

THE DEMOCRACY PROJECT



Reversing a Crisis of Confidence

Foreword

Democracy is facing its most significant challenge of recent years. Worldwide, the uneven distribution of economic progress and unrelenting pace of change have tested the capacity of democratic institutions and their leaders to deliver. At the same time, authoritarian regimes and populist national movements have seized the opportunity to undermine democracy and the example of freedom it represents. The phenomenon has not spared the United States, where confidence in our governing institutions has been weakening over many years and key pillars of our democracy, including the rule of law and freedom of the press, are under strain. These trends have raised questions about whether the public has begun to lose faith in basic democratic concepts and what can be done to strengthen popular support.

To help provide answers, Freedom House, the George W. Bush Institute, and the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement commissioned a series of focus groups and a national survey examining American attitudes about democratic principles and institutions at home and support for U.S. policies that advance democracy abroad. Our organizations engaged two distinguished firms to design and analyze the opinion research: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner

and North Star. This bipartisan effort is a testament to the universality of democratic values and the importance of America's democratic standards for the future of our country and the world. We are grateful to the Knight Foundation for its generous support of our research.

We are encouraged by our finding that American commitment to democracy remains strong. Sweeping ma-

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majorities want to live in a democracy, and they endorse U.S. support for democracy abroad. But the public is also experiencing a crisis of confidence in our political system—a sentiment that spans partisan affiliations and demographic groups. And not all Americans perceive the same benefits from democracy, with some much more convinced of its importance than others.

The study confirms that these frustrations are rooted in systemic problems, including political polarization, racial inequality and discrimination, the influence of money in politics, and degradation of our civil discourse. Such dynamics are hardly new, and the public voiced its dissatisfaction two years ago with the election of a nontraditional candidate for president. While the concerns in question are long-standing and well-documented, they increasingly risk undermining our democratic experiment and must be addressed with new urgency today. We draw inspiration from the powerful activism of citizens across the country, who are taking meaningful steps to restore the health of our democracy. This is a mission that can and must unite us all.

As President George W. Bush has said, “The great democracies face new and serious threats—yet seem to be losing confidence in their own calling and competence. Economic, political, and national security challenges proliferate, and they are made worse by the tendency to turn inward. The health of the democratic spirit itself is at issue. And the renewal of that spirit is the urgent task at hand.”

“The United States is unique among nations because we are founded on a set of democratic ideals,” Vice President Biden said. “You can’t define an American based on where you come from, what you look like, or what faith you follow. Being American is about a commitment to certain basic rights and fundamental freedoms. It’s about upholding those self-evident

truths—that all men and women are created equal, that we are all entitled to dignity. We don’t always live up to our ideals, but they’re the only thing that we all have in common.

“This is a moment where democratic values are under siege around the globe. Governments are making it harder for civil societies to function. Populist attacks are undermining confidence in democratic institutions. Leaders are bolstering their personal power by rolling back democratic principles. And the United States is not immune from these trends. We’ve seen the power of nationalism and populism to appeal to people’s fears and sow division.

“The findings of the Democracy Project confirm we can’t take our freedoms for granted—we have to work for them, and we have to defend them. It’s also a reminder that our democracy has never been perfect, and we can’t be complacent if we hope to continue to lead in the 21st century. By identifying key challenges, we can keep working—Democrats and Republicans, together—to strengthen and reinforce the values that form the foundations of our democracy.”

As leaders of our three organizations, we urge all who care about democracy in the United States to consider these findings and take action of their own. One of the primary purposes of this research is to identify ways that we can communicate more effectively on behalf of the democratic ideals we share and help mobilize public support for democracy and its core principles. We are eager to reinforce the values that form the foundation of our country and have long guided its engagement with the world.

Michael J. Abramowitz, Antony Blinken, and Holly Kuzmich

June 26, 2018

The Democracy Project

The conclusions in this report are drawn from a nationwide telephone survey of 1,700 adults, conducted from April 28 to May 8, 2018; and from 10 focus groups, held with different segments of the American public in five locations across the country, from March 12 to April 18, 2018. A full description of the research methodology is provided in the Appendix.

Finding 1

A large majority of Americans consider it important to live in a democracy, but most also believe U.S. democracy is weak and getting weaker.

Broad support for democracy

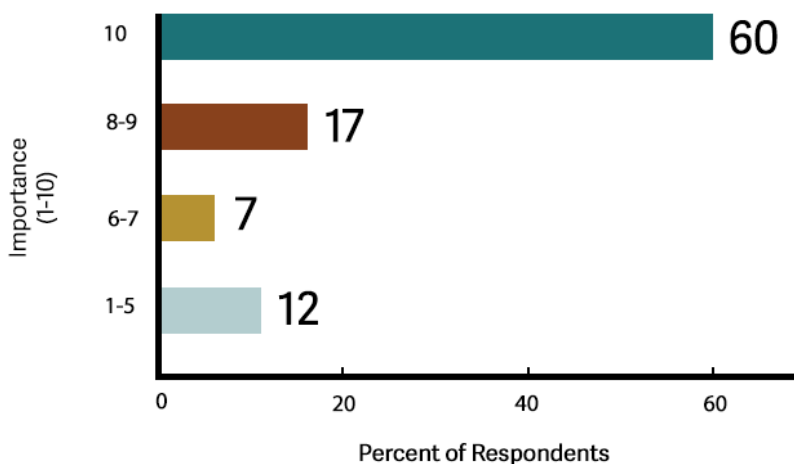
The American public's support for the concept of democracy remains strong. In contrast to the period before World War II, when the appeal of fascism and communism was spreading through Europe and the United States,¹ this project does not show a recent decline in support for the *idea* of democracy.

A full 60 percent of respondents believe that it is "absolutely important" to live in a democracy, rating it at 10 on a 1–10 scale. In total, 84 percent rated the importance at between 6 and 10.

As compared with earlier surveys, these results show no recent decline in overall American support for living in a democracy. The 84 percent of Americans in the current survey who feel it is "important to live in a democracy" (a rating of 6–10) is virtually identical to the 85 percent share in the 2011 World Values Survey. There are even signs that this sentiment is growing stronger. The proportion of respondents in the current survey who rate living in a democracy as "absolutely important" is notably higher than in the World Values

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO LIVE IN A DEMOCRACY?

How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? On a scale of 1-10, where 1 means it is "not at all important" and 10 means "absolutely important", what position would you choose?



Survey, which put it at 47 percent.² But as Finding 2 illustrates below, certain groups are less convinced of democracy's promise.

Support for democracy cuts across partisan lines. Among Democrats, 92 percent feel it is "important to live in a democracy" (a rating of 6–10). Among Republicans, 81 percent gave responses in the same range, as did 80 percent of independents and nonpartisan respondents.

Serious concern about U.S. democracy

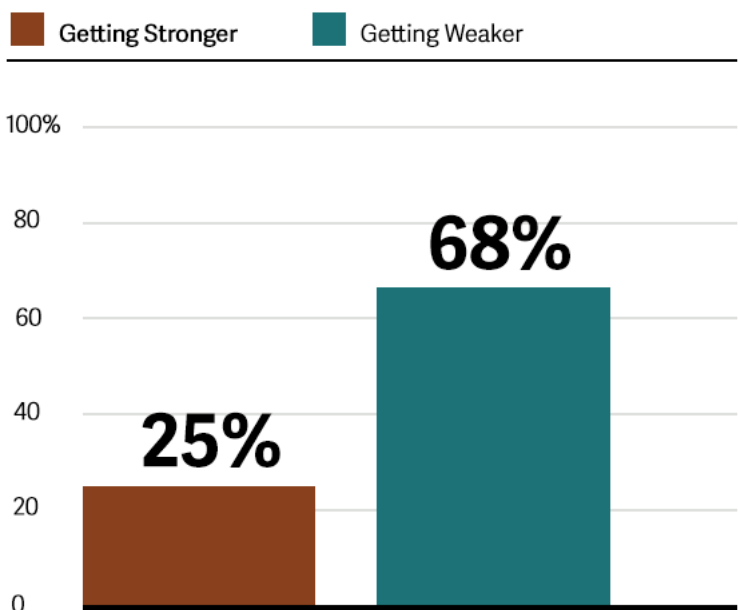
Despite broad agreement on the importance of living in a democracy, there is evidence of a crisis of confidence about how U.S. democracy works in practice. A clear majority of 55 percent see American democracy as currently "weak," and 68 percent believe it is "getting weaker." Around 8 in 10 respondents report that they are "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned" about the condition of democracy in America. A 50–43

1 Melvyn P. Leffler, *The Specter of Communism* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994); Albert S. Lindemann, *A History of Modern Europe* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); David Motadel, "The United States was never immune to fascism. Not then, not now," *The Guardian*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/17/fascism-history-united-states>.

2 The question was worded in the same way across the two surveys, though there are some methodological differences in how they were conducted, including the way in which respondents were recruited (see <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>). This finding calls for further investigation and data collection.

DEMOCRACY “GETTING WEAKER”

Generally speaking, would you mostly describe America's system of democracy these days as getting weaker or stronger?



percent plurality agree that America is in “real danger of becoming a nondemocratic, authoritarian country,” rejecting the alternative statement that “there is no real danger of America becoming a nondemocratic, authoritarian country.”

“You’re disadvantaged not only by where you live or who your family is, but ... your religion, the color of your skin.”

This concern was echoed in the focus group discussions. A focus group participant in St. Louis said, “Our democracy is weak because of the divisiveness. There’s no longer respect or understanding of the process.”

Responses to these questions partly reflect partisan leanings. For example, a strong 57–36 percent majority of self-identified Democrats in the survey say the United States is in real danger of becoming a nondemocratic, authoritarian country, rejecting the counterargument that there is no real danger of this. By almost the same margin, 57–37 percent, a majority of Republicans say there is no real danger of such a development.

There are demographic differences as well. Among women who are members of minority groups, a 60–32 percent majority say the United States is in real danger of becoming a nondemocratic, authoritarian country, whereas only 50–43 percent of white men agree.

As in many polls, most of the questions that touch on satisfaction with the country's conditions and governance tend to elicit more favorable responses from those who identify with the party in power. Yet the crisis of confidence in American democracy spans the partisan divide. Over two-thirds of Democrats, Republicans, and independents feel very or somewhat concerned about the current state of American democracy.

Finding 2

Certain groups that may perceive less benefit from the current system—notably nonwhite Americans—are less convinced of the importance of living in a democracy.

The 84 percent of respondents who said that living in a democracy is important (rating it between 6 and 10 on the 1–10 scale) held steady regardless of race. However, differences between demographic groups emerge over whether living in a democracy is “absolutely important”—a rating of 10 on the 1–10 scale. While 60 percent of respondents overall gave a rating of 10, just 54 percent of nonwhite respondents agreed that living in a democracy is “absolutely important,” and the figure was 64 percent for their white counterparts. A regression analysis of the data shows that concerns about race are associated with a sense of weakness in America’s democracy, even after controlling for party identification.

The divide was more pronounced among certain subsets of minorities. Only 49 percent of members of minority groups who did not graduate from college gave a rating of 10 (compared with 58 percent of nongraduating white Americans), as did 48 percent of younger members of minority groups (versus 53 percent of young white respondents), and 52 percent of minority women (versus 61 percent of white women).

These groups are among those that may perceive less benefit from the country's democratic system. A minority of nonwhite respondents (42 percent) were

satisfied with “the way democracy is working in our country,” compared with 51 percent of white respondents. Minority groups that were less likely to rate living in a democracy as “absolutely important” also had low levels of satisfaction: 58 percent of minority women, 56 percent of members of minority groups who did not graduate from college, and 54 percent of younger members of minority groups expressed that they are not satisfied with the functioning of American democracy.

The demographic gaps on these questions are cause for concern, as they suggest that groups historically underserved by American democracy perceive most acutely the shortcomings of our political system. The focus group conversations produced similar findings. A participant in Charlotte said, “There are a lot of disadvantages. You’re disadvantaged not only by where you live or who your family is, but there are some other things that may limit you: your religion, the color of your skin. There are a lot of things that will lead to you not having opportunities to get a good education, to have a good job, or even to start a business.”

Young adults also feel less strongly about the importance of democracy than respondents over age 29. While 81 percent of younger participants rated the importance of democracy between 6 and 10 on the 10-point scale, only slightly less than the public overall, just 39 percent rated it as “absolutely important”—far below the 60 percent figure for respondents as a whole.

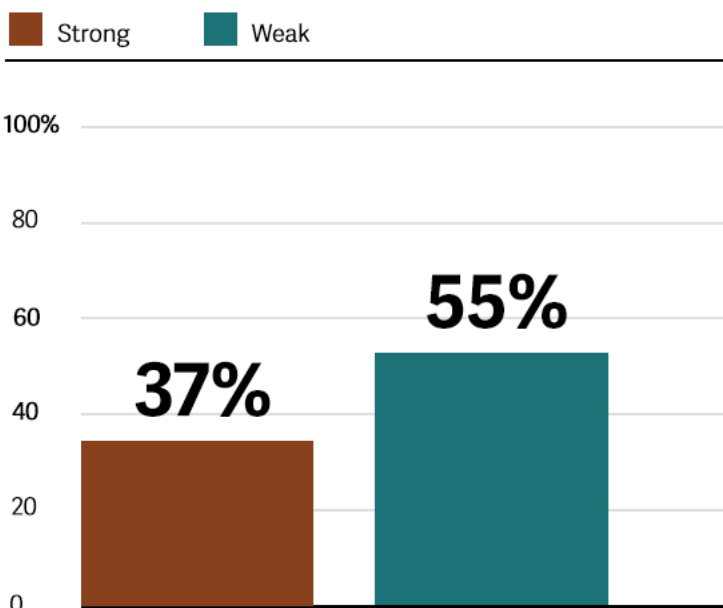
Recent articles have cited this lower support among young Americans as evidence of a national decline in democratic values,³ but past longitudinal studies have suggested a lifecycle effect in which people develop stronger support for living in a democracy as they age. Moreover, in the current research, the share of 18- to 29-year-olds who say it is “absolutely important” to live in a democracy is no lower than in the 2011 World Values Survey, in which 30 percent rated the importance of living in a democracy at a 10, suggesting that support for democracy among young Americans is holding steady or improving. This finding is consistent with those of the Democracy Fund’s study “Follow the Leader: Exploring American Support for Democracy and Authoritarianism.”⁴

3 Roberto S. Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Danger of Deconsolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (July 2016): 5–17.

4 Lee Drutman, Larry Diamond, and Joe Goldman, “Follow the Leader: Exploring American Support for Democracy and Authoritarianism,” Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, March 2018, <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publications/2017-voter-survey/follow-the-leader>.

MAJORITY SEE DEMOCRACY WEAK

Generally speaking, would you mostly describe America's system of democracy these days as weak or strong?



Finding 3

Americans are frustrated with racism and discrimination and with the influence of money in politics.

Survey respondents were presented with a list of 11 “things that some people might say are wrong with our democracy” and asked to select the two that were the most concerning to them. Among the responses, two topics were selected most frequently: racism and discrimination and the influence of money in politics.

Racism and discrimination

“Racism and discrimination” was selected by 27 percent of respondents as one of their top two issues. Among nonwhite respondents, 42 percent selected this as one of their top two concerns. And 39 percent of those under age 30 marked racism and discrimination as one of their top two concerns.

Particularly among nonwhite members of the focus groups, there was a pervasive concern about racial dynamics eroding democracy’s strength. As a participant in St. Louis said, “Our system was set up to be a democracy for a very specific subset of people. We’ve progressed, but some aren’t seeing the democracy that others are seeing.”

Unsurprisingly, nonwhite and white Americans have very different perceptions on this question. Nonwhite respondents selected racism and discrimination as one of their top two concerns more than twice as often as whites (42–18 percent). Half (50 percent) of white survey respondents see “equal rights and protections for racial minorities” improving, while 41 percent see them deteriorating. Nonwhites see conditions getting worse by a much larger margin, 63–31 percent.

There are also meaningful differences across party affiliations. A 68 percent majority of Republicans say “equal rights and protections for racial minorities” in America are getting better rather than worse, while only 23 percent of Democrats hold this view. Racism and discrimination is one of the top two concerns about U.S. democracy for 39 percent of Democrats, but just 12 percent of Republicans selected it.

The role of money in politics

Some 28 percent of survey respondents rated “big money in politics” as one of their top two issues of concern among the 11 possibilities, a statistical tie with “racism and discrimination.” In addition, a large majority (80–12 percent) believe that the “influence of money in politics” is getting worse rather than better. Over three-quarters (77 percent) agree that “the laws enacted by our national government these days mostly reflect what powerful special interests and their lobbyists want.” Only 17 percent chose the alternative statement: “The laws enacted by our national government these days mostly reflect what the people want.”

Majorities from both parties shared these concerns. The feeling that the problem is getting worse is stronger among Democrats, at 89 percent, but nearly two-thirds of Republicans (65 percent) agree. Similarly, while 81 percent of Democrats say the laws enacted these days mostly reflect the wishes of special interests and their lobbyists, 70 percent of Republicans hold the same view. A regression analysis of the data shows that concern about money in politics is associated with a sense of weakness in America’s democracy, even after controlling for party identification.

Money in politics emerged as the top concern across the focus groups as well, discussed at length in all five cities. A participant in Pittsburgh said, “Greed and power are so dangerous. It’s so rampant right now. Whoever has the most money is going to be the most powerful.”

Finding 4

Most Americans believe that protecting the rights of individuals and small groups should be a priority in our democracy.

A 54–39 percent majority of Americans expressed agreement that “in our democracy, it is more important that the majority does not trample on the rights of individuals and small groups,” as opposed to the alternative statement that “in our democracy, it is more important that the will of the majority prevails.” Different respondents likely have different groups in mind when they hear this question. But the results imply general support for the idea that in a democracy, representatives elected by the majority do not have a mandate to impose their policies without regard for the rights of the minority.

This finding is important in light of the illiberal turn taken by some other democracies, such as Hungary and Poland. In both of those countries, political parties that won majorities in general elections have made antidemocratic changes that infringe on individual rights and the rule of law. While some analysts have warned that the same could happen in the United States,⁵ the current research shows that such actions would not be well received by a majority of the American public.

Similarly, there is a good deal of agreement about the importance of “equal rights, regardless of race, gender, or beliefs.” Given a list of 10 components of democracy, 38 percent of respondents selected it as one of the two most important to them personally. Equal rights placed first among the 10 options overall, above traditional democratic freedoms such as free elections, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. Nonwhite respondents, at 47 percent, chose equal rights at a higher rate than whites, at 33 percent.

In 2017, the Pew Research Center found that Americans seemed to put more value on the structural elements of democracy, such as “open and fair elections” and

⁵ See, for example, Yascha Mounk, “Donald Trump Just Asked Congress to End the Rule of Law,” *Slate*, January 30, 2018, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/01/donald-trump-just-asked-congress-to-end-the-rule-of-law.html>; Fareed Zakaria, “America’s Democracy Has Become Illiberal,” *Washington Post*, December 29, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/america-is-becoming-a-land-of-less-liberty/2016/12/29/2a91744c-ce09-11e6-a747-d03044780a02_story.html.

the “system of checks and balances.”⁶ But the present survey, which asks respondents to name the elements that are “most important to you personally,” suggests that equal rights may be a more powerful selling-point for democracy when Americans focus on their own lives rather than how government works in the abstract.

Finding 5

Americans support the idea that democracy and human rights should play a role in U.S. foreign policy.

Public opinion on democracy and human rights support

The American public’s allegiance to the concept of democracy carries over into a belief that the United States should do what it can to support democracy and human rights abroad. Overall, 71 percent of respondents favor the U.S. government taking steps to support democracy and human rights in other countries.⁷ By a 2–1 margin, 36–18 percent, Americans would prefer to increase rather than decrease U.S. government efforts to support democracy and human rights abroad. The greatest share, 42 percent, would like to maintain the current level of support.

The survey tested a number of arguments about democracy and human rights support with the goal of determining which were most persuasive. Overall, respondents signaled much stronger agreement with arguments in favor of U.S. support for democracy and human rights abroad than with those against. A moral argument generated the most consensus. A 91 percent majority agrees that “we can’t control what happens in the world, but we have a moral obligation to speak up and do what we can when people are victims of genocide, violence, and severe human rights abuses.” Agreement with this idea is nearly 30 points stronger than with the top-testing argument *against* democracy support. As a focus group participant in St. Louis said, “If we want to be this forerunner and rep-

resent idealistic democracy, we have to do this. I don’t think it’s more of a burden than a benefit. It does cost a lot, but what’s too much? You’re putting a price tag on people’s freedoms, so I don’t think it’s too much.”

Two other arguments received strong endorsements. An 84 percent majority agrees that “when other countries become democratic, it contributes to our own well-being.” And a 67–22 percent majority believes that “when other countries are democratic, rather than dictatorships, it often helps make the U.S. a little safer”—rejecting the alternative statement that “there is no impact on U.S. security when other countries move away from dictatorship and become democracies.” These responses crossed party lines but were slightly stronger among Republicans. As a focus group participant in St. Louis said, “If you have isolationism and you choose not to interfere, you leave things open to the rise of dictatorships that will one day threaten us.” Another felt that “we should help citizens of other countries enjoy the same rights as we have because we operate in such a globalized environment—it’s extremely important.”

Some arguments against U.S. support for democracy and human rights abroad also generate majority agreement, particularly those that allude in some way to the cost of U.S. military interventions. A 62 percent majority agreed with the statement, “Who are we to dictate what the citizens of other countries want? Who are we to really understand other countries and cultures? We should heed the lessons of Vietnam and Iraq and stop interfering in other countries at high cost to us, and often at the expense of the people who live there.” Similarly, a 56 percent majority agrees with this statement: “Despite our efforts, the Middle East remains a mess and China remains authoritarian; we cannot spend so much money on something that yields so few results.”

Elite opinion

Past research has shown that members of the public tend to care more and have more deeply held opinions about issues that they believe affect them directly, such as rising oil prices or health care. The average American is likely to see foreign policy issues as less relevant to daily life, and studies have found that elite opinion is an important factor in shaping public attitudes on foreign policy.⁸ Because of this pattern,

6 “Large Majorities See Checks and Balances, Right to Protest as Essential for Democracy,” Pew Research Center, March 2, 2017, <http://www.people-press.org/2017/03/02/large-majorities-see-checks-and-balances-right-to-protest-as-essential-for-democracy/>.

7 Based on randomized sample, survey respondents answered one of two related questions: “Do you generally favor or oppose the U.S. government taking steps to support democracy and human rights in other countries?” and “Do you generally favor or oppose the U.S. government taking non-military steps, like diplomacy and development assistance, to support democracy and human rights in other countries?”

8 See, for example, Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies,” *World Politics* 43 (July 1991); Adam J. Berinsky, “Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict,” *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (November 2007); Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, “Calculation, Community and Cues: Public Opinion on European Integration,” *European Union Politics* 6, no. 4 (2005).

the levels of public support for certain foreign policy positions reflected in the present survey are more likely to fluctuate over time.

“People say their vote doesn’t matter. Yes, it does. Get involved.”

To garner the views of a more specialized audience, the survey queried an oversample of college-educated voters (people who report that they always or almost always vote) who are regular news consumers. This group is not identical to the elites who help form opinions on foreign policy, but it shares many characteristics with those elites, making it worth examining in this context. Among the oversample, 80 percent favor the U.S. government taking steps to support democracy and human rights in other countries. Some 42 percent (6 percentage points more than the general public) favor increasing such efforts, while just 16 percent would rather decrease them (2 percentage points less than the general public); another 40 percent (also 2 percentage points less) would keep them at the current level. On the whole, this subgroup is more supportive than the general public of U.S. attempts to promote democracy and human rights overseas.

It is important to note that this poll did not ask respondents to rank democracy support among other budget priorities. Participants in several of the focus groups felt strongly that support for democracy abroad should only come after we have solved problems at home. As one said in Pittsburgh, “We have no role to play. We need to worry about our country first.”

Finding 6

Poll results show which messages about democracy resonate most with the public.

The risk of loss and the call to serve

Words and arguments have the power to resonate and inspire. Words alone cannot restore the public’s confidence in democracy, but the right messages can play an important role in strengthening the coalition of democracy activists and engaging new participants.

Our research tested over a dozen messages aimed at generating increased support for American democracy. After trials in the focus groups, the survey tested the seven most promising approaches (see graphic).

These yielded highly differentiated results, providing useful guidance about the elements of a successful advocacy effort.

The message that resonated the most across nearly all groups stressed the danger that Americans’ freedoms and rights are being “whittled away,” and emphasized the need for greater citizen engagement to prevent that erosion:

“Today, there is a great need for us all to act as responsible citizens—things like voting, volunteering, taking time to stay informed, and standing up for what’s right—so that the freedoms and rights we cherish don’t get whittled away.”

This message makes 86 percent of respondents feel more favorable about America’s system of democratic government; 62 percent felt much more favorable, and 24 percent felt somewhat more favorable. These figures are 6–7 points higher than the response to the next strongest message, and 12–17 points higher than for the weakest messages. Moreover, the message about freedoms being whittled away remains the strongest across virtually every demographic and political category, including party identification, gender, age, race, and education.

There are two elements to highlight in this message. First, it stresses the risk of losing what people value in their democracy: their rights and freedoms. Behavioral psychologists have long noted the phenomenon of “loss aversion,” or people’s tendency to place more value on things they might lose than on things they might obtain.⁹

Second, the message features a call to civic engagement and activism. Among poll respondents, 59 percent report that engagement in civic and political issues is getting better, not worse. Similarly, in focus group discussions, many participants applauded the increased activism they have witnessed in recent months. As one said in Pittsburgh, “Take pride in your community and let it flourish from there. People say their vote doesn’t matter. Yes, it does. Get involved.” The strength of this message in the survey suggests that a call to service remains a compelling approach to engaging Americans in their own democracy. This relates to further findings on ways to strengthen democracy (see below).

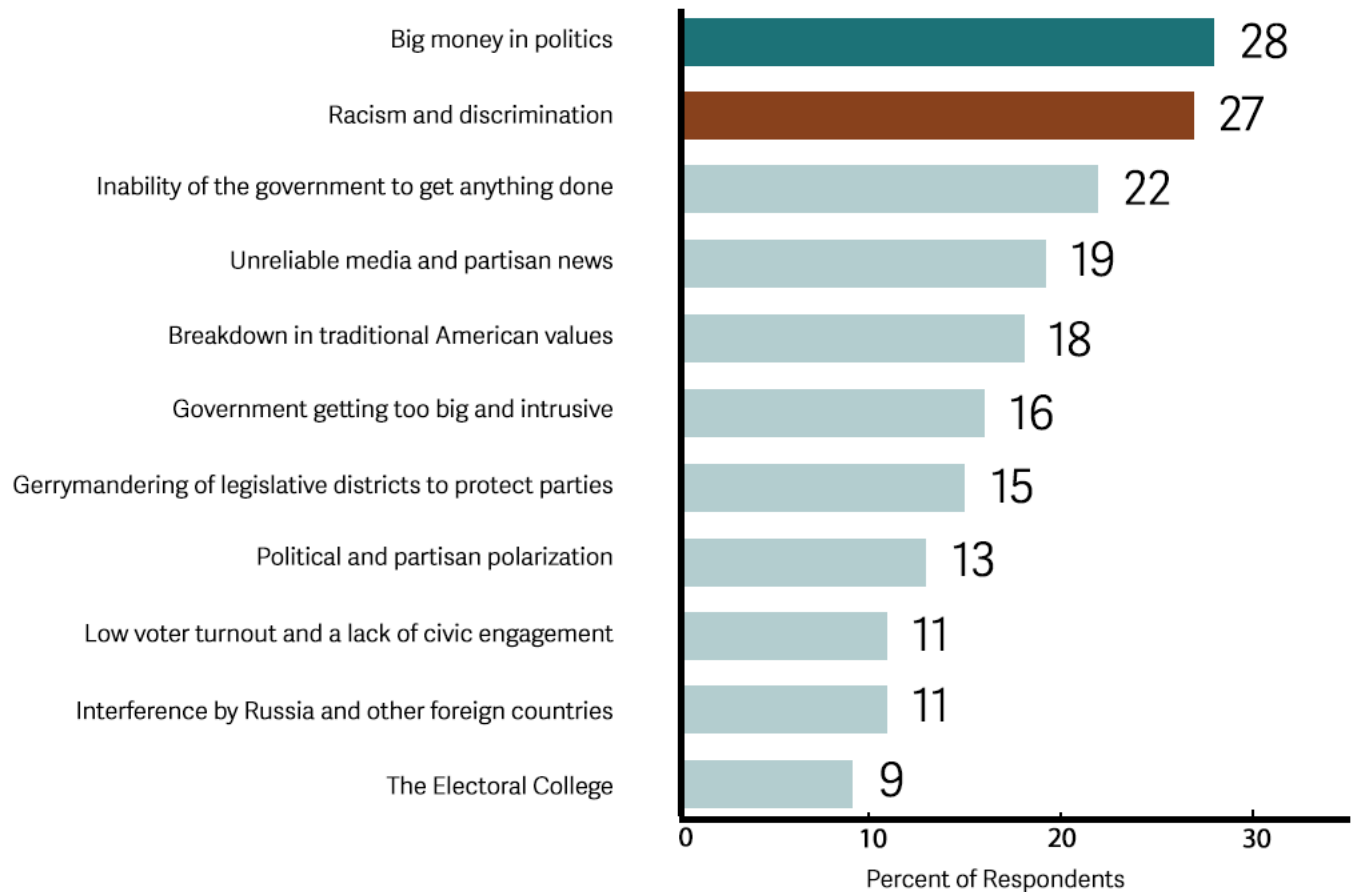
Steps to strengthen U.S. democracy

In the focus groups and the survey, people expressed

⁹ Daniel Kahneman, Jack Knetsch, and Richard Thaler, “Experimental Test of the Endowment Effect and the Coase Theorem,” *Journal of Political Economy* 98, no. 6 (1990).

TOP CONCERNS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

I will now read you a list of some things that some people might say are wrong with our democracy. In your opinion, which TWO of the following are most concerning to you when it comes to democracy in America today?



strong support for a range of measures that could help to reverse the erosion of confidence. Nearly all of the initiatives tested, 10 out of 11, generated majority support. In testing the measures and listing them below, the intent is not to imply that these ideas have been endorsed by the organizations that sponsored this research. Rather, the purpose is to illustrate the kinds of measures that may resonate with the American public.

Although nearly all of the measures were positively received by respondents, three stood out as having potential to address the public’s major concerns about U.S. democracy.

Public service. According to the survey results, 81 percent endorse a proposal to provide “incentives for all young people to do public service, like military, teaching, or volunteer work.” The idea generated support

“It’s not the fact that we shouldn’t support democracy, it’s that we shouldn’t be imposing democracy.”

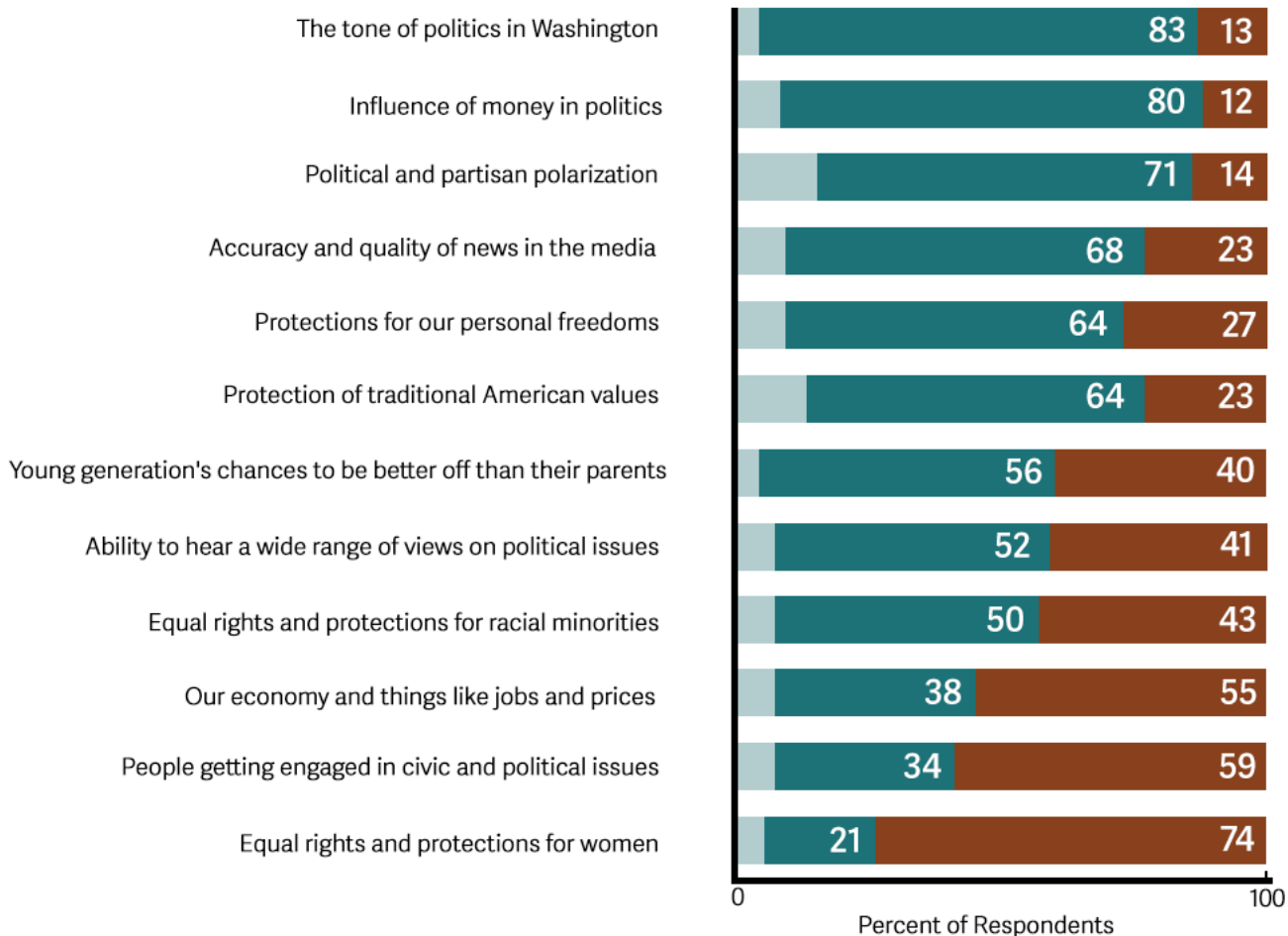
from approximately 80 percent or more among most segments of the public, cutting across races, genders, age groups, political leanings, and education levels. As a focus group participant in Charlotte said, “I see kids in my community who aren’t on the news who are amazing people. There are some really great kids who are informed and volunteer and I’m hoping they’re the ones who rise to the top. I will be happy that they’re going to run my country.”

There is even stronger support for a proposal to “ensure that schools make civic education a bigger

INFLUENCE OF MONEY IN POLITICS SEEN AS GETTING MUCH WORSE

Now, I will read you a list of issues. Please tell me if you think this aspect of our society is getting better or worse in recent years?

In % ■ Getting better ■ Getting worse



part of the curriculum.” This is the single most popular initiative tested, with 89 percent favoring it as a way to bolster democracy. A participant in St. Louis said, “I wish you learned more in school about how government really works and affects you, not just the three branches of government, but what’s going on.”

Adopting protections against racial bias. As described above, “racism and discrimination” was one of respondents’ top two concerns about U.S. democracy. A proposal to “adopt stronger protections against racial bias in policing and criminal sentencing” is among the strongest tested, leading an 80 percent majority to favor it as a way to improve democracy in America. The idea generates somewhat stronger support from

Democrats than Republicans, but only marginally stronger support from nonwhites than whites. A focus group participant in St. Louis said, “Cops and people in that position of power need to be held to the same standards as those who don’t have that power.”

Limits on contributions in federal elections. The role of money in politics was in respondents’ top tier of concerns about U.S. democracy today. A proposal to impose tighter limits and disclosure requirements on financial contributions in federal elections was supported by 75 percent of respondents as a way “to strengthen our democratic system.” It received greater support from Democrats (78 percent) and independents (75 percent) than Republicans (70 percent).

The idea also had more support among those who earn \$100,000 per year or more and white people than those who earn \$50,000 a year or less and nonwhite people.

Messaging for democracy in foreign policy

The survey suggests that it may help to cite specific success stories when talking about programmatic support for democracy and human rights abroad. While overall support for such efforts stands at 71 percent, levels of support for specific historical examples of American assistance is even higher. An impressive 88 percent reported feeling strongly or somewhat strongly that the United States was right to support the post-Soviet democratic transformation of Central Europe. And 80 percent endorse the actions by U.S. citizens to help free Nelson Mandela and end apart-

heid in South Africa during the 1980s and 1990s.

Finally, the research indicates that it may be helpful, when talking about efforts to support democracy and human rights abroad, to specify when such efforts are *nonmilitary*. The focus groups showed that many Americans are wary of democracy promotion abroad precisely because they associate it with military intervention, which they see as delivering mixed results. The survey (using a randomized split-sample experiment) shows a modest but meaningful improvement in responses to questions about democracy promotion when the question clarifies that it is talking about “nonmilitary steps, like diplomacy and development assistance.” A focus group participant in Phoenix said, “It’s not the fact that we shouldn’t support democracy, it’s that we shouldn’t be imposing democracy.”

Recommendations

One of the goals of this project is to encourage everyone who has a stake in U.S. democracy—civil society groups, educators, businesses, elected officials, policymakers, and the general public—to think critically about the challenges facing our democracy and take action to rebuild faith in fundamental democratic principles and institutions. As a starting point, as a result of this research, we offer the following recommendations, particularly on messaging. There is much more to be done, and we hope these recommendations are seen as a work in progress—to be updated and revisited frequently.

- **Call to action:** Lean into calls for civic engagement and activism as a means of bolstering American democracy. The phrase “there is a great need for us all to act as responsible citizens—things like voting, volunteering, taking time to stay informed, and standing up for what’s right” was part of the most persuasive message tested in the survey.
- **Risks of inaction:** When speaking about threats to democracy in the United States, emphasize that Americans risk losing what they value in our system, though not in language so extreme that people forfeit hope. In the survey, the message that generated the most favorable feelings about America’s system of democratic government used the phrase “so that the freedoms and rights we cherish don’t get whittled away.”
- **Civic education:** Champion a stronger public understanding of democratic principles—especially among young people, who showed less enthusiasm for democracy in the survey. This could be achieved in part through improved and expanded civic education, including the teaching of democracy’s basic concepts. Nearly 90 percent of poll respondents favored a proposal to “ensure that schools make civic education a bigger part of the curriculum.”
- **Success stories:** Cite individual success stories as much as possible. Survey respondents expressed greater approval for specific past cases of American support than for the concept of such support in the abstract.

Appendix: Research Methodology

The study consisted of a three-stage process.

Summary and analysis of existing research. This phase began in 2017 with a broad review and discussion of existing opinion research regarding American attitudes toward democracy in the United States, and toward U.S. actions to support democracy and human rights abroad. The two polling companies involved in this project, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner (GQR) and North Star, produced a paper summarizing more than a half-century of such opinion research. That document became the basis for a half-day discussion among a wide range of bipartisan experts and activists on these issues, held at Freedom House on

September 19, 2017. The paper and the discussion concluded that new opinion research could be useful in filling a series of gaps in the published data about U.S. democracy, and could also update many earlier findings.

Focus groups. With input from the sponsoring organizations, GQR and North Star designed and carried out a set of 10 focus groups, with two each in five different locations; each group consisted of a specific segment of the public that remains important to understanding how Americans perceive their democracy. In this report, the participants are referred to by the city of their focus group.

| Date | Location | Segment of the public |
|------------|------------------|---|
| 03/12/2018 | Pittsburgh, PA | Small-business owners |
| 03/12/2018 | Pittsburgh, PA | Conservative white male voters |
| 03/14/2018 | St. Louis, MO | Progressive voters |
| 03/14/2018 | St. Louis, MO | Young people ages 23 to 35 |
| 04/09/2018 | Charlotte, NC | Leaders in faith communities |
| 04/09/2018 | Charlotte, NC | Active military members/veterans/family |
| 04/12/2018 | Indianapolis, IN | Public servants |
| 04/12/2018 | Indianapolis, IN | Social media content generators |
| 04/18/2018 | Phoenix, AZ | Community leaders |
| 04/18/2018 | Phoenix, AZ | Educators |

In all, the 10 groups included 92 participants. Most featured a mix of individuals across lines of gender and race. Except for those focused on conservative and progressive voters, the groups also generally included a mix of partisan identities. Excerpts from these groups are included throughout the report above to provide texture to the quantitative findings from the subsequent survey, but the focus group findings are inherently qualitative.

Nationwide survey. The final stage of the study was a nationwide survey, based on 1,700 telephone interviews, conducted from April 28 to May 8, 2018. Roughly half (42 percent) of the interviews were conducted by mobile phone, to ensure greater representativeness and accuracy. The sample was nationally representative of the voting-age population. The researchers partnered with Luce Research to conduct

the survey and received the sample from TargetSmart, which maintains a database of 254 million phone numbers, including those of unregistered voting-age citizens.

The interviews included a “base sample” of 1,400 adults, plus an “oversample” of 300 “opinion elites”—individuals with a four-year college degree who follow global and national news “very” or “somewhat closely” and who vote “always” or “nearly always.” Counting these individuals along with the “elites” naturally found in the base sample, the survey included a total of 795 elites. The extra interviews with elites were weighted down to reflect their true proportion of the population. The margin of sampling error on a random survey of 1,400 respondents is +/-2.6 percent; the margin of sampling error on the 795 opinion elites is +/-3.5 percent.

About Our Organizations



Freedom House. Freedom House champions democracy worldwide by documenting threats to freedom, supporting frontline activists, and advocating for political rights and civil liberties.



The George W. Bush Institute. Housed within the George W. Bush Presidential Center, the George W. Bush Institute is an action-oriented, nonpartisan policy organization with the mission of developing leaders, advancing policy, and taking action to solve today's most pressing challenges. The work is achieved through three Impact Centers—Domestic Excellence, Global Leadership, and the Engagement Agenda—by which the Bush Institute engages the greater community with its important work. The Bush Institute's Human Freedom initiative advances freedom by developing leaders in emerging democracies, standing with those who still live under tyranny, and fostering U.S. leadership through policy and action.



The Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement. The Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement is founded on the principle that an open, democratic, secure, tolerant, and interconnected world benefits all Americans. As a nonpartisan organization based in our nation's capital, the Penn Biden Center engages more of our fellow citizens in shaping this world, while ensuring the gains of global engagement are widely shared. It works with the University of Pennsylvania community to convene world leaders, develop and advance smart policy, and strengthen the national debate for continued American global leadership in the 21st century.

