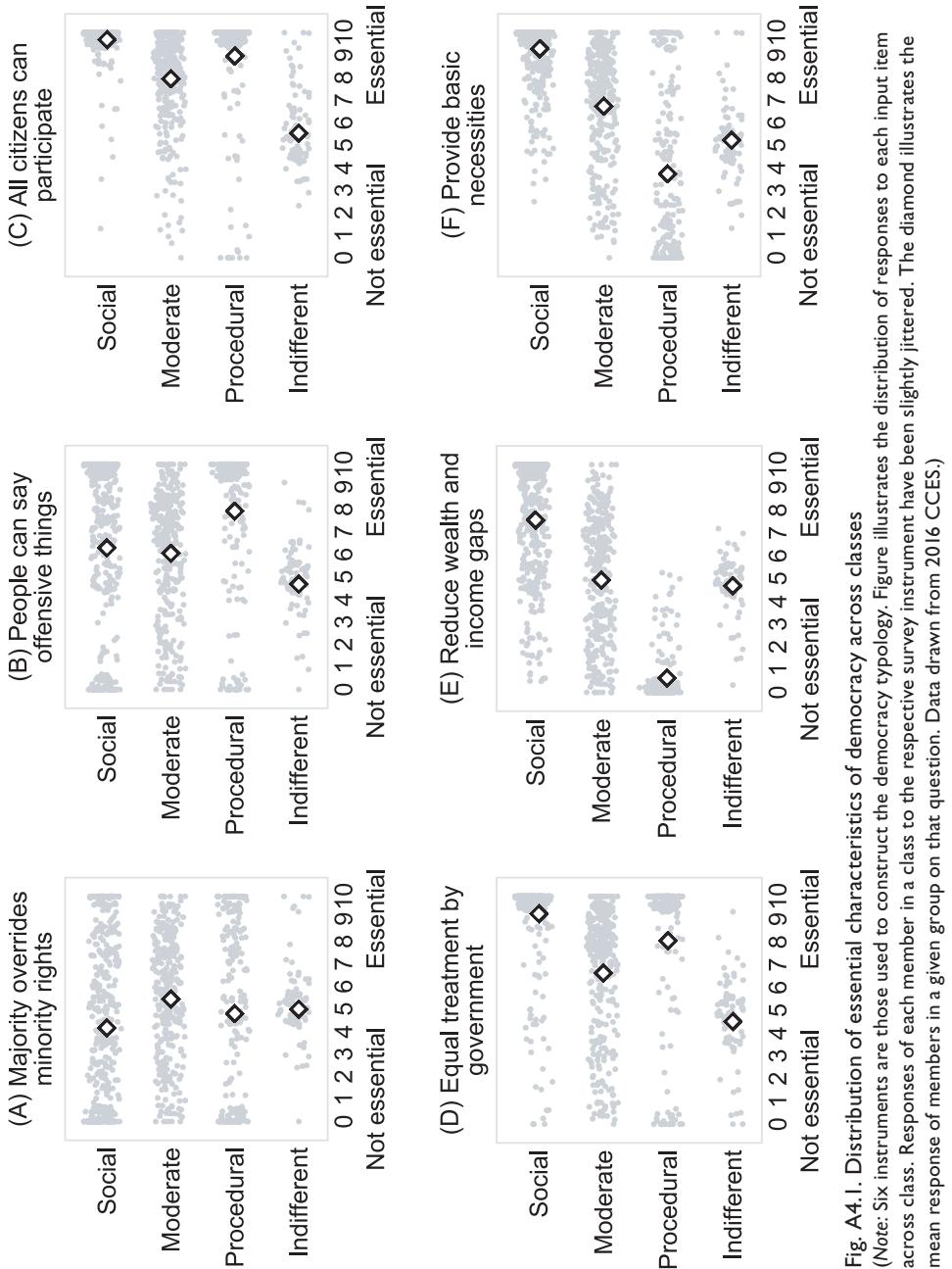
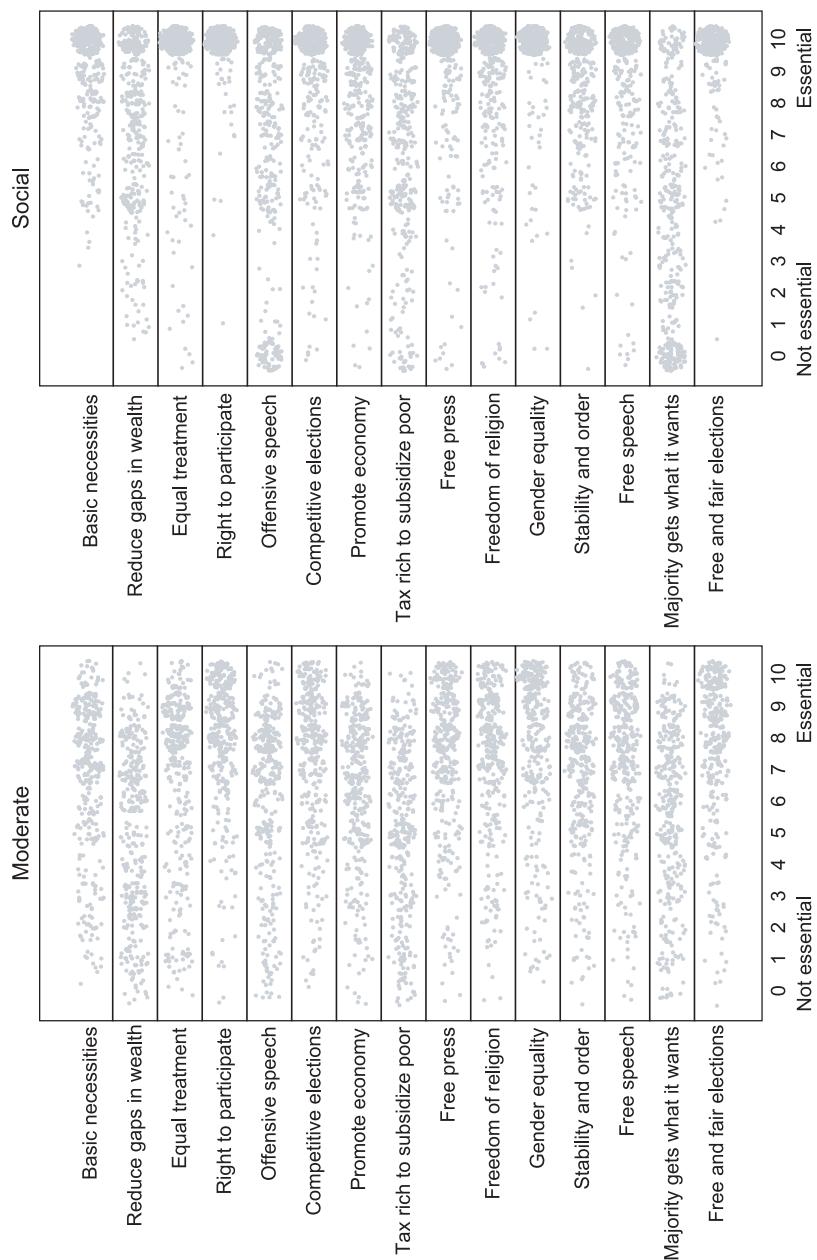


Fig. A4.I. Distribution of essential characteristics of democracy across classes

(Note: Six instruments are those used to construct the democracy typology. Figure illustrates the distribution of responses to each input item across class. Responses of each member in a class to the respective survey instrument have been slightly jittered. The diamond illustrates the mean response of members in a given group on that question. Data drawn from 2016 CCEs.)



**Fig. A4.2. Distribution of values of Moderate and Social classes across full 15-item battery of essential characteristics of democracy**

(Note: Data drawn from 2016 CCES. Figure illustrates class means for all 15 items of the original, full battery of “essential characteristics” of democracy.)

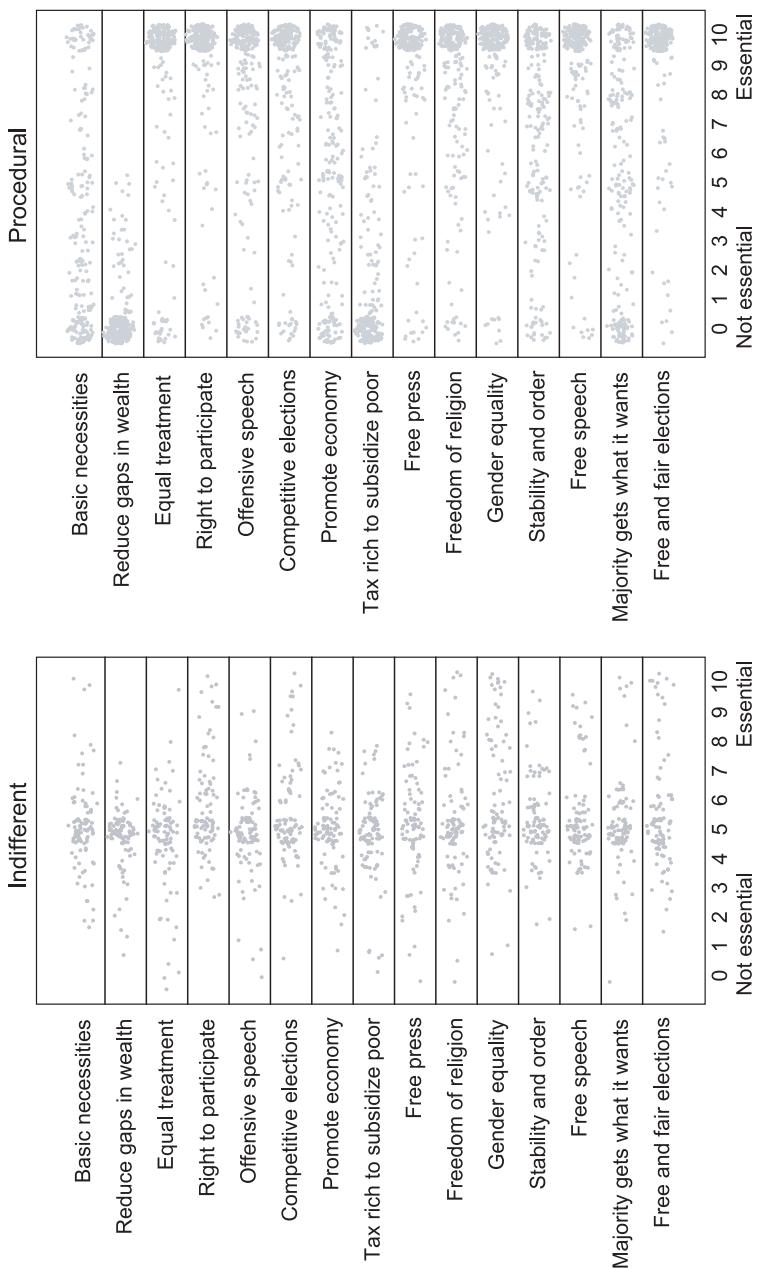


Fig. A4.3. Distribution of values of Indifferent and Procedural classes across full 15-item battery of essential characteristics of democracy  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2016 CCES. Figure illustrates the distribution of responses to the 15 items of the original, full battery of “essential characteristics” of democracy. Responses have been jittered slightly to ease interpretation.)

Finally, although we only use six instruments to build the democracy typology, interested readers may still be curious how persons in the classes responded to all 15 items in our original 2016 survey. This fuller portrait of the classes lends some credibility to our typology—the classes consistently differ upon both civil (procedural) and material (welfare) goods in ways that conform to the pattern of responses generated from the six-item typology.

## Chapter 5—Modeling Output

In chapter 5, we modeled class assignment as a function of a set of political attitudes, racial attitudes, system awareness, and respondent demographics. For readers interested in the full model, we present these estimates in figure A5.1.

## Chapter 6—Modeling Output

In chapter 6, we analyzed how people think about various processes and actors conventionally associated with democracy. In several instances, we presented bivariate analysis of attitudes toward these objects across our typology. For readers interested in whether or not differences among respondents with different views of democracy hold up to multivariate analysis, we depict these estimates below.

Our approach is, again, a visual one. Rather than fill many pages with numbered tables, we plot coefficient estimates and confidence intervals for the various items included in these models. All covariates are held consistent across models, meaning that the same basic battery of demographic characteristics is standard for each outcome. Because the democracy typology is categorical, our baseline category is “moderate” views of democracy for all models here. Thus, the coefficient for “social” or “procedural” democracy should be interpreted as the change in the dependent variable relative to the moderate category. To fully contextualize the estimates corresponding with membership in the democratic classes, readers should consult the associated bivariate analysis to get some sense of mean differences in the outcome of interest across groups.

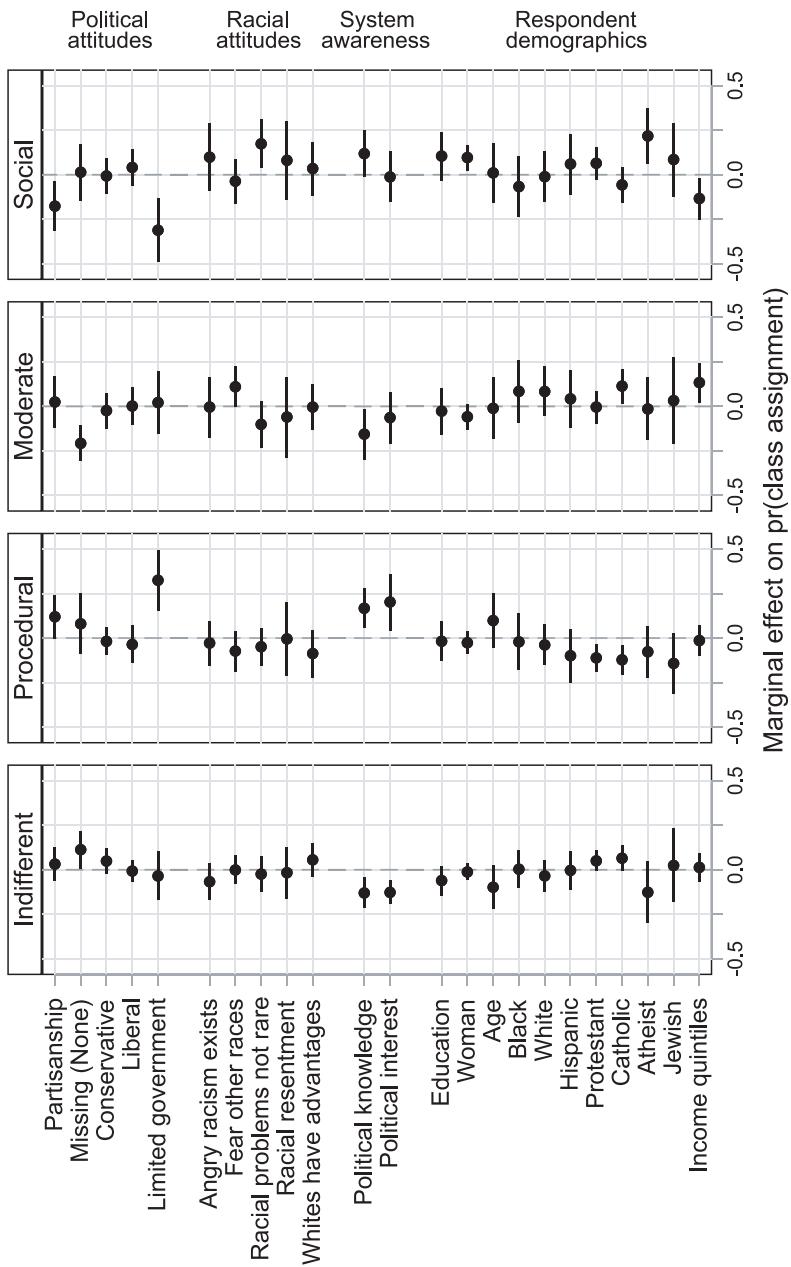
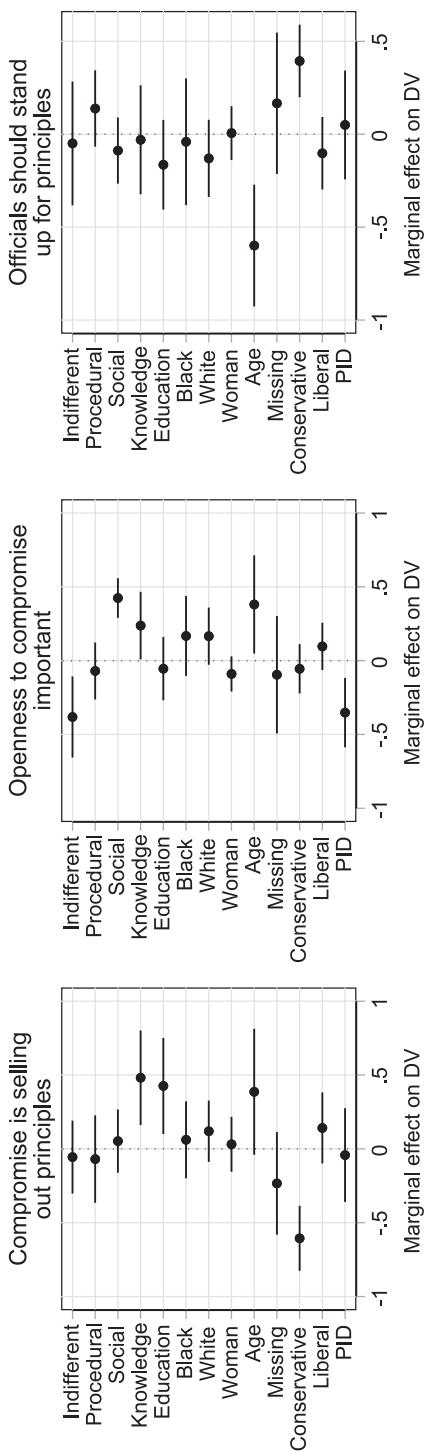
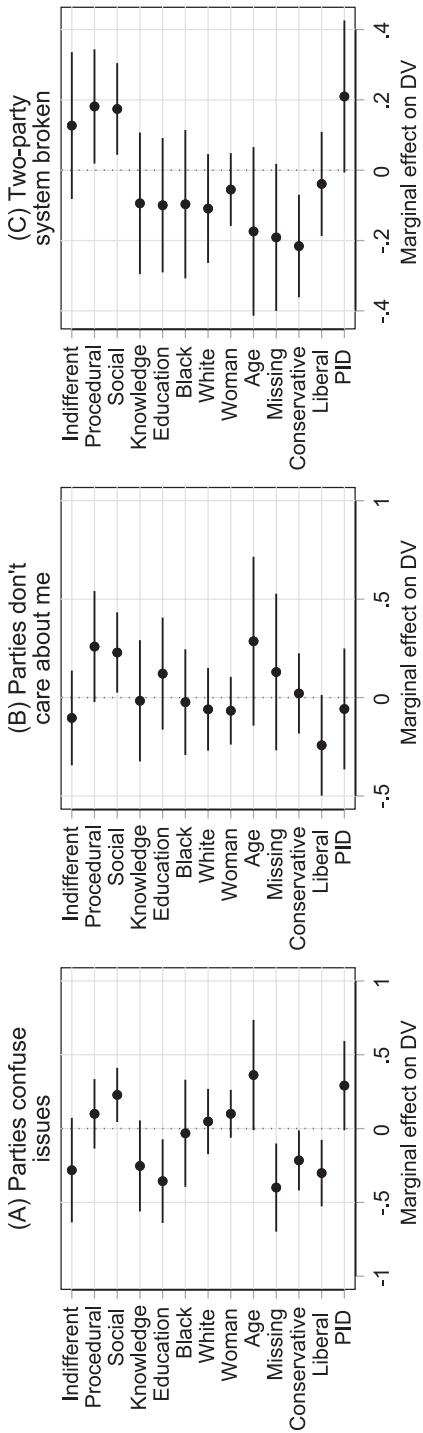


Fig. A5.1. Full model of correlates of democracy typology  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2017 CCEES survey module. Point estimates convey marginal effect of given variable on class assignment, bracketed by 95 percent confidence intervals.)



**Fig. A6.1.** Multivariate modeling results corresponding to bivariate analysis in figure 6.1  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2016 CCEES survey. Point estimates derived from OLS regression models and convey marginal effect of given variable on y-axis on the dependent variable. All variables have been recoded from 0 to 1 to ease interpretation of the magnitude of coefficient sizes. Each dependent variable asks individuals whether they agree or disagree with that statement; the response sets range from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (1).)



**Fig. A6.2. Multivariate modeling results corresponding to bivariate analysis in figure 6.2**  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2016 CCES survey. For panels A and B, values of dependent variable range from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (0). For panel C, values on dependent variable range from “works fairly well” (0) to “has problems but works” (0.5) to “seriously broken and needs third party” (1). Point estimates are derived from OLS regression models and convey marginal effect of given variable on the dependent variable. All variables have been recoded from 0 to 1 to ease interpretation of the magnitude of coefficient sizes.)

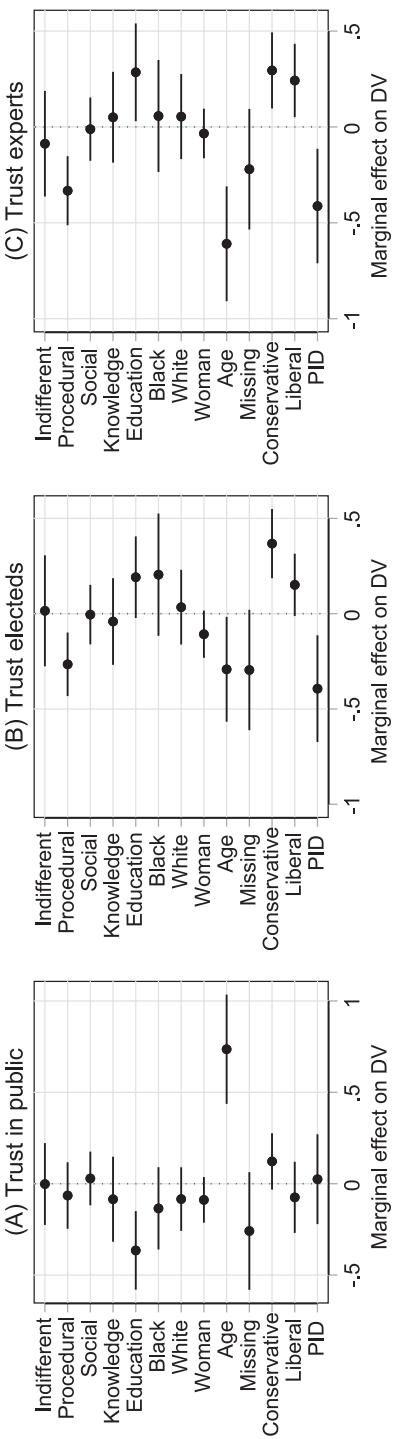


Fig. A6.3. Multivariate modelling results corresponding to bivariate analysis in figure 6.3  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2016 CCES survey. For each dependent variable, values range from "not at all" (0) to "a great deal" (1). Point estimates derived from OLS regression models and convey marginal effect of given variable on y-axis on the dependent variable. All variables have been recoded from 0 to 1 to ease interpretation of the magnitude of coefficient sizes.)

***Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?***

The people, not the politicians, should make the most important policy decisions.

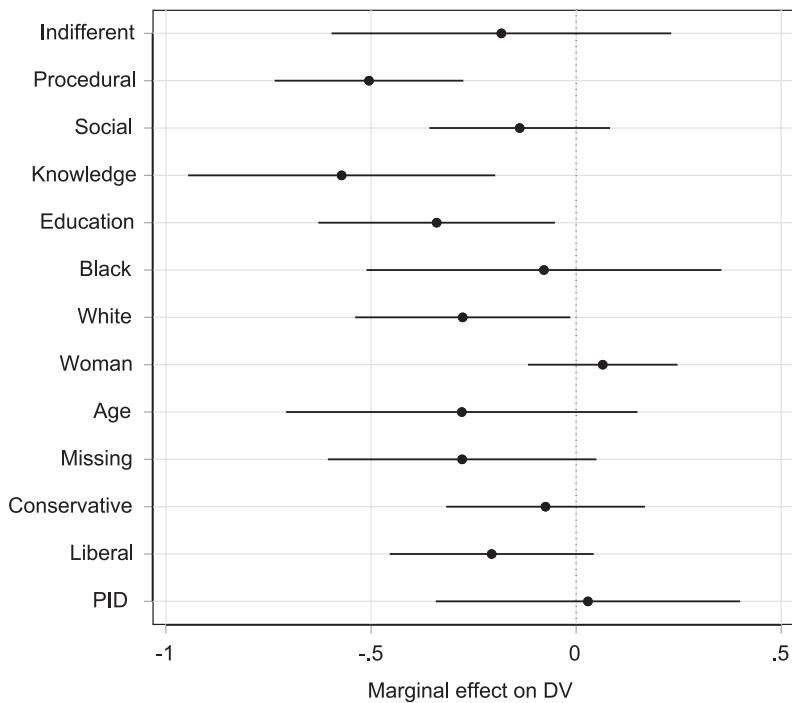
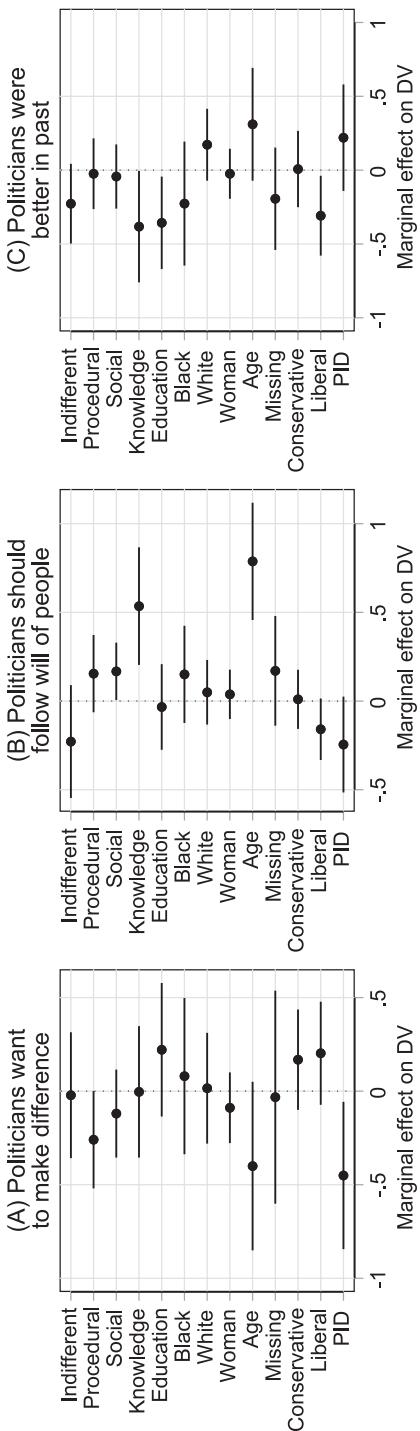


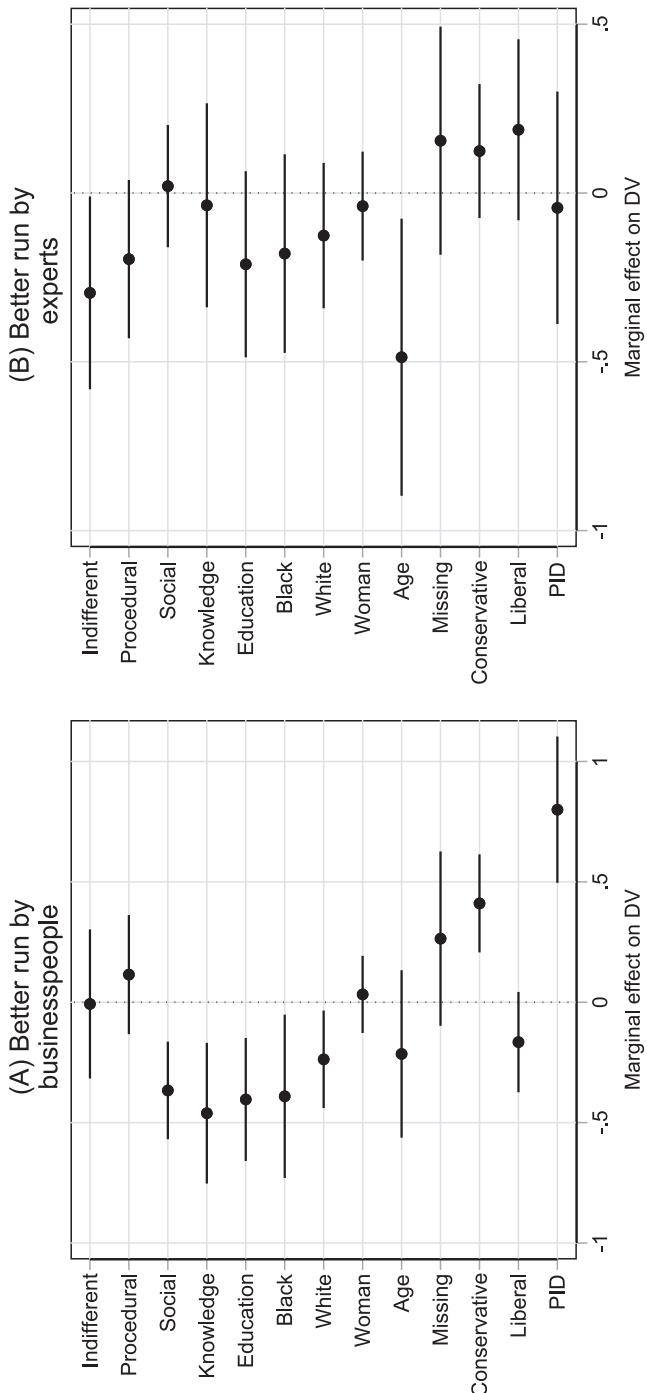
Fig. A6.4. Multivariate modeling results corresponding to bivariate analysis in figure 6.4

Text above image: *Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The people, not the politicians, should make the most important policy decisions.*

(Note: Data drawn from 2016 CCES survey. Point estimates derived from OLS regression models and convey marginal effect of given variable on y-axis on the dependent variable. All variables have been recoded from 0 to 1 to ease interpretation of the magnitude of coefficient sizes. Dependent variable asks individuals whether they agree or disagree with that statement; the response sets range from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (!).)



**Fig. A6.5. Multivariate modeling results corresponding to bivariate analysis in figure 6.5**  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2016 CCES survey. Point estimates derived from OLS regression models and convey marginal effect of given variable on y-axis on the dependent variable. All variables have been recoded from 0 to 1 to ease interpretation of the magnitude of coefficient sizes. Each dependent variable asks individuals whether they agree or disagree with that statement; the response sets range from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (1).)



**Fig. A6.6. Multivariate modeling results corresponding to bivariate analysis in figure 6.6**  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2016 CCES survey. Point estimates derived from OLS regression models and convey marginal effect of given variable on y-axis on the dependent variable. All variables have been recoded from 0 to 1 to ease interpretation of the magnitude of coefficient sizes. Each dependent variable asks individuals whether they agree or disagree with that statement; the response sets range from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (1).)

## Chapter 7—Modeling Output

In chapter 7, we presented the relationship between the democracy typology and partisanship and different ratings of democracy. The full modeling output is available below in figure A7.1.

## Chapter 8—Modeling Output

In chapter 8, we presented a series of pared-down models that depicted the relationship between the democracy typology and perceptions of whether a norm violation was “completely inappropriate.” The full modeling output is available below. Figure A8.1 illustrates the full model with “moderate” views of democracy as the excluded category. Figure A8.2 illustrates the full model with “procedural” views of democracy as the excluded category.

## Chapter 9—Modeling Output

In figure 9.1, we presented the distribution of support for government involvement in nine areas across the democracy typology. That simple, bivariate analysis illustrates that different views of democracy are associated with more or less support for the welfare state. Figure A9.1 corresponds to that analysis but subjects that support to multivariate analysis. In other words, the analysis presented here tests whether or not, controlling for partisanship and ideology, those differences persist. Indeed, they do. We find that, even accounting for powerful political group memberships, one’s view of democracy is associated with how they think about a variety of issues.

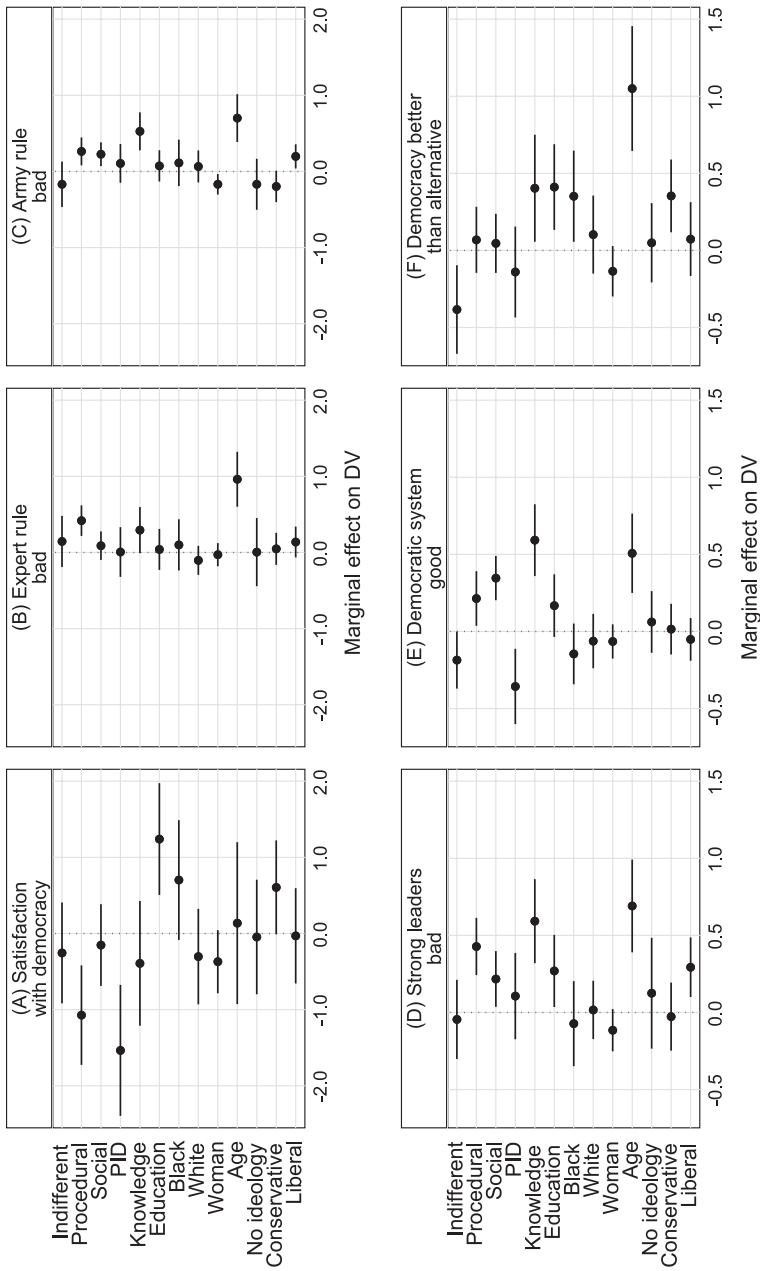
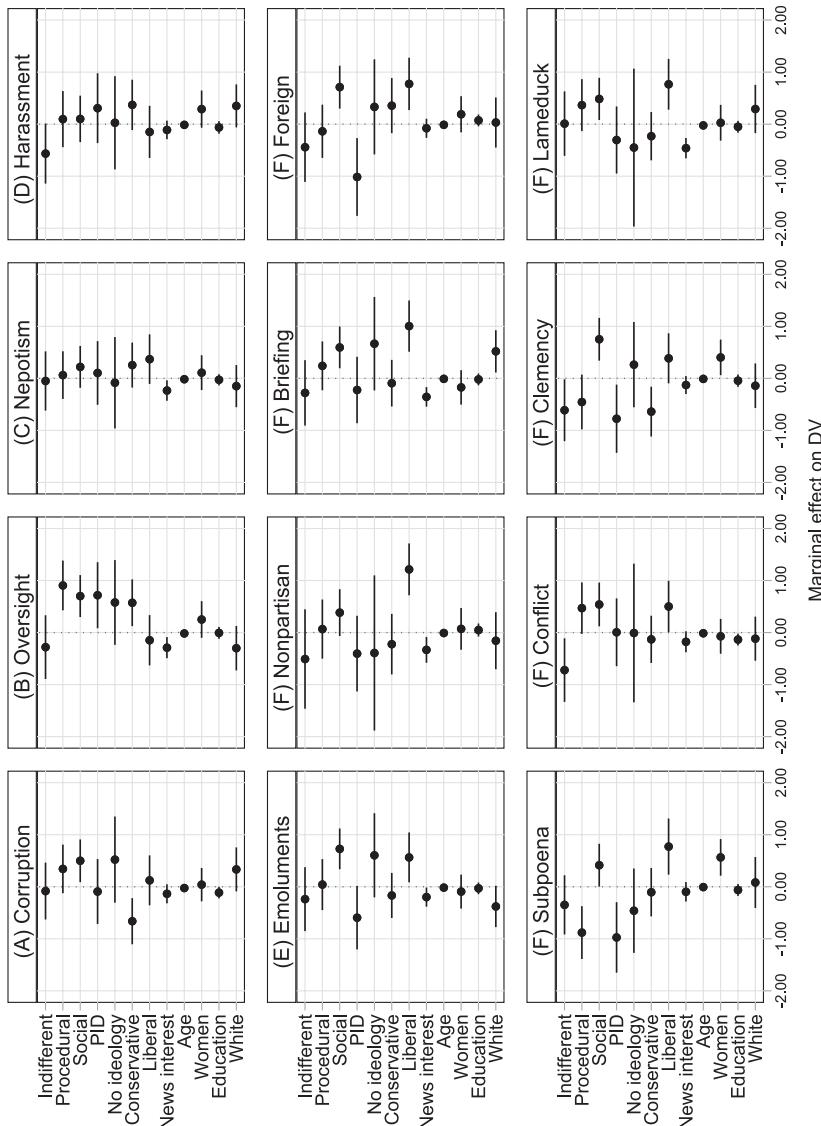
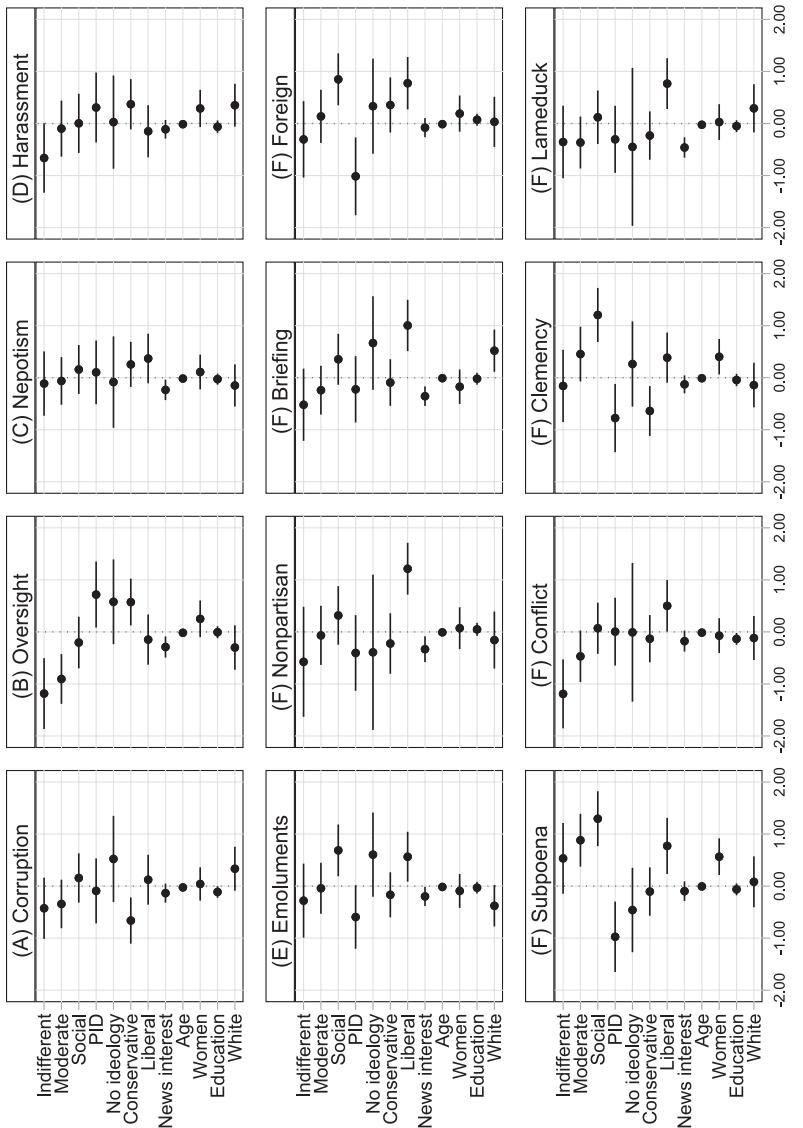


Fig. A7.1. The correlates of democratic evaluations, full modeling output  
 (Note: Data drawn from the 2016 CCES survey. Coefficients derived from OLS modeling. Each point estimate is bracketed by 95 percent confidence interval; lines that cross the vertical dashed threshold at zero are indistinguishable from zero.)



**Fig. A8.1. Predicting views of norm violations with “moderate” class as excluded category**  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2020 YouGov survey. Point estimates are log-odds ratios bracketed by 95 percent confidence intervals. Excluded category here is ‘moderate’ views of democracy.)



**Fig. A8.2. Predicting views of norm violations with “procedural” class as excluded category**  
 (Note: Data drawn from 2020 YouGov survey. Point estimates are log-odds ratios bracketed by 95 percent confidence intervals. Excluded category here is “procedural” views of democracy.)

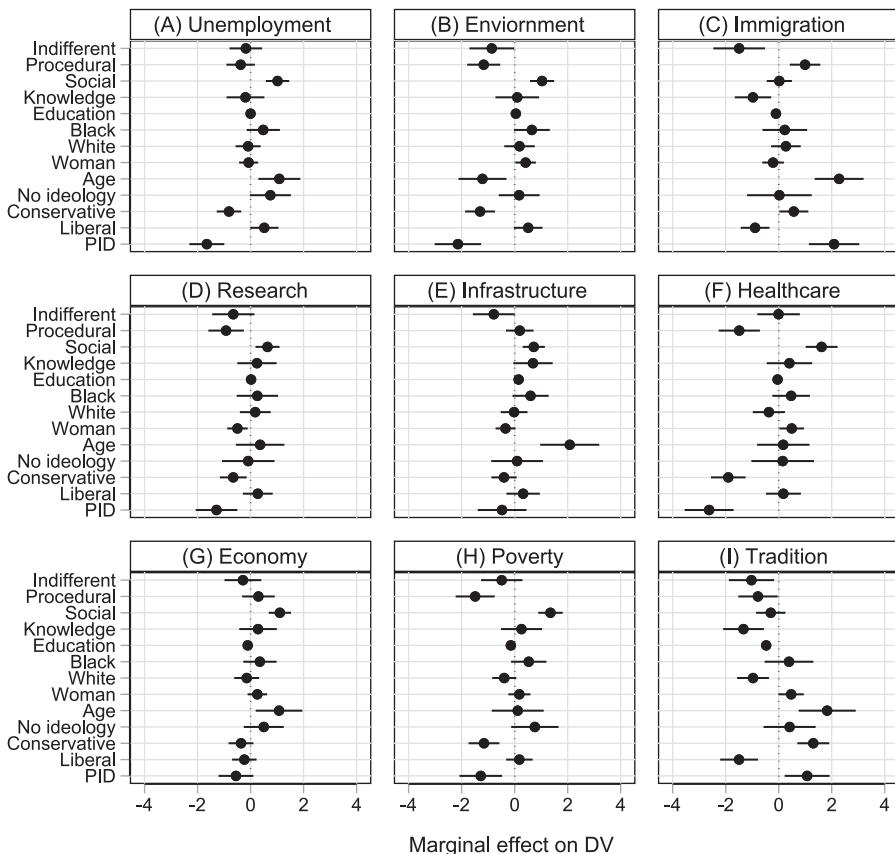


Fig. A9.1. Marginal effect of democracy typology and political group memberships on government solving problems

(Note: Data drawn from 2017 CCES survey. Excluded category for democracy typology and liberal-conservative identity respectively is “moderate.” Question text reads: “Thinking about the following issues, do you think government should do more to solve the problem, government should do less, or is government doing about the right amount?” Responses range from “government should do less” (0) to “more” (10). Item text is as follows: (A) Providing government assistance to the unemployed; (B) Protecting the environment; (C) Reducing illegal immigration; (D) Conducting scientific and medical research; (E) Rebuilding roads, highways, bridges, and other infrastructure; (F) Ensuring that all Americans have health care coverage; (G) Strengthening the economy; (H) Helping people get out of poverty; and (I) Restoring traditional moral values.)



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