

PUBLISHER PROPOSAL

# Democracy's Meanings: How Citizens Think About and Evaluate Democracy

Nicholas T. Davis  
*Texas A&M University*

Kirby Goidel  
*Texas A&M University*

Keith Gaddie  
*University of Oklahoma*

1. BOOK OVERVIEW
2. CHAPTER SYNOPSES
3. READERSHIP
4. REVIEW OF MARKET
5. ANTICIPATED TIMELINE
6. BRIEF AUTHOR BIOS

Interested publishers should contact:

Nicholas Davis  
Assistant Research Scientist  
Public Policy Research Institute  
Texas A&M University  
4476 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843  
Email: [ntdavis1017@gmail.com](mailto:ntdavis1017@gmail.com)  
Web: [www.nicholastdavis.com](http://www.nicholastdavis.com)

Kirby Goidel  
Professor, Dept. of Communication  
Director, Public Policy Research Institute  
Texas A&M University  
4476 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843  
Email: [kgoidel@tamu.edu](mailto:kgoidel@tamu.edu)  
Web: <https://comm.tamu.edu/kirby-goidel>

## 1 Overview

The folk theory of democracy, popular among pundits, elites and textbooks alike, conveys that democratic values, beliefs, and priorities have remained more or less constant over time. This is patently wrong. Democracies operate in an ongoing state of existential crisis regarding access to the levers of power. The comparatively egalitarian nature of democracy in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, for example, would be unrecognizable to a woman and minorities living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in part because neither norms nor institutions are wholly stable, but also because the public's valuation and extension of democratic principles has evolved remarkably over time.

In this respect, scholars of politics have begun taking Americans' attitudes toward democracy seriously, often focusing on simple barometers of democratic support and institutional health. From them we learn that Americans are dissatisfied with democracy (e.g. Mounk 2018), and democracy, in turn, is in crisis because hallowed norms are being violated with impunity (e.g. Levitsky and Ziblatt 2017). Comparatively little attention, however, has been paid to how the mass public actually *thinks* about democracy's core meanings – much less the implications that these meanings have for political attitudes and behavior.

This book explores how the public thinks about the meaning of democracy and why it matters. Using two new public opinion surveys collected during 2016 and 2017, we argue that these meanings have two important implications. First, unlocking the puzzle of how citizens think about democracy is valuable for assessing the depth of the partisan fractures that characterize a polarized political environment. Second, these attitudes are vital to diagnosing whether and to what extent the public is actually disengaging from democracy. This is particularly important in the aftermath of Donald Trump's ascension to the White House, which has raised critical questions about Americans' respect for and consensus regarding the shared value of public inputs, the integrity of electoral processes, and the basic guarantee that citizens will be treated equally.

*Democracy's Meanings* promises to fill the gap between process-based democratic theory – the idea that democracy is best understood in terms of its institutional qualities – and how ordinary citizens conceptualize democracy with respect to their social, economic, and political experiences. In turn, we challenge prevailing narratives regarding how Americans grade democracy. While the crisis-of-democracy literature implies that citizens have become disillusioned with democracy, we argue that these conclusions are deeply flawed. We show that while the mass public remains largely committed to important democratic values, there are important disagreements among citizens regarding the design of democracy as it relates to equal treatment and the distribution of power and material goods. Some individuals perceive that democracy should take restitutive steps to even the playing field among citizens. Others value democracy for its relationship to the free-market economy and, by extension, small footprint on the lives of citizens.

These tensions are built into the fabric of American of American democracy. But they also problematize a shared vision of democracy as a public good. As such, *Democracy's Meanings* provides a template for understanding democratic support during an odd, possibly historic political moment. Moreover, we offer a theoretical framework for how parties can work toward strengthening Americans' ties to shared community values, even as they sharply disagree regarding matters of public policy. Simply put, there is an over-reaching consensual preference for "fuller" democracy, even though many individuals are unaware of it.

## 1.1 Our approach

Our analyses are based on original survey data collected in 2016 and 2017 via the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey. Where possible, we also place the data within the context of the World Values Study, Eurobarometer, and the Bright Line Watch surveys. This approach allows us to not only consider the features that Americans associate with democracy, but provides a benchmark against how citizens from other western democracies think it.

Rather than infer meaning from voting behavior or policy preferences, we ask citizens explicitly and directly about the essential characteristics of democracy. Then, using an agnostic, data-driven algorithm, we let the data speak for itself to create a typology of mutually-exclusive perspectives of democracy. We discover that citizens can be reliably sorted into one of five "classes" of democratic meanings: Critical; Indifferent; Social Democratic; Libertarian; and Neoliberal perspectives, respectively.

This typology forms the backbone of the proceeding chapters. We first investigate how a wide-ranging series of psychosocial and demographic characteristics shape the meanings citizens assign to democracy. Curiously, the traditional partisan and ideological cleavages that define American politics only modestly characterize these visions of democracy. While civil rights and liberties enjoy widespread appeal among classes, there is only modest "partisan sorting" regarding individuals' preferences for the regulatory elements of government. In fact, a nontrivial proportion of Republicans actually profess for a fuller, social-democratic vision of democracy.

In no small part, one of the defining characteristics that parcel preferences for expansive and limited forms of democracy are grounded in attitudes toward equal treatment and how people think about access to power and material well-being. How Americans think about the tradeoffs between these ideas explains much of the variance in class membership. By extension, we also find evidence that how citizens think about both gender and racial treatment shape their views of the meaning of democracy.

Finally, we connect these classes of democracy to attitudes how satisfied group members are with democratic governance, political institutions, and elite behavior. While Social Democrats and Libertarians possess distinctly different visions of democracy, they nevertheless *value* it. If

there is a burbling sense of democratic dissatisfaction, it mostly stems from Critical, Indifferent, and Neoliberal persons. This shared affection for democracy, however, obscures real differences regarding how these groups rate institutions and value assigned to political compromise.

## 1.2 Our contribution

Our findings lead to two important conclusions for observers of American politics. First, attitudes regarding democracy are more or less ideological, but not in the conventional left-right cleavage that characterizes present political conflict in American politics. Rather, they exist in what Phil Converse (1964) termed interconnected belief systems. That is, while a subset of American citizens are indifferent or possess critical attitudes toward democracy, a majority of people exhibit developed and lucid belief systems regarding the meaning of democracy. For these individuals, democracy is not just an abstract set of values, but manifests in a set of guiding principles by which to structure social and economic exchange.

The rub, however, regards the tension between these competing visions on the one hand, and the actual prevalence of their distribution throughout the mass public, on the other. Thus, our second contribution is identifying that a preference for social democracy far surpasses libertarian preferences. Comparing those citizens who envision democracy as “social democracy” and those with “libertarian” and “neoliberal” views, we discover that social democrats outnumber those other groups individually and combined. The prevailing consensus among a majority of Americans, is that democracy both protects rights *and* performs some redistributive functions that help reduce inequality. This finding has new and important ramifications for policy and party strategies, suggesting that many citizens are open to diverse, “progressive” messaging that cut across traditional political divisions.

## 2 Chapter Synopses

### Chapter 1 – Introduction: Why the Public’s Understanding of Democracy Matters

In the introduction, we raise the central question of the book: What does the public believe about democracy and how do those beliefs affect their evaluations of democratic political institutions and leaders? These are not insignificant questions. The prevailing political moment, from Russian meddling in the 2016 election, to the strain within the Democratic Party over progressivism and social democracy, to Donald Trump’s election and frontal assault on many of the implicit norms governing democratic behavior, is replete with tensions regarding the “soul” of democracy. Yet, questions about what democracy represents and whom its blessings involve are not new. We briefly provide the historical basis for these questions, outline our approach to deciphering how the public thinks about democracy, and conclude by discussing the broader implications that our findings have for how individuals

and parties think about the relationship between the meaning of democracy and political power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## Chapter 2 – Democracy's Conventional Meanings

This chapter provide a theoretical framework for thinking about the meaning of democracy and its importance to the process of system legitimation. This includes reviewing academic and popular definitions of democracy, outlining important distinctions between these understandings, and examining how these distinctions might influence public understandings and evaluations of democratic governance. We pay particular attention to substantive versus procedural understandings of democracy and how these approaches have shaped discussions regarding the meaning of democracy historically.

## Chapter 3 – Democracy's Public Meanings: A Typology of Democracy

In this chapter, we consider how the mass public thinks about democracy across a broad number surveys over time. We then hone in on original data collected from two modules of the 2016 and 2017 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies that ask citizens specifically about the essential characteristics of democracy. We find that citizens think about democracy along two dimensions – one emphasizing individual rights and the other emphasizing economic equality and fairness – but that these dimensions intersect to form five different permutations of democratic meanings: Critical, Indifferent, Social democratic, Libertarian, and Neoliberal perspectives. We then briefly trace the development of this typology throughout American political development.

## Chapter 4 – Sorting Citizens into Classes of Democracy

With our typology of democracy in hand, we turn next to investigating the demographic composition of these classes. We then explore how a number of psychological features shape individuals' propensity to sort into particular perspectives regarding democracy. In particular, we consider whether political affinities or other attitudes regarding the structure of social order shape the meaning that individuals assign to democracy. Our findings reveal that how Americans think about equal treatment, access to power, material well-being, and the perceptions regarding equality of opportunity shape composite views of democracy. Thus, this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the different qualities and characteristics that predict inclusion in each respective definition of democracy.

## Chapter 5 – The Promise and Performance of Democratic Governance

To what extent does our democratic typology shape how citizens evaluate democratic governance? Do members of these groups distinguish between the performance of democratic political institutions and democracy as a political system? In this chapter, we explore how

understandings of democracy influence evaluations of democratic political institutions, processes, and democracy as a system of government. Throughout, we give consideration to the distinctions political scientists have made between diffuse and specific political support and whether such conceptual distinctions are practically meaningful. In addition, we investigate how members of each class evaluate the parties, the overarching party system, whether they support wholesale changes to the institutional structure of government, and the type of legislative behaviors that they prefer.

## Chapter 6 – Democracy in Crisis? The Ongoing Challenges of Democratic Governance

To read the popular press or to watch popular media accounts is to believe that democracy is confronting a unique historical challenge. But how true is this? In this chapter, we argue that democracies, by their very nature, operate in an ongoing existential crisis. Nothing about democratic governance, including its future, is guaranteed. The specific challenge confronting democracy today is unique, we contend, in terms of the alignment of social, economic, and political forces working against democratic norms. Challenges to democracy—more broadly conceived—are, however, not unique. We can learn from previous challenges, how those challenges were overcome, and how they created the conditions for the next democratic challenge. We conclude the text by looking to the future. Democracy is, at once, inherently fragile and remarkably robust. To live in a democratic government is to live in an existential crisis. And, yet, there is much shared consensus among American citizens regarding their preference for a more open, fuller democracy.

### 3 Readership

Democracy is popular. A keyword search of the number of times “democracy” was mentioned in the *New York Times* over the previous year yields 2,700 hits. At *The Washington Post*, a similar search dredges up almost 4,600 hits over the same period. The mass public’s appetite for information on and knowledge of democracy is voracious. Based on the success of Yascha Mounk’s *The People Vs. Democracy* and Levitsky and Ziblatt’s *How Democracies Die*, Americans want to know whether the extraordinary events of the 2016 election have something to say for the sustainability of democracy. What these books lack, however, is any meaningful evidence regarding *what ordinary Americans actually believe about their democracy*.

Our book is targeted to these sorts of readers, in much the same way that Lilliana Mason’s recent book *Uncivil Agreement* appealed to both ordinary readers and experts alike. We also believe that *Democracy’s Meanings* would be ideal reading in undergraduate public opinion courses and American government seminars. In particular, we argue that it is well-suited to speak to the growing interest in data-driven methods of opinion analysis like Grossman and

Hopkins' (2016) well-received book *Asymmetric Politics*, which excelled at bridging academic work to popular audiences.

#### 4 Review of Market

Although there are many books regarding democratic theory, generally, and a growing body of work on democratic deconsolidation, specifically, there are no books regarding the shared public meanings of democracy. Using latent structure analysis, our typology of perspectives on democracy is an original approach to studying public opinion regarding democracy. This work is important because, while there is an expanding literature on declining trust in democratic political institutions, that work has struggled with distinguishing between support for the performance of these institutions versus broader support for democratic governance.

Democratic satisfaction is important for understanding whether citizens approve of democracy broadly, but related work rarely connects these evaluations to citizens' expectations and understandings of democracy as an abstract theory of government. Indeed, most criticisms of democratic governance are rooted in the idea that government failures are rooted in the idea that government is not democratic enough. Our work attempts to understand American democracy from the standpoint of democratic citizens by capturing how these public meanings shape evaluations of political institutions.

We believe this book offers an original contribution to contemporary work on democracy. Below, we list three recent monographs on democracy and discuss how *Democracy's Meanings* differs from this research.

- Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2017. *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press.

First, in *Democracy for Realists*, Bartels and Achen (2017) focus primarily on deconstructing "folk" views of democracy in relation to political behavior. They argue that democratic theory should be grounded in identity groups, yet that book speaks little to how citizens fundamentally think about democracy itself. Our work, however, shows that preferences regarding democracy actually *cut across traditional social and political groupings*. This complicates the idea that party politics will efficiently respond to such preferences. However, because our typology literally constitutes different *groupings* of democratic beliefs, we believe that party politics grounded in these meanings offers a powerful way of thinking about how to pursue effective policymaking in the face of seemingly irresolvable policy-based disagreement.

- Hibbing, John R., and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. *Stealth democracy: Americans' beliefs about how government should work*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Second, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (2002) work in *Stealth Democracy* argues that many Americans don't actually like certain features of their democratic system. In particular, they are that citizens would much prefer to default to "expert" rule. Our monograph provides a corrective update to this argument by juxtaposing many different facets of democratic governance against our typology of democratic meanings. We find that many citizens actually prefer *more* citizen input and reject a business- or expert-centric form of governance. In some sense, populism pervades how individuals think about democracy. This certainly presents its own challenges: "too much" democracy is no panacea to declining trust in and support for government.

- Mounk, Yascha. *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and how to Save it*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

Finally, our proposal speaks to the growing "crisis-of-democracy" literature by exploring how democratic meanings relate to evaluations of government. In *The People vs. Democracy*, for example, Yascha Mounk (2018) implies that liberal democracy is under siege. We find that this sort of analysis greatly oversells how Americans rate democracy. In fact, across our typology of democratic meanings, there is robust support for a vast array of fundamental aspects of traditional democratic governance. If anything, there seems to be a desire *for too much public input* – not disinterested disengagement. Our book also digs deeper into other evaluations of government institutions to assess how different perspectives on democracy shape how individuals rate the fundamental actors within the American political system.

## 5 Timeline

We have presented portions of Chapters 3 and 4 at the Southern Political Science Association's annual meeting in January, 2018. Chapter 5 was accepted for presentation at the American Political Science Association's annual meeting in August, 2018. A related paper was recently invited to resubmit at *The Journal of Politics*. We expect a draft of the monograph will be completed by late January, 2019.



Nicholas Davis is an Assistant Research Scientist at the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University. His research investigates three broad domains within American politics: (1) the sorting of social and political identities, (2) attitudes regarding the meaning of and support for democracy, and (3) interdisciplinary work involving the criminal justice system. His research on these topics has been published in a number of scholarly journals like *Political Research Quarterly*, *Political Behavior*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Social Sciences Quarterly*, *Research and Politics*, and *Electoral Studies*. His work has also been featured in The Washington Post, Vox, and The New York Times.

Kirby Goidel is Professor of Communication and Director of the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University. Previously, he was the Scripps Howard Professor of Mass Communication in the Department of Political Science at Louisiana State University where he also served as director of the Public Policy Research Lab. His research is motivated by questions of democratic governance, including whether citizens are up to the task of democratic self-governance, the willingness (and ability) of politics to manipulate public opinion, and the institutional mechanisms which translate democratic inputs into policy. In addition to publishing in leading journals like the *American Journal of Political Science* and the *Journal of Politics*, he is the author of *Misreading the Bill of Rights: Top Ten Myths Concerning Your Rights & Liberties*, *America's Failing Experiment: How We The People Have Become the Problem*.

Keith Gaddie is President's Associates Presidential Professor and Executive Faculty Fellow of the University of Oklahoma, and also Senior Fellow (dean) of Headington College. His current research focuses in three areas: the intersect of the built environment and democratic values; redistricting; and voting rights reform. He has authored or coauthored 24 books or volumes, and is a two-time winner of the V. O. Key Jr. Award for the outstanding book on Southern Politics. Among his published works are the books *Regulating Wetlands Protection* (2000), *Triumph of Voting Rights In the South* (2009), *Rise and Fall of the Voting Rights Act* (2016), and *The Three Governors Controversy: Skullduggery, Machinations, and the Decline of Georgia's Progressive Politics* (2015). His textbook with Thomas R. Dye, *Politics in America*, is entering its 12th edition.

## Selected bibliography

- de Tocqueville, Alexis de. (1835) 2003. *Democracy in America*. Reprint, Regnery Publishing.
- Inglehart, Ronald F. 2016. "How much should we worry?." *Journal of Democracy* 27(3), 18-23.
- Grossman, Matt and David A. Hopkins. 2016. *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*. Oxford University Press.
- Lijphart, Arend. 2012. *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.
- Rossiter, Clinton. (1961) 1999. *The Federalist papers; Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay*. Republished New York, N.Y.: Mentor.
- Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mounk, Yascha. *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and how to Save it*. Harvard University Press, 2018.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How democracies die*. Crown
- Converse, Philip E. 1964. "The nature of belief systems in mass publics." In *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David Apter.