The Link Between the Meanings of and Support for Democracy

After a period of neglect, scholars of American politics have begun analyzing the depth of Americans' commitments to democracy. Yet, for all the concern regarding how prevailing events have undermined citizens' support for democracy, comparatively little attention has been paid to how individuals understand democracy's core meanings – much less the implications that these meanings have for such support. Drawing on new data collected in a nationally-representative 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) module, we construct a typology of perspectives on democracy. While there is general consensus regarding the importance of instrumental rights like free and fair elections and freedoms of speech and assembly, differences in composite views of democracy are rooted primarily in substantive disagreements over the appropriate allocation and distribution of political and economic power. In turn, we find that commitments toward democracy are grounded in how citizens think about its meanings.

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, "Politics and the English Language"

The role of political science has been described as the pursuit of an empirical democratic theory (Key 1949, 1956; Dahl 1956). In this vein, fundamental questions regarding democratic governance – Are citizens capable of governing? Are democracies sustainable? – have traditionally animated scholarly interest in democracy. Yet, for all the theorizing about the value and nature of democracy, 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).

This lack of clarity is worrisome given that a growing chorus of scholars have argued recently that democracy is in crisis (Diamond 2015, Foa and Mounk 2016, Mechkova, et al. 2017, Page and Gilens 2017, House 2018, Mounk 2018). In this telling, public commitments to democratic norms, principles, and processes are waning (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014, Foa and Mounk 2017, Jennings, et al. 2017), alongside long-term declines in trust and confidence in political institutions (Kriesi 2013, Citrin and Stoker 2018).[1] Within the United States, specifically, the crisis of democracy is reflected in a growing disenchantment with political institutions (Hetherington 2005, Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), increased affective polarization (Iyengar, et al. 2012, Lelkes 2016, Mason 2016), and declining support for democracy – particularly among younger generations (Foa and Mounk 2016).[2]

A glaring omission throughout this work, however, is the lack of common evaluative criteria by which to judge democratic support. To appropriately assess how individuals value democracy requires first understanding what meanings the mass public associates with democracy Because procedural definitions of democracy primarily focus on representation and responsiveness, much of the work examining individuals' attitudes toward democracy examines institutional support in relation to

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[1] Although prevailing political events have brought these concerns into sharp relief, we would note that this crisis is hardly the first. Four decades ago Michael Crozier, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki (1975) wrote the aptly named "The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission," arguing that the capacities of democratic political institutions were overwhelmed by democratic demands (Crozier, et al. 1975).

[2] While many of these shifts were apparent before the 2016 presidential election, the combination of Donald Trump's disregard for democratic norms and the authoritarian base of his political support have given new urgency to concerns that the American mass public is souring on democracy (MacWilliams 2016, Inglehart and Norris 2017, Mickey, et al. 2017; Carey et al. n.d.).

democratic processes (e.g. electoral winners are more satisfied with democracy). Yet, the question of how individuals conceive of democracy is, in a meaningful sense, ideological – certainly the weaving of liberalism into the fabric of American democracy reveals a prescriptive argument regarding the shape and nature of basic civil liberties (Beetham 2012) and the underlying market economy (Polanyi 1944 Ebner 2011). As such, 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, a multidimensional framework of social and economic preferences. If true, then appraisals of democracy, in turn, must account for those expectations.

This paper explores how Americans conceptualize democracy and, in turn, how they evaluate it. Using data from a nationally-representative Cooperative Congressional Election Survey module collected in 2016, we explore the various "essential" features that individuals associate with democracy. We then use latent class analysis (LCA) to build a typology of citizens' composite views of democracy. To establish the face validity of the resulting classes, we then conduct an exploratory investigation of the various predictors of class membership. We find that these visions of democracy are not conventional ideological or partisan proxies, but that they relate to how attitudes regarding freedom, economic parity, and opportunity of access intersect.

Finally, we analyze how this typology is related to eight assessments of democracy found commonly throughout the literature on democratic support. We find that while our typology is modestly related to satisfaction with democracy (specific support), composite visions of democracy structure authoritarian preferences and the value individuals assign to living in a democracy (diffuse support). Not only do these effects persist and exceed those associated with liberal-conservative identity, but they operate in countervailing ways that offset some of the negative association between conservatism and support for strong leaders or military rule. On balance, these findings reveal that discussions about declining support for democracy should be informed by first considering how citizens actually understand it.

A Framework for Assessing Democratic Meanings

The distinction between how publics define democracy and what they expect from it is perhaps best illustrated by the concept of the "democratic deficit," or the gap between democratic expectations and democratic performance (Norris 2011). Unrealistic expectations, structural biases toward negative news, and failures of elected governments all sow democratic disaffection among citizens. This disconnect is also characteristic of the promise and performance model of democracy (c.f. Ostrom and Simon 1985), whereby citizens evaluate democracies based on prior expectations about what democracies promise versus what democracies actually accomplish. For many citizens, democracy's promise is not realized by its performance (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014, Foa and Mounk 2017, Jennings, et al. 2017, Davis and Weber 2018).

Left unstated throughout much of this work, however, is an assumption that citizens operate from a shared understanding of how democracies *ought* to function. Yet, when pollsters ask citizens to rate democracy, are citizens evaluating the same construct? We posit that the answer is no, that groups of citizens operate under different understandings of democracy and that those understandings have implications for democratic evaluations. This is not a new argument, per se. As early as 1960, Protho and Grigg challenged a prevailing theoretical premise that some level of public or elite consensus on the rules of the games was either theoretically necessary or empirically observable (Prothro and Grigg 1960, McClosky 1964). To the extent that any consensus existed within American politics, they argued, it was to an abstract, ambiguous definition of democracy. Once the rules were more fully articulated and carefully specified, consensus quickly fell apart. Elsewhere, David Easton (1975) distinguished between specific support (for a ruling party) and diffuse support (for the broader political system), raising questions about how citizens' expectations of democracy shaped their evaluations of democratic processes and outcomes.

Our approach to ascertaining how individuals think about democracy begins with the notion that democratic attitudes are inherently multidimensional. In other words, citizen understandings of democracy are more complex and nuanced than a unidimensional continuum ranging from dissatisfied to satisfied or not confident to confident (Dalton, et al. 2007, Canache 2012). Figure 1 illustrates this distinction in a very simplified fashion. In Panel A, it is not abundantly clear what summary judgments involving "satisfaction" or "confidence" in democracy conveys – other than the valence regarding (dis)approval.

If these instruments do little to uncover the meaning of democracy, perhaps other items that ask about the "important" (European Social Survey) or "essential" features of democracy (World Values Survey) offer more fertile ground for thinking through democratic evaluations. Within comparative research, scholars often distinguish between procedural and substantive understandings of democracy when evaluating public support for democracy (Mattes and Bratton 2007). Where procedural elements include democratic processes and procedures (fair elections, majority rule) and the protection of individual rights (freedom speech and religion), substantive features involve social benefits (providing for basic needs, unemployment benefits) as well as economic growth and development (see also, Dalton, et al. 2007). These attitudes regarding important features of democracy are thought to be distinct enough conceptually to be treated separately for the purposes of analysis, and these instruments typically reduce into latent constructs that roughly approximate the distinctions outlined here (e.g. Ferrín and Kriesi 2016).

Figure 1. Templates for thinking about democracy

A. Unipolar evaluations
How do you feel about democracy?

B. Dimensional evaluative framework
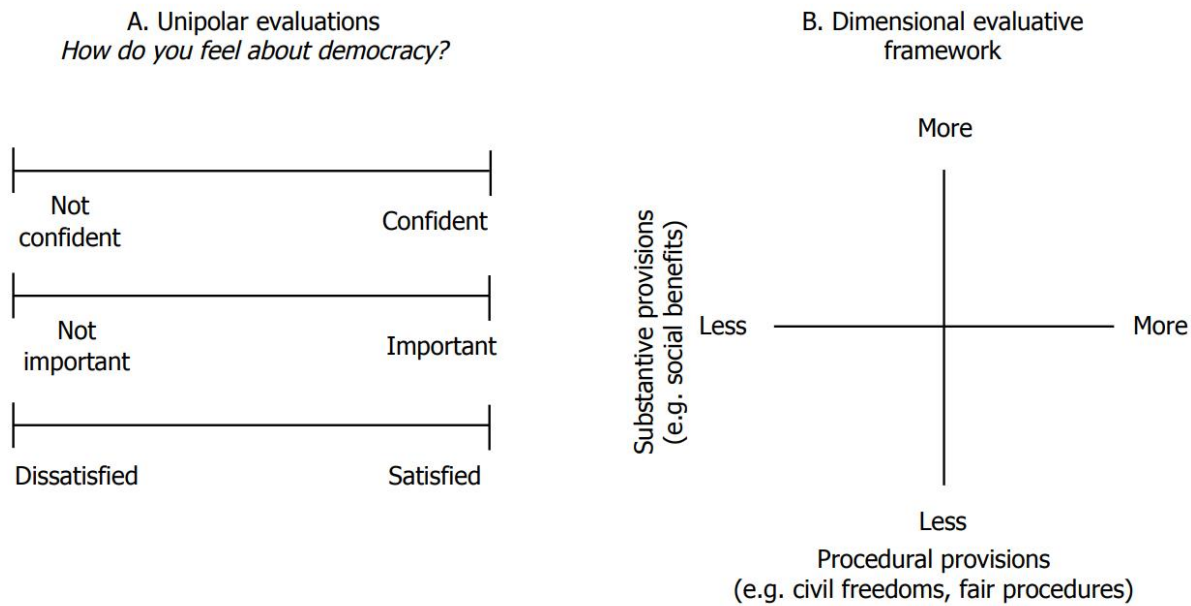
Yet, it is not clear how *configurations* of such attitudes intersect to form composite, discrete visions of democracy. Consider Panel B in Figure 1. For illustrative purposes, we juxtapose a latent dimension reflecting preferences toward welfare provisions (horizontal axis), which might encompass attitudes toward redistributive taxation, the provision of basic needs, and other social welfare features, with a second dimension regarding procedural provisions, like preferences about free speech, the importance of fair elections, and equal treatment (vertical axis). It is not immediately clear how these attitudinal dimensions, which may or may not be orthogonal, intersect to create different permutations of democratic meanings. Here, constructing groupings of respondents based on response patterns would require the researcher to make an arbitrary decision regarding the appropriate bounds associated with different combinations of attitudes.

We suggest that rather than imposing a view of democracy on respondents based on elite definitions of it, scholars might allow different permutations of attitudes toward democracy to emerge spontaneously from the data itself. There is a parallel here to the literature on ideology. Whereas early work used unidimensional scales to describe political preferences (e.g. Converse 1964), this research was criticized for imposing ideological structure on the mass public rather than trying to understand how the mass public structured their political beliefs across multiple dimensions or schema (Lane 1962, Conover and Feldman 1984, Peffley and Hurwitz 1985, Feldman and Johnston 2014, Weber and Federico 2013).

This idea is not wholly new within the study of democracy. Previously, Dryzek and Berejikian (1993) used Q methodology – essentially a form of guided factor analysis – to study how various

statements regarding democracy sorted individuals into a researcher-defined typology (see also, Carlin, 2018). While compelling, this methodology suffers from some of the concerns outlined above regarding arbitrarily binning individuals into categories of democratic perspectives. More recently, scholars have turned to latent class analysis to investigate mass attitudes toward democracy (e.g. Oser and Hooghe 2016, 2018).[3] LCA is a particularly promising way of constructing a typology of democratic meanings because it algorithmically sorts individuals rather than variables into groups. We push this analysis forward in two ways. First, within this nascent body of research, little attention has been paid to understanding the bases of Americans' composite views of democracy. As we will demonstrate below, exploratory analysis of our five-class solution produces sensible relationships among class membership and respondents' views regarding the appropriate allocation of power, material wellbeing, and access to opportunity. Second, it is not clear how individuals connect their composite visions of democracy to evaluations of it. As we will show, there are sincere differences in how class members rate democracy that cut across traditional political orientations.

A Typology of the Essential Characteristics of Democracy

To evaluate how individuals conceptualize democracy, we fielded a nationally-representative survey module in the 2016 CCES. Building on prior work, we included a battery of survey instruments asked respondents about what they think are "essential" characteristics of democracy (e.g. World Values Survey). Our protocol involved listing a statement about a particular characteristic of democracy and then asking respondents to report on a sliding scale to what degree that element is "not essential" (coded 0) or "essential" to democracy (coded 10). Using this template, we fielded a fifteen-item inventory that explored respondents' views about the characteristics of democracy across a broad spectrum of qualities (Table 1). These questions ranged from how voters select their leaders, to the importance of civil liberties, to gender and political equality, to the role of the media, and to the relationship between democracy and the economy.

There is broad support across this set of items for process-based rights. Respondents convey that fair elections, free speech, free exercise of religion and equal treatment. On balance, individuals also perceive that competitive elections are important. There is substantially *less* agreement regarding majoritarian deference and the role that democracy ought to play in creating conditions for economic parity. However, at least with respect to providing basic necessities and promoting economic growth, individuals report that these features are essential to democracy. Thus, we observe a somewhat ironic

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[3] Although our analysis of American citizens' attitudes toward democracy is not the first to use LCA (see: Oser and Hooge 2018), the input items used in our analysis are different – involving the "essential" rather than "important" characteristics of democracy. In our view, essentiality is a more appropriate feature of an object than importance. Notwithstanding, their five-class typology produces a different set of groups, sorting people into 1) medium ideals, 2) high ideals, 3) low ideals, 4) political rights, and 5) social rights classes. Save for "low ideals" these groups neither map well onto our typology nor are easily recognizable within the political history of the United States.

tension in that individuals envision democracy as having some essential role to play with respect to welfare provisions, yet attitudes redistributive functions vary widely.

Table 1. Mean scores on essential characteristics of democracy

				EFA	
		Mean	Std dev.	Factor 1	Factor 2
1.	Elections are competitive with a choice of at least two political parties.	7.86	2.61	0.53	-----
2.	Government provides stability and order.	7.47	2.58	0.54	-----
3.	People of all faiths, even those considered extreme, can practice their religion freely.	7.84	2.58	0.55	-----
4.	Everyone is treated equally by the government	7.85	2.95	0.62	-----
5.	People can openly say what they think and criticize the government even during a national crisis.	8.09	2.45	0.63	-----
6.	The media can report the news without government censorship.	8.17	2.54	0.65	-----
7.	Women have the same rights as men.	8.62	2.35	0.68	-----
8.	People choose their leaders in free and fair elections.	8.57	2.29	0.69	
9.	Every citizen has the right and opportunity to participate in democratic processes	8.69	2.13	0.7	-----
10.	Government reduces gaps in income and wealth.	4.98	3.43	-----	0.71
11.	Everyone has basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter.	6.89	3.17	-----	0.57
12.	Government taxes the rich and subsidizes the poor.	4.92	3.35		0.66
13.	The majority gets what it wants, even if the rights of some minorities are restricted	5.03	3.26	-----	-----
14.	Government policies promote economic prosperity and growth	6.86	2.85	-----	-----
15.	People can say things in public that might be offensive to racial or religious groups	6.57	3.28	-----	-----

Source: 2016 CCES

Notes: Values on each respective item range from 0 "not an essential characteristic" to 10 "essential characteristic of democracy." Entries represent unweighted descriptive statistics. Final two columns report factor loadings for exploratory factor analysis (EFA), after oblimin rotation.

Figure 2. Comparing respondent scores regarding the essentialness of substantive and procedural provisions
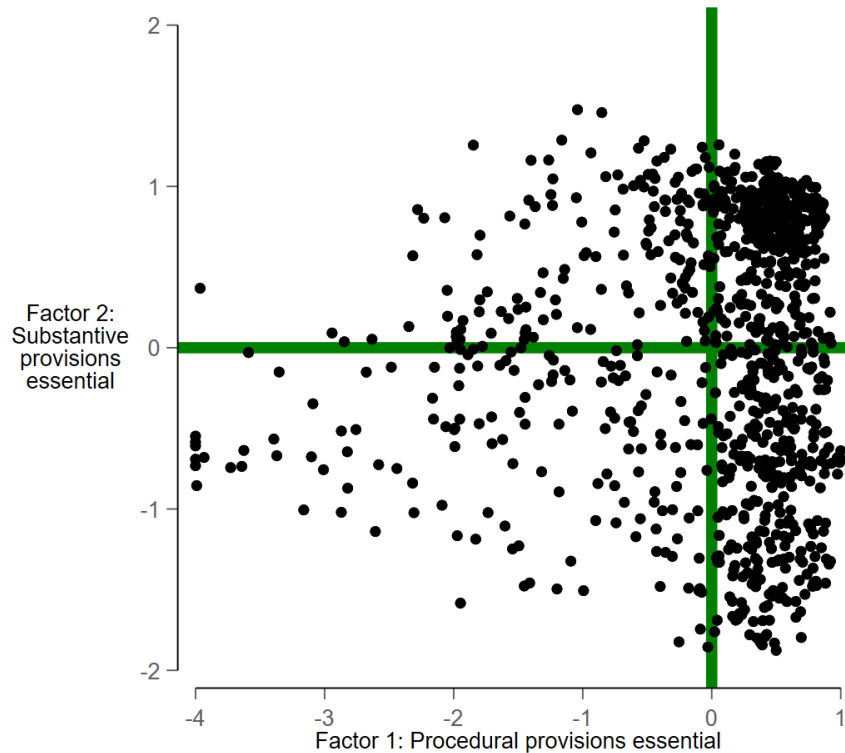
Notes: Factor scores derived via exploratory factor analysis. Solid axes have been superimposed at mean value on respective axis.

The final two columns in Table 1 report the results of an exploratory factor analysis, which we believe is instructive in showing why factor analysis struggles to convey composite visions of democracy. These estimates imply that 12 of the 15 variables reduce reasonably well onto two latent factors. Factor 1 seems to reflect classic procedural elements of democracy (e.g. civil liberties), while factor 2 reflects substantive concerns (e.g. welfare provisions). Figure 2 presents a scatterplot of respondents' score on factor 1 against scores on factor 2; overlaid onto these responses is a set of axes at the mean score on each factor.

It is reasonably clear that there are likely two groups of persons who both highly value procedural provisions (i.e. responses clustering toward the right pole of the x-axis), yet diverge with respect to the essentialness of substantive elements of democracy (i.e. the wide variance in responses along y-axis). It is less clear what to make of the variance in factor 2 scores among the lower right quadrant of persons, however, much less the variance depicted in the upper- and lower-left panels. And this is to say little of the fact that drawing these quadrants is a completely arbitrary decision based solely on the natural means (0) of the predicted factors, much less where the items that *didn't*

load on either factor – majoritarian attitudes, the promotion of economic prosperity, and attitudes toward offensive speech – fit.

Given the difficulty of understanding how these attitudes intersect to form cohesive views of democracy, we pivot, instead, to latent class analysis (LCA). LCA is a more suitable technique for sorting persons into discrete groups. By generating a series of latent classes in which the input items are treated as conditionally independent, LCA calculates a vector of estimated class membership probabilities that correspond to each individual (McCutcheon 1987,Collins and Lanza 2010). As a result, the prevalence of the various latent classes comprises the average of respondent-specific posterior probabilities of class membership (Hagenaars and McCutcheon 2002, Muthén and Muthén 2008). Specifically, Vermunt and Magidson (2002, p. 94) describe the mathematical model as

$$f(y_i \mid \theta) = \sum_{k=1}^{K} \pi_k \prod_{j=1}^{J} f_k(y_{ij} \mid \theta_{jk})$$

where the observed data, y, is a function of a series of estimated parameters, θ, and where the probability of belonging to a latent class k is derived from the distribution of J items (Vermunt and Magidson 2002). Each unit (individual) is then assigned to the class with the highest associated posterior probability (i.e. modal assignment; Collins and Lanza, 2010).

We begin by specifying an LCA model using Penn State University's Stata plug-in (Collins and Lanza 2010). Although mixture models allow for analysis of continuous observed variables, we trichotimzed our input items so that values 1 through 4 convey that a concept is "not essential" to democracy, value 5 conveys "neither not essential or essential," and values 6 through 10 convey "essential." We do this for two reasons. First, LCA does not deal well with sparseness in response categories, which can reduce the likelihood the model will converge. Second, substantively, this approach makes it easier to interpret the results.[4]

Because LCA is naïve to the "correct" number of classes that describe a given set of data, ascertaining the 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. Although there is some debate regarding the appropriate criteria for a terminal model (Tein, et al. 2013), the LCA is considered fully saturated when the k+1 solution no longer improves model fit. Table 2 compares various fit statistics for different class models. On balance, a decrease in BIC values for a k+1 model conveys greater fit. We find

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[4] For example, collapsing responses into a dichotomous, essential / unessential scheme reduces important variance that allows for discrimination between classes.

significant gains in goodness-of-fit through the five-class solution; BIC values are less ideal for the six-class solution.

Table 2. Model fit for k class models

	Entropy^2	BIC	G^2	Log likelihood	Df
2 Class	0.95	8949.59	8528.22	-9803.37	14,348,845
3 Class	0.85	8488.00	7852.48	-9465.50	14,348,814
4 Class	0.89	7853.04	7003.39	-9040.95	14,348,783
5 Class	0.89	7659.51	6595.72	-8837.11	14,348,752
6 Class	0.89	7705.84	6427.91	-8753.21	14,348,721

Notes: BIC values reach their nadir for five-class solution, which is generally indicative that the LCA solution should not be expanded further.

The five classes produced by this analysis are illustrated in Figure 3, which arrays predicted means of the input items across classes and their accompanying 95% confidence intervals. Based on the profile of responses in each group, we label the classes accordingly. Class 1 is the smallest group and, by extension, the probability of inclusion is low (less than 5%). It comprises persons who gave blasé, middle-of-the-road responses about the essential qualities of democracy. Give their apparent apathy, we label these persons "Indifferent." In contrast to these individuals, persons belonging to Class 2 do not associate any of the 15 input items as essential to democracy. Numerically, this group is also small, comprising less than one-tenth of all respondents. Given their negative attitudes, we label these persons "Critical."

Figure 3. Latent class means on "essential" qualities of democracy
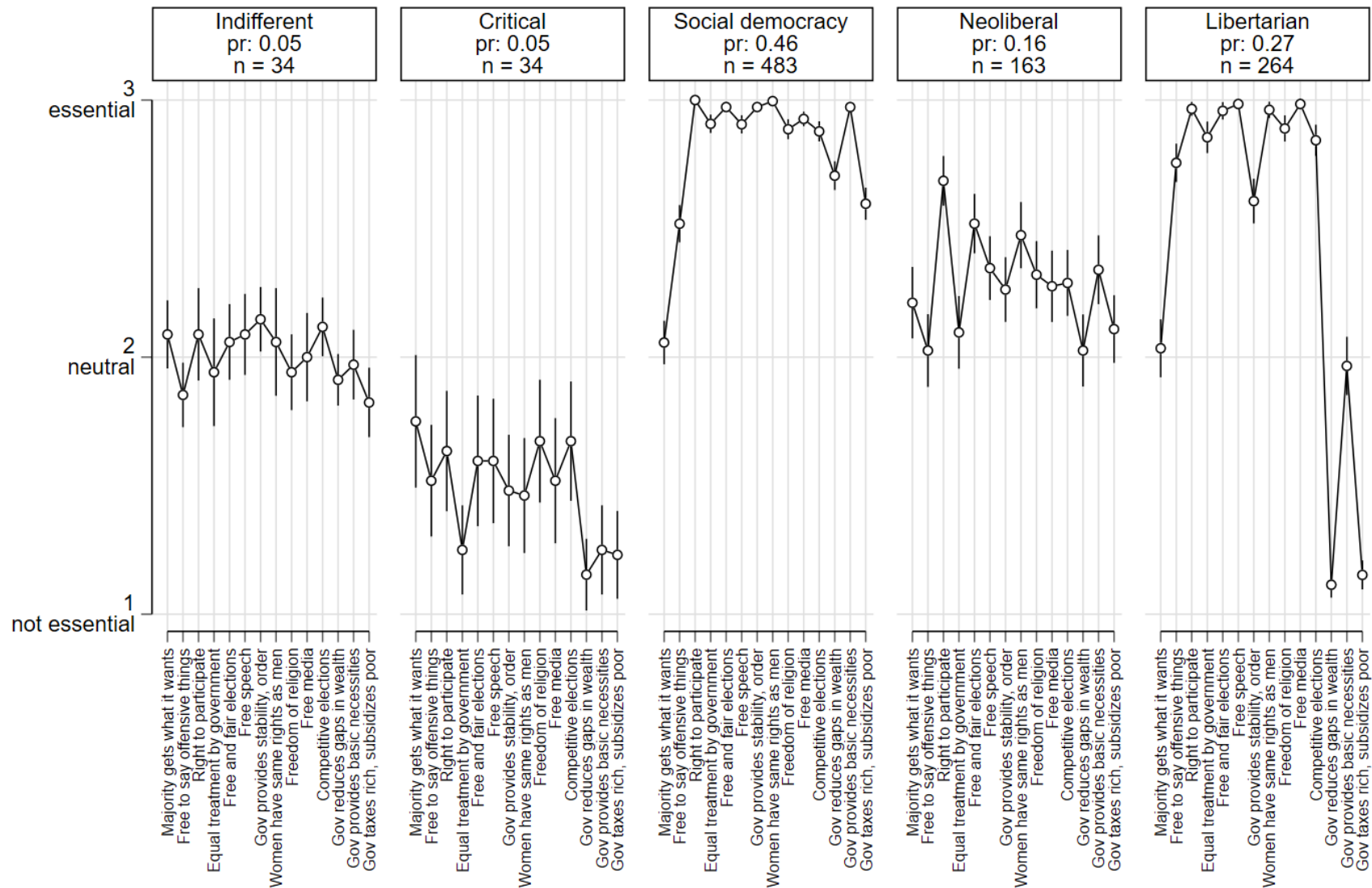
Notes: Bars convey class means for respondents in each latent class. Value 3 correspondents to "essential," value 2 corresponds to neutral category, value 1 corresponds to "not essential."

Beyond these two classes, three permutations of "classic" democratic meanings exist. Class 3 is the largest of the classes, with a predicted probability of inclusion of roughly 45 percent. Respondents in this class possess the most robust conceptualization of democracy, linking it not just to civil freedoms, fairness, and equality, but also to the way in which public goods should be distributed. These individuals possess a "maximal" definition of democracy and, as such, are classified as "Social democrats." In contrast, Class 5 comprises a large share of respondents who see democracy in terms of civil liberties, yet believe that democracy should *not* engage in redistributive behaviors. These persons do not believe that government owes citizens basic necessities nor should trouble with reducing inequality. We label this group "Libertarians." Finally, Class 4 constitutes a balance between Classes 3 and 5 – these persons modestly value civil liberties and are mostly neutral regarding the redistributive functions of the state. We term these persons "Neoliberals."[5]

The Correlates of the Democracy Typology

While we believe that the class labels we impose on this typology of democratic meanings is appropriate, it is possible that these groups simply map onto existing ideological divisions that characterize American politics. Thus, in service of establishing the face validity of this typology, we conduct an exploratory analysis that assesses how beliefs about freedom, economy well-being, and opportunity shape class membership relative to individuals' liberal-conservative identities. Our primary explanatory variables are as follows.

Measures

As part of our CCES module, we collected additional information from respondents regarding their attitudes toward core elements of self-governance. Ten items are particularly useful in testing whether our class structure picks up on meaningful differences regarding the nature of democracy and power. Individuals were given the following prompt: "If you had to decide between the following items, which would you choose?" They were then asked to place themselves along a continuum ranging from 0 to 10, anchored at either end by countervailing response options.

These items are presented in Table 2.[6] On balance, each pairing asks individuals to make a difficult choice. Would they trade a stronger national economy for a healthier democracy? Do they value their individual freedoms over economic security? Are opportunities distributed equally? Is the economic

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[5] Although it is true that the definition and usage of "neoliberalism" has shifted over time (c.f. Boas and Gans-Morse 2009), it was originally conceived as something of a "third" or "middle" option relative to classical liberalism and socialism (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). At least within the United States context, neoliberalism is generally associated with modest support of instrumental rights, in addition to limited state intervention with respect to welfare programming. This sort of belief system may generally characterize right-leaning persons, but the Clinton administration also embraced neoliberalism at different junctures.

[6] Full question text is supplied in the accompanying appendix.

system fair? These questions each get at the heart of fundamental ideas that individuals might associate with democracy that lie at the core of our democracy typology.[7]

Table 2. Factor loadings of 10 explanatory items

"If you had to decide between the following items, which would you choose?"	Exploratory Factor Analysis		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
	Perceived System Unfairness	*Values Freedom*	*Money Influence*
1. Economy vs. healthy democracy		0.48	
2. Financial well-being vs. individual influence		0.68	
3. Economy vs. freedom		0.72	
4. Financial well-being vs. freedom		0.54	
5. Distribution of wealth fair or unfair	0.72		
6. Opportunity to get ahead or No chance to get ahead	0.56		
7. Economic system fair or unfair	0.78		
8. Americans have equal electoral influence or wealthy Americans affect elections more			0.48
9. Money too little or too much electoral influence			0.49
10. Economic growth more important than public inputs or public influence more important than economic growth			
Cronbach's α	.75	0.70	0.55

Notes: Values on each item range from 0 to 10, anchored by competing options. Full text for survey questions is available in appendix. Estimates derived from principle factors analysis with oblimin rotation. Loadings less than 0.40 have been excluded from presentation.

We next explore whether there these separate instruments can be simplified or distilled into broader (latent) attitudinal dimensions. Table 2 also reports the results of an exploratory factor analysis of these variables. Two factors emerge with properties that convey the associated items covary. Factor 1 comprises items that reflect that the proverbial "deck is stacked" against ordinary Americans. Here, higher values convey that individuals perceive that there is systematic bias against less-wealthy

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[7] It is possible, of course, that some of these items are double-barreled. Perhaps freedom and economic considerations, for example, are orthogonal. For our purposes, we are agnostic on this point. In fact, we are curious about the *tension* between these ideas and whether or not respondents will weigh one against the others. To this end, we give individuals an "out" in a middle category that allows them to not pick a particular "side."

Americans that precludes them from full inclusion in the body politic. Factor 2 involves the items that trade economic well-being against freedoms and democratic health. Finally, while responses to items 8 and 9 are correlated (the Cronbach's score is modestly lower than conventional thresholds), item 10 is unique among the battery of items.

Using this exploratory analysis as guide, we construct a number of different indices based on these variables. First, drawing from Table 2, we average responses to items 5 through 7 together, and name the resulting variable *perceived system unfairness*, where high values convey that an individual perceives that prevailing political and economic systems are unfair and little opportunity of access exists. Next, items 1 through 4 are averaged together. We label this composite *values freedom over economic development*, where higher values convey that a person values freedom over economic well-begin. Although the Cronbach's reliability coefficient is modest (0.55), we average together items 8 and 9, which reflect orientations toward money in politics, *money has too much influence*. Aside from these indices, we enter item 10 into our model separately, which reflects the *importance of public inputs*.

Figure 4 presents a series of kernel density plots that convey the distribution of scores on these items. Although we will more fully explore how ideology relates to our typology below, some of these constructs seem to tap into popular ideological divides within mass opinion, so we disaggregate the liberal from conservative responses. In the first panel, it is clear that individuals are unwilling to trade economic health with freedoms. Simply put, both liberals and conservatives prefer balance between these features. In contrast, the second panel illustrates that liberals are much more likely than conservatives to rate the access to economic and political power as fairly distributed. In the third panel in the lower left corner, most individuals think that money has too big of a role in elections, although conservatives are slightly more likely to possess strong feelings about this issue. Finally, we observe some differences with respect to liberals and conservatives regarding balancing economic health with public inputs. Liberals are more sensitive to public inputs than conservatives.

In addition to these indices, we also control for a number of psychological and socio-demographic characteristics. How individuals think about and value *compromise* – an essential feature of peaceable, deliberative, and democratic exchange – is operationalized via the following question. "What are your thoughts about the following idea? Openness to other people's views and willingness to compromise are important for politics in a country like ours." Responses ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Next, we use a standard ideological self-placement instrument to measure *liberal-conservative identity*. Individuals placed themselves along a five-point continuum ranging from "very liberal" (1) to "very conservative" (5). Individuals who *knew House majority* correctly identified that Republicans controlled the House of Representatives, coded 1, and otherwise 0. *Education* ranges from 1 "no high school" to 6 "post-graduate" coursework. Persons identifying as *black* or *white* were coded 1 and otherwise 0. Gender is coded 1 for male and 0 for otherwise. *Age* conveys the numeric value associated with a person's birth year subtracted from the year in which the survey was collected. Persons who identified as being *born again* (i.e. were "evangelicals") were coded 1 and otherwise 0. Liberal-conservative self-placement ranges from 1 "very liberal" to 5 "very conservative." *Household income* is

a categorical item ranging from 1 "less than $10,000" to 16 "more than $500,000." *News interest* is measured on a 4-point scale reflecting how closely respondents paid to attention to what is going on in government and public affairs ranging from with 0 for respondents who "hardly paid any attention at all to news" to 3 for respondents "pay attention most of the time."

Figure 4. Distribution of responses regarding freedom, perceived access to power and opportunity, and the role of money in politics
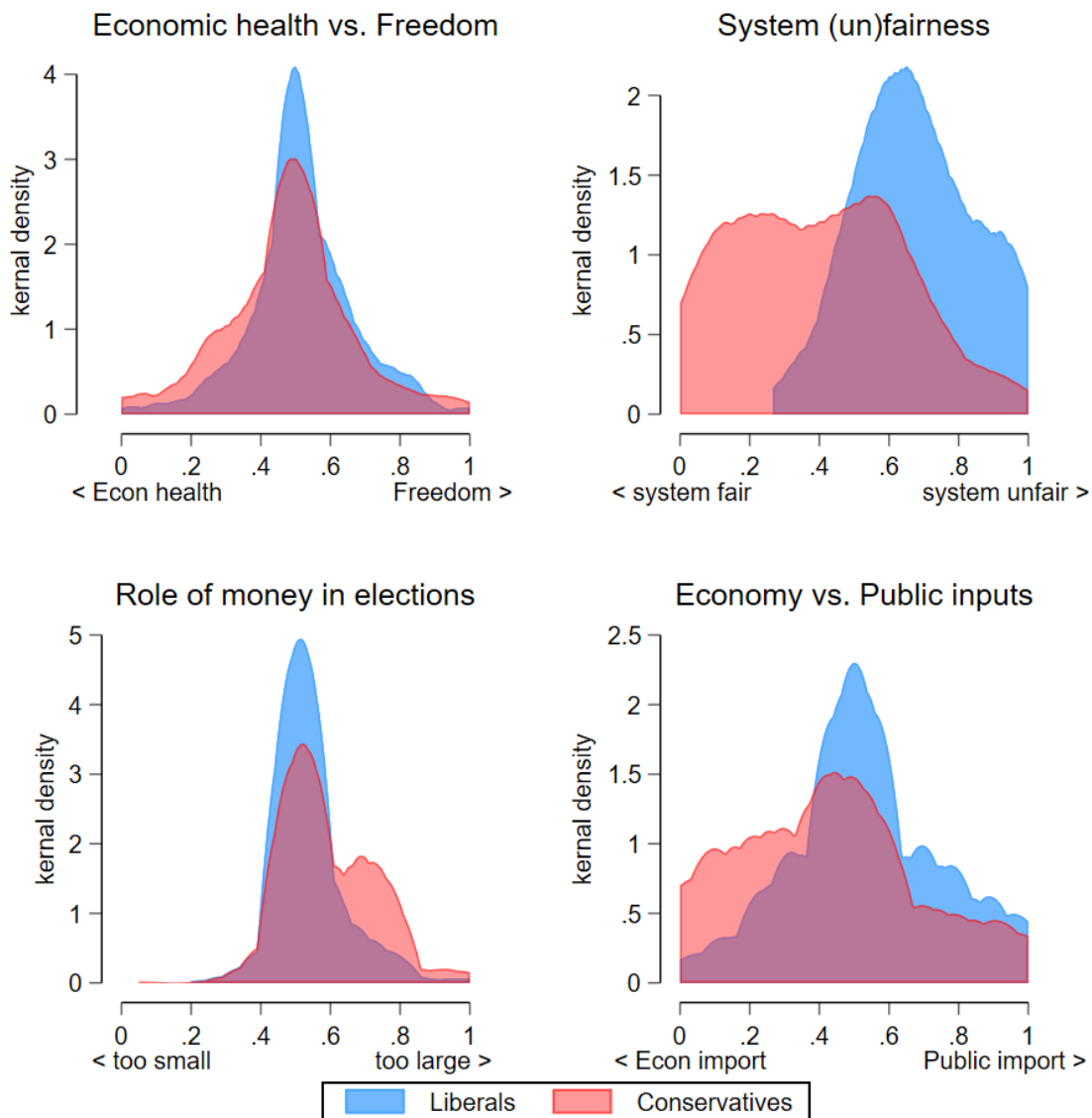

Notes: Figure portrays kernel density plots across range of values. All variables have been rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

Results

We begin with a simple bivariate analysis juxtaposing liberal-conservative ideology across our typology of democratic meanings in Figure 5. Given that the various input items used to construct the democratic classes have an obvious ideological flavor to them, it is worth exploring the extent to which democratic meanings covary with ideology. Among Indifferent and Neoliberals persons, respondent ideology is distributed roughly normally. Critical respondents are slightly more likely to comprise conservatives. In each class, however, at least 60% of respondents are spread somewhat evenly among the core three categories of liberal, moderate, and conservative identification; a smaller share of ideologues fall generally into the "very" conservative or liberal poles. On balance, there is little evidence that ideology is primarily responsible for sorting persons into competing visions of democracy across these classes, which encompass about a quarter of all persons in our sample.

Figure 5. Democratic meanings typology by ideological self-placement
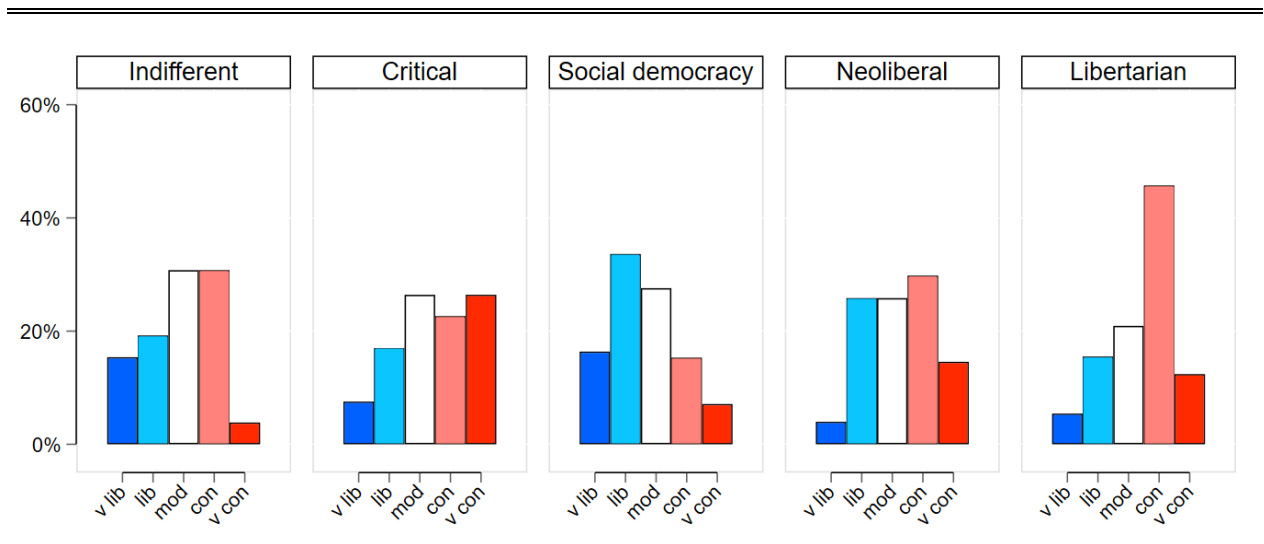
Notes: Bars in each panel sum to 100%, convey distribution of persons in respective class across categories on x-axis.

In contrast, the Social democrats and Libertarians exhibit modest ideological sorting. To some extent, persons with left-leaning identities prefer fuller democracy that joins redistributive functions to civil liberties, while right-leaning persons reliably prefer more limited forms of democratic governance. However, even within these categories, there is important ideological heterogeneity. While conservatives comprise roughly 60% Libertarian respondent, liberals comprise about 50% of Social democrats. Further, persons who exhibit a preference for social democracy are much more diverse with respect to ideology than we might otherwise expect; almost 30% are conservatives and about a quarter of respondents self-describe as moderates.

If liberal-conservative ideology only partially explains the sorting of individuals into these classes of democratic meanings, then what explains class membership? To assess how the various covariates described above sort individuals into different categories within our typology of democratic meanings, we use multinomial logistic regression (MNL). MNL produces log-odds coefficients that are contingent upon the chosen baseline category. In turn, this makes it difficult to assess the traditional modeling output associated with regression models. Instead, we estimate the discrete marginal effect of each variable on the probability of class membership and present this information visually. These estimates are presented in Figure 6 and are bound by 95 percent confidence intervals; those bands that cross the vertical dotted threshold at value 0 are indistinguishable from zero.

Beginning with Class 1, recall that "Indifferent" persons were the least prevalent class of respondents in our typology. Perhaps unsurprisingly, few of the covariates for which we account are related to an individual's propensity for this configuration of attitudes. Perceiving that money decides elections contributes to a slightly higher probability that a person would possess an indifferent understanding of democracy while a preference for compromise slightly reduces the probability of class membership. So, too, does identifying as very conservative.

A similar pattern is exhibited among Critical persons. Again, preferences for compromise decrease class membership; further, it appears that positive economic evaluations are also related to a lower propensity to belong to this class. Few of the demographic items predict class membership, save for individuals who identified as black. These persons are about 10 percentage points more likely than the baseline category of "other" persons to be classified as critical of democracy.

Members of Class 3 prefer fuller, social democracy that combines support for both procedural and substantive facets of democracy. As such, it is not surprising that the first instrument – freedom versus economic priorities – exhibits no meaningful relationship to class membership. Individuals belonging to this group value both of these features, and are unwilling to choose between one or the other in any systematic fashion. However, persons who convey that economic and political systems are "unfair" are much more likely to be sorted into this class. Moving from minimum to maximum values on the scale translates into about a 40 percentage point increase in the likelihood a person belongs to this class.

Next, while perceptions about money in politics are effectively unrelated to class membership among social democrats, we observe that a preference for public involvement in decision-making modestly increases the probability that respondents will be categorized as a Social democrat This relationship may seem curious in light of the insignificant finding regarding the tradeoffs between freedom and economic well-being, but consider that the exact question wording asked individuals whether they were willing to forego involvement in decision-making to speed economic growth. Simply put, it appears that these individuals are unwilling to prioritize economic well-being at the expense of public involvement in politics, which is different than the "personal freedoms" that characterize the above trade-off.

Two psychological features are noteworthy correlates of classification as a Social democrat. First, individuals in this group are modestly more likely to self-identify as liberals, but the magnitude of this relationship is quite modest relative the covariates described above. Recalling that perceived

fairness covaries with ideology to some extent, it appears to be the case that views toward access to economic and political levers of power are a stronger correlates of class membership than conventional ideological self-placement, Class membership has less to do with liberal-conservative ideology than deeper affinities toward opportunity that might underlie those preferences. Finally, attitudes regarding compromise are associated with a very large shift in the probability of group membership. Respondents who value compromise as a vital feature of deliberative political exchange are roughly 45 percentage points more likely to be sorted into this group.

Neoliberals are a curious group that exhibit the sort of qualities traditionally associated with thin democrats (Schumpeter 1942). These are individuals, for example, who value economic well-being over individual freedom but who also perceive that money has too big of a role in politics. In addition, positive affect toward compromise reduces the probability that a person will be classified as a Neoliberal; so, too, do sociotropic economic evaluations. On balance, these are persons who do not value compromise, who believe the economy is not doing well, and, to a lesser degree, that the system as rigged. The combination of these items suggests that Neoliberals may value freedom, but they are sour regarding the economic state of the world.

Finally, we turn to Class 5, our group of Libertarians. Unlike Social democrats, Libertarians prioritize freedoms over economic well-being. Individuals who communicated that a freedoms were more important than a stronger economy, for example, are more likely to select configurations of democratic meanings that resemble libertarian preferences. Similarly, individuals who value a stronger economy over more public inputs are more likely to understand democracy in this way. Finally, in keeping with the general view that democracy should have little relationship with the market system, individuals are much less likely to sort in Libertarian preferences if they believe that economic mobility and access are limited and that money has an outsized effect on electoral outcomes. On balance, we find Libertarians are those persons who believe that the prevailing economic system is fair, that individuals who work hard enough can find success, and who prioritize civil freedoms over system-wide economic development. Of course these associations fit with the popular or lay profiles of civil libertarianism with respect to *policy* prescriptions, but it is rewarding that we are able to show that this configuration of democratic meanings is related to a sensible pattern of social and economic preferences, independent of conservative ideology.

Figure 6. Correlates of Meanings of Democracy Typology
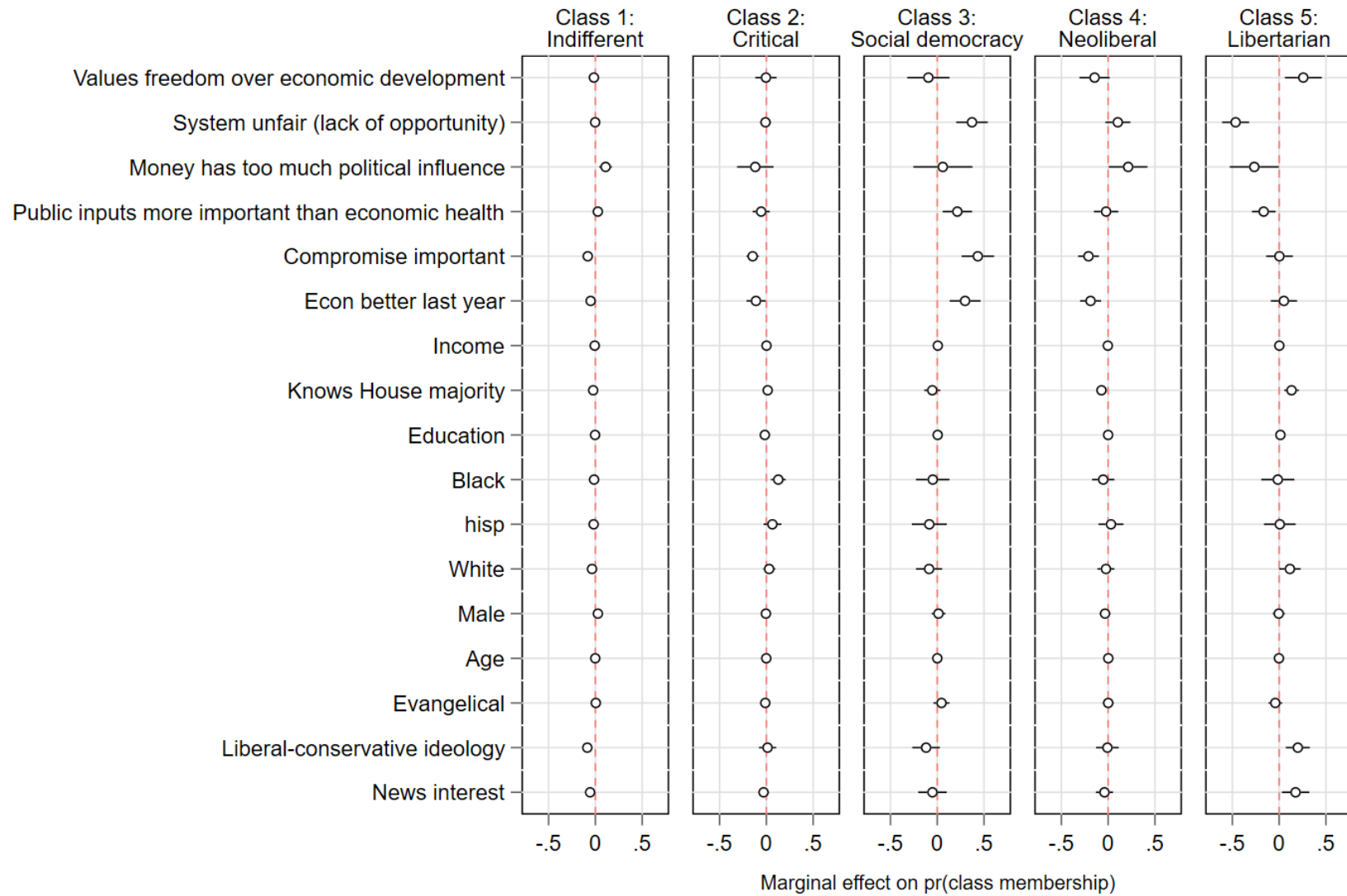
Notes: Point estimates convey marginal effect of covariate on the probability of class membership. Solid bands represent 95% confidence intervals.

Connecting the Democracy Typology to Evaluations of Democracy.

Our argument to this point has been that the mass public possesses valid mental frameworks by which they conceptualize the essential characteristics of democracy. In turn, the meanings that citizens associate with democracy should have consequences for how they evaluate it. This relationship is particularly pressing given growing research that alleges citizens are souring, if not disengaging from democracy (e.g. Armingeon and Guthmann 2014, Foa and Mounk 2017, Jennings, et al. 2017).

Conversations regarding democratic support begin – inexorably – with Easton's distinction between an organization's outputs and the value that such organizations merit irrespective of short-run performance. In some sense, these two assessments are related. Short run satisfaction with democratic outputs are undoubtedly related to longer-term evaluations of democracy – should democratic governments repeatedly fail to meet their formal obligations or violate normative expectations set by their citizens, then satisfaction with democracy might erode democratic legitimacy. Put another way, if specific support constitutes (dis)approval of what an object does, then diffuse support comprises "evaluations of what an object is or represents" (Easton 1975, pg. 444). Yet, importantly, this distinction does not imply that these sorts of assessment are wholly independent. Instead, changes in diffuse support will occur (slowly) over time as such outputs are interpreted and reinterpreted through the experiential and learning processes involved with the socialization of an object (Easton 1965).[8]

The distinction between specific and diffuse support outlined here – and validated across an impressive array of 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 the Latino barometers (Lagos 2003) – is important in that how individuals conceive of democracy's performance across different substantive and procedural dimensions may shape these types of evaluations. In particular, although some research argues that diffuse attitudes toward democracy reflect "stable cognitive" (Huang, et al. 2008, pg. 56-58) or "principled" values (Mattes and Bratton 2007, pg. 201), recent research finds evidence that government outputs shape both specific and diffuse support. Magalhaes (2014), for example, finds that effectiveness – perceptions of the quality of public and civil services and the credibility and independence of government from inappropriate intervention (Kaufmann, et al. 2010) – is related to an array of democratic assessments.

These findings imply that individuals might connect the meanings of democracy to democratic evaluations in different ways. While the procedural dimension of these attitudes might be closely related to diffuse support for democracy, substantive elements seem more closely wedded to the sort of democratic outputs that characterize temporal assessments like democratic satisfaction (e.g. Singh 2014). Within our typology, given the strong commitments to civil freedoms by Social Democrats, Libertarians, and, to a lesser extent, Neoliberals, diffuse support may be much higher relative to our

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[8] As Magalhaes (2014) notes, this idea is also found elsewhere: Lipset (1959), Dahl (1971), and Linz (1978) each argue in some form or another than regime outputs (eventually) shape legitimacy Lipset 1959, Dahl 1971.

Critical or Indifferent groups. In contrast, given that Social Democrats and Libertarians vary with respect to the emphasis placed on the substantive elements of democracy, specific support may be more sensitive to, say, electoral outcomes.

Measures

We investigate eight assessments of democracy: pre-election satisfaction, collected prior to the 2016 election, post-election satisfaction, collected after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, change in satisfaction from pre to post-election, whether unelected, independent experts should govern, whether army rule, strong leaders, and democracy are "good," and whether democracy is better than alternative forms of government. Both *pre-* and *post-election satisfaction with democracy* are measured on an 11-point scale ranging from "not satisfied" (0) to "satisfied" (10). *Change in satisfaction* is operationalized by subtracting the pre-election from post-election measures. Here, negative (positive) values convey that a person became less (more) satisfied from pre-to-post election. Next, respondents were asked whether *unelected expert, strong leader*, and *army rule* were good or bad ways of governing a country. Responses ranged from "very bad" (1) to "very good." Finally, two questions about the importance of democracy were asked. Individuals were asked whether *democracy was a good or bad way of governing a country* using the same four-category response set detailed above ranging from "very bad" to "very good." In addition, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the idea that *democracy is better than the alternative ways of governing a country.* Responses ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Results

We opt for a visual depiction of the relationship between democratic meanings and democratic evaluations in Figure 7 (full OLS model output is available in the accompanying appendix).[9] However, in the interest of demonstrating that these composite visions of democracy are distinguishable from ideology, we also model the predicted marginal effect of ideology on these assessments. For comparison sake, each of the dependent variables has been rescaled to range from 0 to 1 in order to facilitate the magnitude of the plotted class estimate.

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[9] For each democratic evaluation, the respective model controls for a stock battery of socio-demographic features, including household income, knowledge of House majority party, education, race, gender, age, and born-again status. These variables are all operationalized according to the schemes outlined in the prior section. Four of the following items – *unelected expert, army,* and *strong leader rule*, along with *democracy is good* – are ordinal rather than continuous variables. Here, ordered logistic regression is the more appropriate analytical technique, but, for sake of pure comparison, we analyze these items using OLS. The results are robust to ordered logit, which we include in the appendix for robustness.

Figure 7. The relationship between class membership and common democratic evaluations
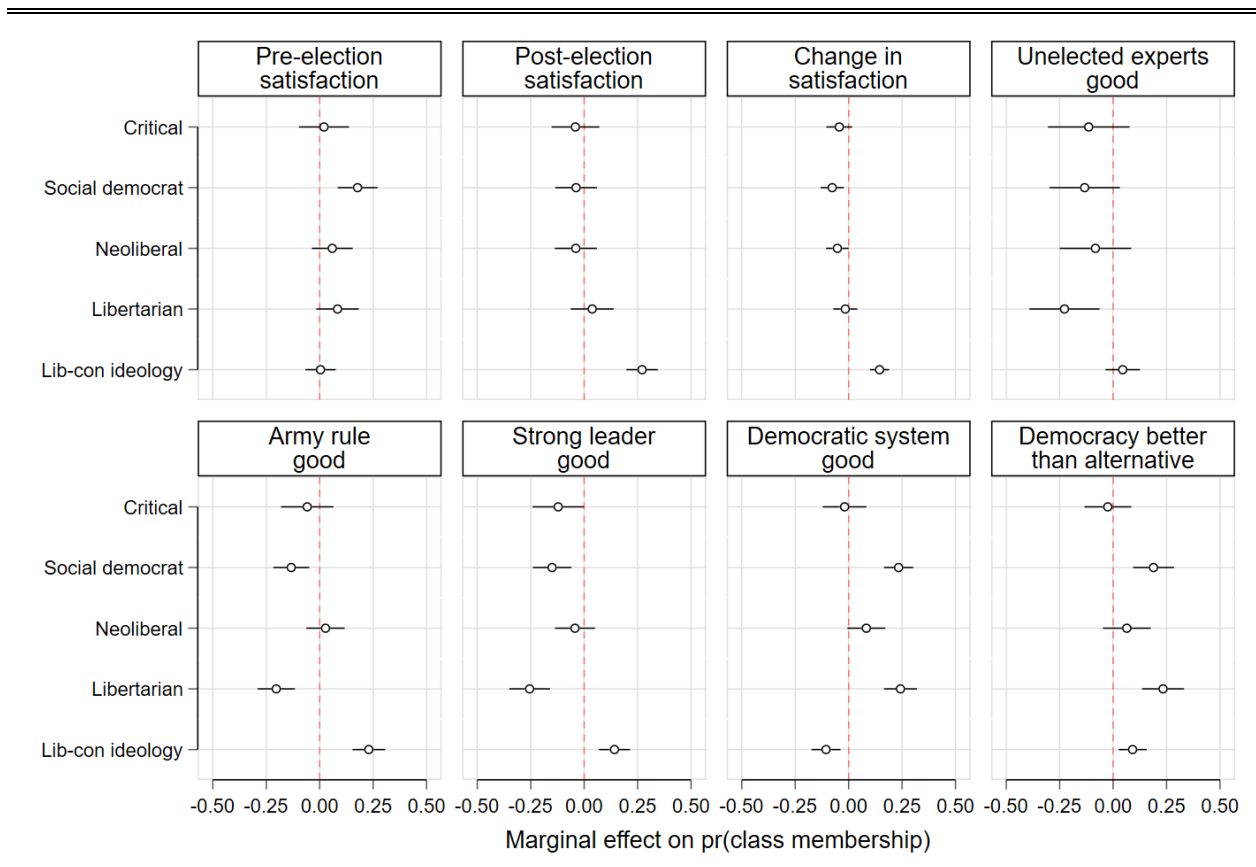
Notes: Only democratic satisfaction was asked in the post-election wave. Solid lines bracketing point estimates convey 95% confidence intervals. Estimates overlapping vertical dotted line are indistinguishable from 0. Models include standard battery of demographic items including, household income, knowledge of House majority party, education, race, gender, age, and born-again status; full estimates available in supporting materials, Table A2.

On balance, the results portrayed here imply that democratic meanings are extremely relevant to how individuals rate democracy. Beginning first with specific support, the first three panels display different permutations of democratic satisfaction. Social Democrats were modestly more satisfied with democracy prior to the 2016 presidential election. In contrast, liberal-conservative ideology was unrelated to these assessments during this wave. Interestingly, in the post-election wave, none of the estimates associated with class membership are distinguishable from 0. However, in the context of *changes* in satisfaction, there is some evidence that Social democrats' and Neoliberals' satisfaction soured from wave 1 to wave 2, but these effects are modest compared to the relationship between liberal-conservative self-placement and democratic satisfaction. On balance, how individuals think about democratic satisfaction seems to be a purer function of group identity than the meanings that they associate with democracy.

This is not the case, however, with respect to diffuse support. In fact, ideology occasionally works in ways that are counter-intuitive to our democracy typology. Beginning first, with the question

of whether unelected experts are good, which is a key facet of "stealth democracy," we find that Libertarians are less likely to agree that this is an appropriate form of representation relative to Indifferent persons. In the case of authoritarian or anti-democratic preferences for army and strong leader rule, we observe that Social democrats and Libertarians are *both* more likely to disagree that these are good ways of structuring government.

In both panels, however, conservatives are more likely than liberals to convey that these are "good." Much has been made recently regarding the relationship between conservatism and anti-democratic orientations. If Libertarians are routinely more likely to be conservatives, then the additive effect of being classified as a Libertarian *and* identifying as a strong conservative essentially wash each other out, implying that, at least in the case of conservatives who possess strong affinities for procedural rights in democracy, it is unlikely that they will exhibit authoritarian preferences. This important bit of nuance is only made possible by considering how the meanings of democracy intersect with conventional forms of ideology.

Finally, we observe some parallel trends regarding democracy being "good" and "better than the alternative." Consider first that Social democrats and Libertarians exhibit strong affinity for the value of democracy relative to Indifferent persons. Yet, at least in the case of democracy being "good," we find some evidence that conservatives are *less* likely to convey that democracy is good. This might be problematic, on the one hand, but, when you consider this effect in conjunction with the positive relationship between Libertarian classification and this evaluation, again, any negative effect associated with conservatism is effectively washed out. Moreover, in the case of democracy being better than the alternative, we observe robust evidence that Social democrats and Libertarians are more likely to convey positive responses to this question – irrespective political ideology.

Toward a Richer Understanding of Mass Preferences Regarding Democracy

Early 18th century Whigs coined the phrase *vox populi, vox dei* – the voice of the People is the voice of God. But, in the case of American democracy, it is perhaps better to add the caveat *diablous autem per singula* – the devil is in the details. Democracy may well have some universal meanings, but citizen conceptualizations of it vary tremendously. Our latent class solution produced five identifiable classes that characterize how individuals think about democracy. We discovered there are Indifferent (Class 1) and Critical (Class 2) persons who hold moderate and negative attitudes regarding democracy, respectively. In contrast, individuals who are distributed among the Social Democracy (Class 3), Neoliberal (Class 4), and Libertarian (Class 5) groups all hold "positive" views regarding civil liberties and participatory rights. Where they differ, involves questions of whether (and how) democratic governments address material well-being, and, to a lesser degree, issues of equality.

We believe this typology has practical value for two reasons. First, given prevailing political pressures, it is clear that Americans are concerned about the state of their democracy. Yet, the growing "democracy-in-crisis" literature has yet to fully wrestle with how citizens *actually think about democracy*. It is one thing to argue that individuals are dissatisfied with democracy. But to unpack what such unease or unhappiness with democracy implies requires grappling with what citizens think

democracy *means.* Our results communicate that individuals do not simply associate democracy with freedoms and rights, but that democracy inevitably also regards the distribution of social and material power and goods. Too often, the democracy-in-crisis literature has portrayed survey respondents as mechanistically balking against perceived threats to rights. We would argue that accounting for how individuals spontaneously combine these democratic meanings across our typology is necessary to evaluate how citizens grade democracy. Social democrats and libertarians value democracy and exhibit less authoritarian preferences, controlling even for ideology. While conservatism is sometimes linked to a preference for strong man and army rule, we find that classification as Libertarian offsets those tendencies.

Second, among this typology of meanings, preferences for full democracy dramatically outweigh the alternative. Simply put, there is far more support for the welfare state than a limited form of democratic governance. This finding is important insofar as while affective polarization continues to characterize the American mass public's divisions, there is broad consensus that democracy should not only protect civil freedoms, but provide for greater economic parity. By extension, it may be the case that bridging the *partisan* divide can be accomplished by appealing to *shared visions of democracy*. Not only do Social democrats value civil freedoms, but a modest proportion of otherwise-conservative persons agreed that democracy should be doing more to distribute wealth fairly. While it would be naïve to assume that grand appeals to social democracy can immediately overwhelm the loyalties that underscore political identities, it would nevertheless be foolish to deny that the mass public has a thirst for fuller democracy than they are presently receiving. In this respect, this project has vital importance for thinking carefully about how to fashion democratic governance that works for the majority of the American people.

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