The study of support for democracy

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Abstract

Despite academic concern over mass publics' commitments to democracy, contemporary synthesis on the subject of "support for democracy" is conspicuously absent. This review fills that gap by using large language models to code and analyze the Support for Democracy (SFD) corpus, a collection of 442 peer-reviewed journal articles spanning 1967 to 2026 that use survey data to understand how citizens think about democracy. Three findings emerge. First, the field is largely organized around Easton's distinction between specific and diffuse support. Second, this divide subsequently structures distinct reading communities where papers devoted to one of these evaluative dimensions are limited in their citation practices of the other. Finally, the relationship between these dimensions – i.e. whether dissatisfaction with performance ultimately erodes commitment to democracy itself – is rarely tested directly. I close by describing how future research would benefit from sharper measures, clearer research designs, and a broader focus on democracies globally.

Word count:

Keywords: support for democracy, diffuse support, specific support, satisfaction with democracy, democratic backsliding, winner-loser gap, systematic review, citation analysis

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Introduction

The study of citizens' support for self-rule long predates the modern survey infrastructure that measures it today. Classical and early modern political theorists, for example, viewed popular attachments to regimes as central features of governmental stability. Aristotle's *Politics* (Books V-VI) warned that political conflict may emerge when citizens become disillusioned with governing authorities' promises about equality and fairness. Polybius' *Histories* (Book VI) builds on that reasoning, arguing that democracy is particularly susceptible to degenerating into mob rule when citizens take freedom and equality for granted. Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* puts an even finer point on this warning: democracies become corrupted not from outside threats, but by an erosion of the democratic spirit within. Formal institutions set the conditions under which democracy is procedurally experienced, but citizens' commitments to the principles those institutions are meant to embody are an essential ingredient of democratic peace.

These early philosophical works anticipate a central question of modern democratic theory: when faced with (inevitable) disappointment, what binds citizens to the democratic project? Because government cannot escape turmoil, Lipset (1959) names legitimacy as the foundation of democratic stability, arguing that a regime's acceptance by its citizens helps it withstand crises of effectiveness. Easton's (1965, 1975) subsequent work on systems theory helps unpack the logic of this delicate relationship. Citizens may hold a deep attachment to the political system (diffuse support) that lets them withstand episodic dissatisfaction with what government delivers (specific support). Linz and Stepan (1996) place those commitments at the center of democratic consolidation, which occurs when citizens accept democratic procedures as "the only game in town," even when government disappoints them.[1]

Today, attention to these attitudes largely manifests in debates over whether mass publics will resist or enable democratic backsliding. Around the world, scholars have documented weaker satisfaction with democracy (e.g., Armingeon and Guthmann 2013; Turner and D'Art 2025), public sympathy for authoritarian alternatives to democracy (e.g., Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017; Lavrič and Bieber 2021; Claassen and Magalhães 2023), and tolerance, if not outright acceptance, of politicians who violate democratic norms and principles (Graham and Svolik 2020; Gidengil, Stolle and Bergeron-Boutin 2021; Dahlum, Langsæther and Wig 2025). Yet, despite this academic interest, there are few integrative or systematic reviews that investigate the study of support for democracy as a body of public opinion literature, although narrower reviews of outcomes and measures exist (Valgarðsson and Devine 2022; Claassen et al. 2025; Welzel 2021).

[1] On this point, commitment and satisfaction need not move together: citizens can value democratic ideals while judging democracy's performance harshly (Norris 1999), a gap Norris (2011) calls the "democratic deficit."

Thus, despite significant scholarly productivity, this literature has developed without a clear agenda for connecting findings across outcomes, settings, and research traditions into a cumulative account of why citizens support democracy. Because different measures, explanations, and findings paint a portrait of support for democracy that can be difficult to harmonize, this review takes stock of this growing body literature. Drawing on the Support for Democracy (SFD) corpus, which contains more than 440 peer-reviewed journal articles, I first describe how the corpus was built and coded, then map where the research takes place and which survey programs it relies on. I next trace how support for democracy is measured, review what predicts specific and diffuse support, and summarize what the field can say about spillover between them. I then conclude with a brief discussion regarding the field's limitations and the questions it has yet to answer.

Building the Support for Democracy Corpus

The Support for Democracy (SFD) corpus was built in two stages.[2] First, using Harzing's (2007) *Publish or Perish* web scraper, I scraped Google Scholar between October 1 and 8, 2026, for papers that included one of thirteen phrases in the title: (1) attitudes toward, (2) commitment to, (3) preference for, (4) satisfaction with, (5) support for, (6) trust in, and (7) the meanings of democracy, along with (8) support for democratic norms and (9) democratic support, (10) values, (11) norms, (12) norm violations, and (13) backsliding. Collectively, the searches returned 974 records and 884 unique works. An initial procedural cull was then performed using large language model (LLM) agents where the corpus was screened for English-language journal articles that were indexed via Scopus- or Web of Science, resulting in 498 peer-reviewed articles (books, book chapters, working papers, and other unpublished manuscripts were omitted).[3] The full text of six of these articles could not be obtained, leaving 492 to screen. Next, a substantive screening scheme was implemented, which resulted in removing papers whose outcome is not a mass attitude toward democracy (n = 72), papers that use democracy only as a predictor (n = 21), papers without survey data (n = 3), and papers that report neither an inferential test nor a systematic comparison of the outcome across groups (n = 3). In total, 393 papers passed this set of screens.

[2] An early attempt at building and coding this dataset involved using under- and graduate student coders, but the task of collecting and coding these works by hand provided a difficult and slow challenge. Large language models coupled with clear instructions, however, proved particularly adept at consistently and efficiently producing usable output.

[3] The omission of books and book chapters is a limiting scope condition. For example, *Democracy's Meanings* (Davis, Gaddie, and Goidel 2023) explores several support for democracy measures in the span of a single integrative text, and yet it is omitted from the analysis here. I return to this limitation below.

While this strategy produces a reasonably comprehensive body of work on support for democracy, this practice may yet omit research that is relevant to the core topic simply because its title does not use the right combination of keywords. Here, consulting the corpus' master reference list – the aggregated list of references cited by all papers in the corpus – suggests that this is indeed a problem. Analyzing the 150 outside works that corpus papers cite most often, 57 works were seemingly on-topic journal articles that the searches never returned. Often, these papers were excluded because they possessed a descriptive title that was topical rather than specific to a measure of support for democracy.

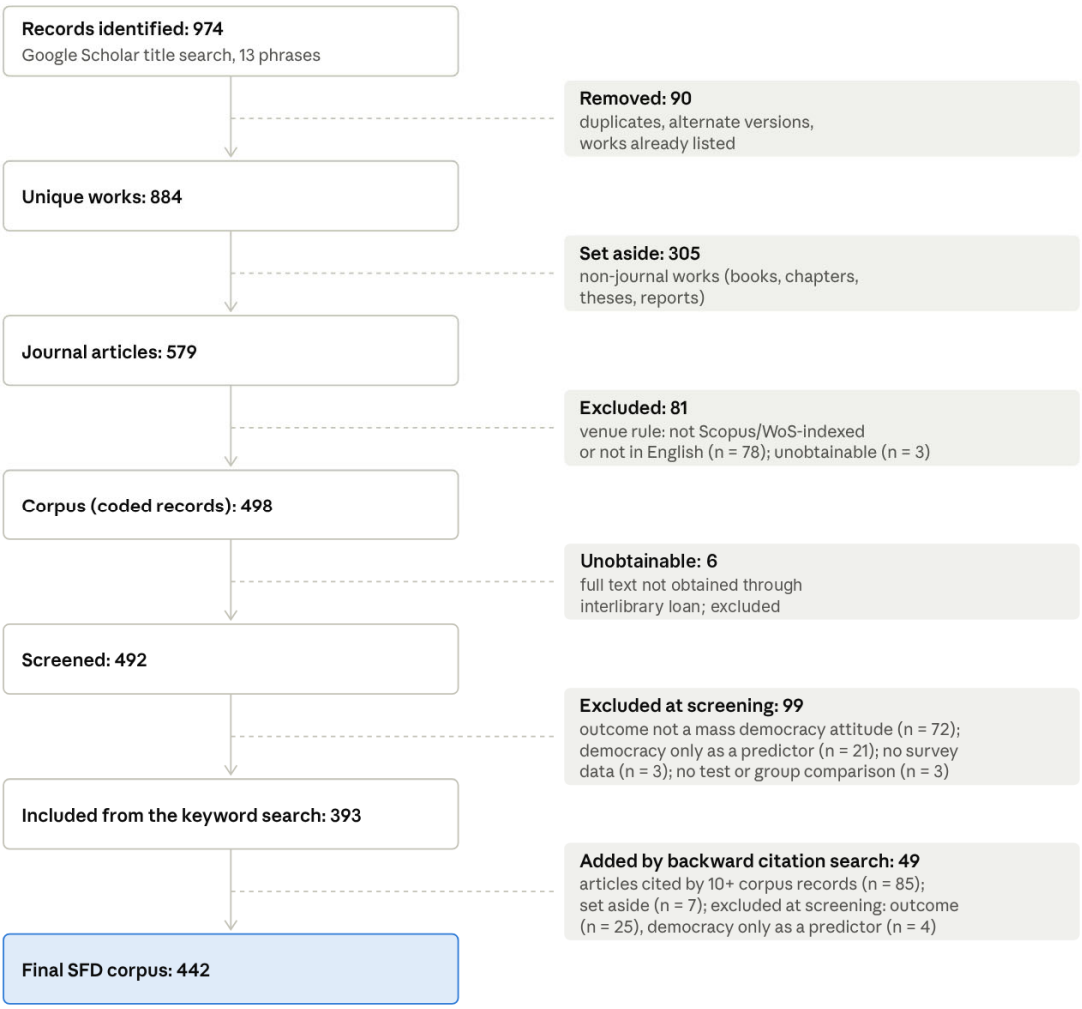


Figure 1. Corpus construction via PRISMA flow diagram.

To incorporate those omitted works, I conducted a second data collection using one round of backward citation search (Wohlin 2014). This process involved retrieving the reference list of every corpus record from OpenAlex, an open bibliographic database, and counting how many corpus records cite each outside work. Every journal article cited by at least 10 corpus records was a candidate for inclusion (n = 85). Non-journal articles (n = 4) and general statistical-methods papers with no democratic-attitude outcome (n = 3) were set aside, and the remaining 78 articles were screened under the same procedural and substantive scheme described above, which removed papers whose outcome is not a mass attitude toward democracy (n = 25) and papers that use democracy only as a predictor (n = 4). In total, 49 papers passed this second stage. Together, these processes produce a final corpus that contains 442 papers: 393 from the keyword search and 49 from the citation search (Figure 1).[4] Unless noted otherwise, the counts and percentages reported below refer to all 442 papers.

Coding research works in the SFD corpus

After screening, each paper was coded for the type of analysis (e.g., observational, experimental), the source of its public opinion data (e.g., the World Values Survey), and the countries and regions it studies. Categorizing outcomes was straightforward because a narrow list of outcomes quickly emerged; coding predictors, however, was considerably more complex. Paper-level coding followed a written codebook, developed and revised over several rounds of human hand-coding before turning loose the LLM coders. Using Anthropic's Claude.ai (Opus 5.5), agent coders then read each paper's full text and recorded (1) *inclusion eligibility*, namely whether a mass attitude toward democracy is modeled as a dependent variable, whether democratic attitudes serve as more than predictors, whether the paper analyzes standardized survey responses, and whether it reports at least one inferential test of the democracy outcome, (2) the *country* and *region* associated with data collection, (3) *data source*, (4) *sample type*, (5) the *democratic outcome*, (6) each *predictor* the paper frames as central and tests against that outcome using a list of 29 predictor labels, (7) *moderation*, when an effect varies with country- or context-level conditions, (8) *research design* (e.g., observational, experimental), and (9) *measurement*, when a paper explicitly states that its aim is to study the structure of democratic beliefs. For analysis, I later grouped the 29 predictor labels into 13 predictor families; those families are an analytical grouping generated after the predictor labels were applied to facilitate discussion of trends in this research.

[4] Descriptive, measurement, and predictor counts use all 442 included papers. The citation analyses in the section on reading communities use only the keyword-search records, because papers added for being cited by the corpus would inflate within-corpus citation by design.

The codebook was developed iteratively. Across three rounds of testing, I independently coded 90 papers and compared my coding with coding conducted by LLM agents. I adjudicated each disagreement, and where a disagreement exposed an ambiguity in the rules, I amended the rules before further coding continued. Once the rules were final, they were frozen, and a fresh batch of LLM coders, working blind to all earlier coding, recoded every paper with an available full text in a single final pass under those frozen rules. The codebook and logbook of those decisions is available in the appendix.

Agreement between human coding and the final coding conducted by LLM agents was high. As mentioned above, the screening process began by determining whether a paper ought to be included in the main corpus; agreement on inclusion was 94% (Cohen's $\kappa = .84$). Next, outcomes were coded according to a set of criteria, and agreement on the focal outcome family was 90% (98% when either of the two outcome families I coded matched either of the two in the final coding). For predictors, my predictor families matched those of the final coding in 87% of papers. Agreement on which predictor a paper treats as "primary" was much lower (61%), largely because coders ordered the same predictors differently or chose neighboring concepts (e.g., an election coded as representation by one coder and as an external shock by another). As such, I abandoned the focus on a single primary predictor. Instead, each paper is represented by the full set of predictors it frames as substantively important: those named in its title, stated aims (per abstract), or hypotheses and tested against a democracy outcome.[5]

The geography of the study of support for democracy

If democracy is an international project, then the study of support for it has taken an appropriately global view. To understand this literature's geographic terrain, it is helpful to track the various cross-national survey programs that have been developed over the last half-century. Within the SFD corpus, most papers rely on one or a small number of these survey programs. Table 1 lists the most-used survey projects, which include the European Social Survey (ESS), the World Values Survey (WVS), and various "barometer" surveys that span many geographically proximate countries.

Given the public availability of these data and the relative ease with which survey data can be compared across country contexts, the research designs used across papers are often comparative: more than sixty percent of papers analyze more than one country ($n = 273$); only about one in three papers

[5] To establish the reliability of this approach, a second set of agents coded 60 random papers, applying the same frozen rules. These agreed on the inclusion determination on all 60 papers, on the outcome family in every included paper, and on significance in 96% of comparable relationships. The two codings' sets of framed predictor families overlapped at a mean Jaccard of .91 and were identical in 83% of papers.

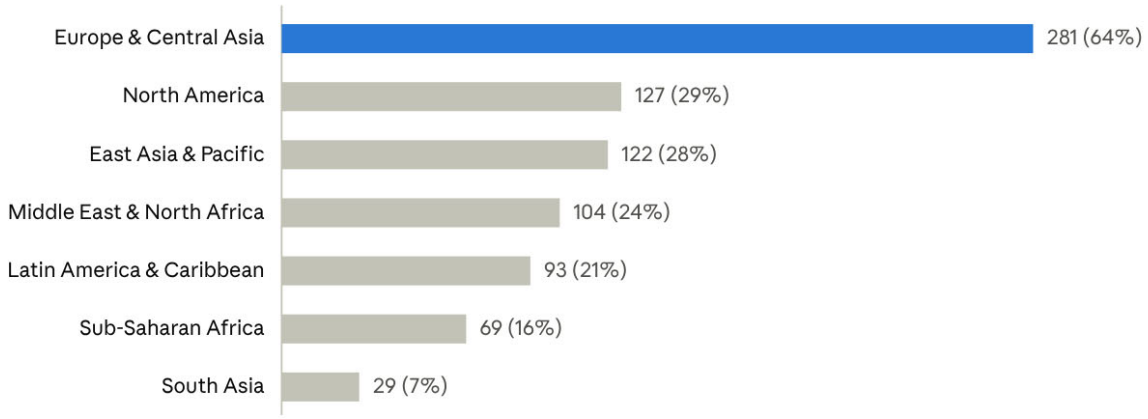
examines a single country context. Among papers that are comparative in nature, the median number of countries analyzed is 16, while the maximum number of countries investigated is well over 130 in a single paper. Among papers that investigate a single case study, 30 study the United States, 66 a country in Europe or Central Asia, 5 another Anglophone democracy (Canada, Australia, New Zealand), and 57 other countries. The remaining 11 papers report only the regions they cover or no recoverable country list.

Survey program	Coverage	Papers	% of included
European Social Survey	Europe	50	11%
World Values Survey	Global	50	11%
Comparative Study of Electoral Systems	Global	50	11%
Eurobarometer	EU members and candidates	39	9%
National election studies (non-US)	Single countries	32	7%
Afrobarometer	Africa	31	7%
Asian Barometer	East and Southeast Asia	23	5%
European Values Study	Europe	22	5%
Americas Barometer (LAPOP)	Americas	21	5%
Latinobarómetro	Latin America	21	5%
American National Election Studies	United States	12	3%
Arab Barometer	Middle East and North Africa	11	2%
International Social Survey Programme	Global	5	1%
Original data collection	Varies	126	29%

Table 1. Survey programs used by included papers (a paper counts once for each program it uses).

Panel A in Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of which regions are investigated within this body of literature. Coverage is heavily skewed toward Europe and Central Asia, which appear in 64% of included papers (n = 281), far ahead of North America (127), East Asia and the Pacific (122), the Middle East and North Africa (104), Latin America (93), Sub-Saharan Africa (69) and South Asia (29). Europe's dense survey infrastructure, which includes the European Social Survey (ESS), the European Values Study (EVS), and Eurobarometer, probably contributes to this skew in the regions under study. Outside Europe and North America, the dependence on large, omnibus survey projects is significant: 91% of the papers covering Sub-Saharan Africa, 90% of those covering South Asia, 86% for Latin America and 84% for the Middle East and North Africa use a cross-national program compared to roughly 60% for Europe and North America. On a more granular level, Table 2 reports the top-10 most studied countries. European democracies fill the

top of the list. The United States ranks 16th by total papers (105, tied with Norway), but it is by far the most common single-country case (30 of 158 single-country papers).



(A) Distribution of regions surveyed

Country	Papers	Of which single-country
Germany	176	15
Spain	144	5
United Kingdom	141	4
Poland	135	3
Netherlands	133	4
Sweden	133	3
France	127	3
Finland	116	0
Italy	114	1
Hungary	113	2

(B) Top-10 most surveyed countries

Figure 2. Regional and country coverage of papers in the SFD corpus. In Panel A, regions derived from World Bank; a comparative public opinion paper counts for a given region if it includes a survey from a country belonging to the region. For both panels, country lists are coded from what the authors report: text, tables, figures, appendices and, where available, replication files. In a minority of papers that list had to be reconciled with the authors' own stated count of countries.

Approaches to measuring support for democracy

In early work, Almond and Verba (1963) asked whether citizens held the orientations a stable democracy needs. Surveying publics in five countries, they argued that democracy is most stable where citizens' expectations of government are tempered by a measure of trust and deference, a balance they call the "civic culture." Despite its canonical place in the literature, this early research largely treated orientations toward democracy as a single cultural syndrome, which meant that its findings could not say whether disappointment over government outputs would erode commitment to democracy itself.

Easton's (1965, 1975) field-setting work on systems theory provided a template for filling that gap by distinguishing diffuse from specific support – a distinction that has largely structured how the subsequent research on support for democracy has evolved over the last sixty years. The earliest articles in the SFD corpus tend to include to both specific (e.g., Kornberg and Clarke 1994; Mishler and Rose 1996; Anderson and Guillory 1997) and diffuse support for democracy (e.g., Crotty 1967; Shin, Chey and Kim 1989; LoGerfo 1996). A series of developments, however, then pulled the field toward the performance dimension of Easton's systems framework. Satisfaction with democracy, asked routinely in Eurobarometer surveys and later in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, made performance evaluations cheap to study across many countries; in no small part, the significant scholarly investment in studying satisfaction cannot be divorced from the dramatic growth in cross-national public opinion research more generally.

In the aftermath of this attention, a measurement debate emerged, with researchers questioning what, precisely, satisfaction with democracy meant in practice.[6] Here, criticism divided over the implications of the conceptual ambiguity inherent in "satisfaction." Some concluded that because satisfaction blends support for the regime, the system, and incumbents, researchers needed to clarify the implications of such support (Canache, Mondak and Seligson 2001). Others, instead, narrowed the interpretation of the instrument, treating it as a gauge of how democracy performs in practice rather than of commitment to democratic principles, although even this reading depends on institutional context (Linde and Ekman 2003). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that satisfaction varies so closely with both the underlying institutional rules (e.g., Anderson and Guillory 1997; Aarts and Thomassen 2008; Bernauer and

[6] Those questions extended even to the way satisfaction was surveyed. The Eurobarometer asks about satisfaction with how democracy "works," while the World Values Survey asked in waves 3 and 4 about how democracy is "developing." Valgarðsson and Devine (2022) show that survey programs produce different estimates of the level of satisfaction, even though their trends move together. They attribute the gaps to some mix of question wording, response scales, survey mode and fieldwork timing.

Vatter 2012) and the status of citizens as "winners" or "losers" (e.g., Blais and Gélineau 2007; Curini, Jou and Memoli 2012; Singh 2014) – features that have implications for democratic experiences.

Today, although satisfaction with democracy still predominates as an outcome in the SFD corpus (appearing in 57% of papers), a new phase has developed in the aftermath of scholarly concerns about democratic deconsolidation. In the mid-2010s, the volume of work on support for democracy rose sharply – 272 of the 442 included papers date from 2017 or later – at which point the literature's motivating question shifted to backsliding. Two changes mark this late development. First, attention moved from abstract regime preference toward commitment to liberal-democratic norms and the rejection of autocratic alternatives (i.e. 9 papers from 2010-2016 compared to 43 papers from 2017 to present). Second, research designs became more experimental: 50 of the papers since 2017 rest wholly or partly on a survey, natural or quasi-experiment, against only 4 of the 170 earlier papers.

Measuring support for democracy within the SFD corpus

The theoretical distinction between diffuse and specific support is only as good as the empirical evidence that sustains it, yet even substantive papers largely concede measurement challenges before setting them aside. Nevertheless, 75 corpus papers carry measurement tags: 35 papers whose main contribution involves measurement of support for democracy and 40 that make a measurement argument alongside a substantive one. The literature is mostly recent: 32 of the 75 date from 2020 or later and largely concentrates on a few questions (Table 3). The construct examined most often is generic support for or preference for democracy (n = 28), followed by meanings of democracy (n = 15) and satisfaction with democracy (n = 8).

Focus	Papers
Dimensionality and structure of support	24
Item validity and response bias	20
Meanings and understandings of democracy	16
New instrument or index	11
Question design and survey mode	9
Cross-national equivalence and invariance	7

Table 3. Topical focus of papers measuring support for democracy. Some papers contain more than one such analysis and are thus counted in multiple categories.

To assess the prevalence of different measures of support for democracy within the corpus on a more granular level, I pair Norris' (1999, 2011) work with Easton's (1965) distinctions between specific and diffuse support. If the latter provides a blunt dichotomy between evaluation types, the former provides a second layer that helps nest different outcomes within these broad buckets, separating out support for the political community, regime principles, regime performance, regime institutions, and incumbent actors.[7] Specifically, four broad families of measures manifest in the corpus. Shares below are of the 442 included papers, classified by their focal outcome; three papers whose outcome combines government and regime evaluations fall outside all four. [8]

- *Diffuse support, regime principles (45%).* These attitudes involve abstract support for democracy as an admirable, if not ideal form of government. These commitments are embodied by preferences for democratic government (democracy preferred to its alternatives), autocratic alternatives (rejection of strongman, military, or expert rule) and liberal-democratic values (commitment to rights, tolerance and limits on power).
- *Diffuse support, understanding of the regime (2%).* Across the world, different people hear different things when they consider what democracy means. The "meanings" of democracy questions ask respondents to consider whether certain features of democracy are more or less important or essential. These attitudes are classed as diffuse in nature because they concern what citizens take democracy to be, though they are a precondition of support rather than support itself.
- *Specific support, regime performance and a few institutions (51%).* These attitudes are classic performance evaluations. The standard example is satisfaction with democracy, along with other evaluations of how well democracy is performing at a given moment.

[7] One could also make the argument that beliefs about democracy may fit within an alternative framework that distinguishes thin (endorsement of democracy in the abstract) and thick support (commitments to what democracy requires). Thin support is often instrumental; that is, people say that they prefer democracy because they associate it with positive outcomes. Even though the evaluative object is the regime, that kind of support can behave like specific support, collapsing when performance falls. Whether mass support for democracy rests on intrinsic or instrumental grounds is a question within this literature (e.g. Bratton and Mattes 2001; Kilavuz and Sumaktoyo 2020; Spierings 2024); I do not adopt that framework here, however, because it cuts across outcome families rather than replacing or offering an alternative to them.

[8] Each paper is assigned a level from its focal outcome. The outcome family alone decides three levels: regime preference, rejection of autocratic alternatives and liberal-democratic values are principles; meanings of democracy is understanding; and support for direct democracy or referendums is a procedural preference. Evaluation outcomes default to regime performance, except that items rating particular institutions are classed as institutions and indices that combine principle and performance items are classed as mixed. Of the 442 included papers, 208 fall on the principles side (principles or understanding), 223 on regime performance, 2 on institutions, 6 on direct democracy, and 3 are mixed. Comparisons of principles and performance set the last 11 aside or, where noted, keep them as a third group.

- *Procedural preferences (1%)*. These attitudes constitute a small share of the attitudes measured in the corpus and most directly measure support for direct democracy. Preferring a way of making decisions is neither an evaluation of how democracy is performing nor a commitment to its principles, so I treat these papers as a separate category, outside the diffuse–specific divide; the comparisons of principles and performance below set them aside.

Figure 3 breaks these categories down into the specific measures behind them, showing the share of included papers that model each item as an outcome. Satisfaction with democracy is the only measure that most papers share. Measures of principles, by contrast, are spread thinly across many items: the most common, rejecting a strong leader who need not bother with parliament or elections, appears in only 17% of papers, and no liberal-democratic value appears in more than 8% of papers.

In addition to these shares is a second feature worth acknowledging that involves how composite measures are built. Often, where papers measure principles or other items included under the banner of diffuse support, researchers combine items into composite indices. Of the 53 papers (12%) whose focal outcome combines items from two or more outcome families, 51 sit on the principles side, most commonly in the form of the democracy–autocracy index built from World Values Survey items (c.f. Inglehart and Welzel 2005), which adds endorsements of democracy and subtracts support for rule by a strong leader or the army. More broadly, roughly a quarter of papers describe their focal outcome as an index, scale, or latent score. This distribution includes 90 papers measuring principles, whereas 23 of the 228 papers focused on evaluations of performance do so. That result produces an interesting asymmetry. Performance is generally measured with a single, well-accepted question, while principles are measured with a variety of composites measures that often merge embracing democracy with rejecting its alternatives. Findings across the principles side are thus harder to compare across studies.

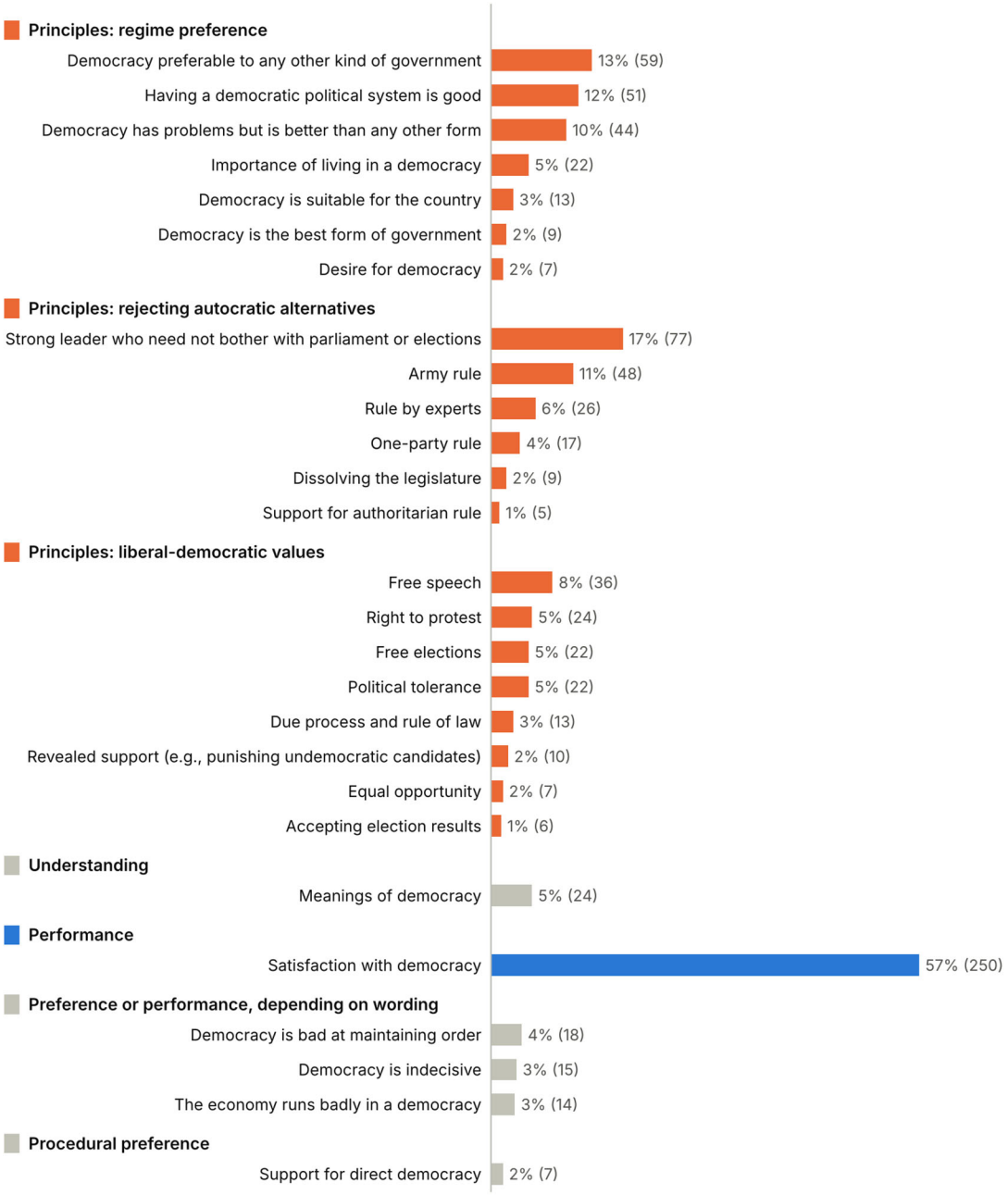


Figure 3. Outcome items in the SFD corpus. A paper counts toward every item it models, focal or not, so shares sum to more than 100%. Items in fewer than 5 papers are not drawn, which includes: democracy as a priority (4), rule by a few (3), trust in democracy (3), return to communist rule (2), dictatorship sometimes better (2), majority rule (2), monarchy (1), compromise with opponents is dangerous (1). Secondary outcomes without a democracy referent, modeled alongside a democracy outcome, are also not drawn: confidence in institutions (41), trust in elections (12), rating of the current system of government (11), government accountability (5). 137 papers (31%) also model an outcome not on the checklist, mostly composite indices and newer norm-violation measures; 7 rely on such outcomes alone.

Recent research on support for political institutions like the Supreme Court offers a cautionary parallel to this development. There, diffuse support (legitimacy) has typically been measured with multi-item batteries and specific support with a single approval item, a mismatch Davis and Hitt (2026a, 2026b) address by validating a three-item measure of specific support. The SFD corpus shows the same asymmetry: performance is usually measured with one item, while more durable commitments to democracy (values, principles, and regime support) are measured with composites. That mismatch matters. First, single items carry more random measurement error than multi-item scales. When satisfaction is modeled as an outcome, this likely makes estimates noisier; when it is a predictor, as in tests of spillover, it biases estimated effects toward zero. In that case, observed differences in how strongly predictors relate to performance and to principles may partly reflect differences in instrumental measurement practice rather than substance. Second, composite measures that fold endorsements of democracy and rejection of autocracy together, obscure whether the correlates of those attitudes are distinct.

What predicts support for democracy?

Given the motivational distinctions between specific and diffuse support, it seems prudent to expect that the correlates of these attitudes will differ, as well. To unpack these relationships, I begin by giving a broad overview of what the SFD corpus can tell us about the wellspring of support for democracy. I then devote separate space to reviewing what past scholarship says about the common correlates of specific and diffuse support. The studies cited here are drawn largely from the most-cited papers in each predictor family and on each side of that divide (by Google Scholar citation counts). Figure 4 organizes the distribution of predictors of support for democracy. Recall that the codebook assigns each tested predictor one of 29 labels, which I group into 13 "families" of explanations. Figure 4 illustrates the prevalence of a predictor family in total (*n* papers) against the share of papers in which that predictor family is used to explain specific rather than diffuse support. Here, the unit of analysis is the set of predictors each paper frames in its title, stated aim or hypotheses, not a single "focal" predictor.

On balance, a slight majority of explanations for support for democracy are tested against performance-based outcomes. However, as Figure 4 illustrates, these explanations vary dramatically based on whether researchers model specific or diffuse support. Elections – and their consequences – are reliably associated with satisfaction, while other forms of system-level performance (government, economy) are connected to both specific and diffuse support, alike. A variety of additional explanations ranging from partisanship and group identities to social and political trust are more often tied to commitments to democratic governance and principles.

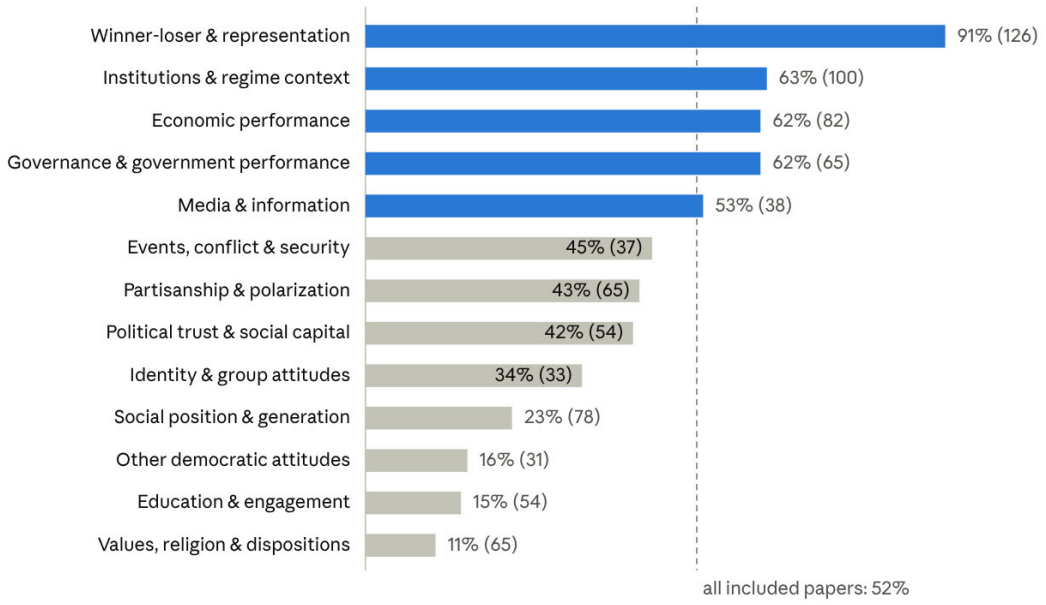


Figure 4. Distribution of predictor families in the SFD Corpus. Bars convey total prevalence of predictor family across the SFD corpus. These 13 predictor families condense a variety of sublabels into one categorical heading. *Winner-loser and representation* covers elections and representation. *Institutions and regime context* combines institutions and policy, regime context and history, and foreign powers and international influence. *Economic performance* joins economic evaluations with the macro-economy. *Social position and generation* groups socioeconomic position; age, cohort and time; gender; and place of residence and urbanization. *Partisanship and polarization* includes partisanship and polarization, elite and candidate norm violations, the radical right, and populism and anti-elite attitudes. *Values, religion and dispositions* combines values, religion, and psychological dispositions and personality. *Governance and government performance* joins government performance with governance and corruption. *Political trust and social capital*, *Media and information* (the media environment, information and social media) and *Other democratic attitudes* (democratic attitudes used as predictors of other democratic attitudes) each correspond to a single label. *Education and political engagement* pairs education with political knowledge and interest. *Events, conflict and security* groups events and shocks, violence and conflict, and crime and security. *Identity and group attitudes* combines identity and belonging with racial attitudes.

Specific support tracks performance and context

The largest body of work within the SFD corpus investigates satisfaction with democracy, which is rendered as a verdict on how the system works. This research is anchored by Anderson and Guillory (1997), the most-cited paper in the entire corpus, which found that electoral losers are more satisfied, and winners less so, in countries with consensual institutions. This focus on representation, and whether citizens backed the winner or loser, forms a throughline through this body of work (Blais and Gélineau 2007; Rohrschneider 2002; Curini, Jou and Memoli 2012; Singh, Karakoç and Blais 2012), although institutional explanations

for specific support extend beyond this domain. Indeed, other work explores how electoral and constitutional design (Aarts and Thomassen 2008; Bernauer and Vatter 2012) and, increasingly, the quality rather than the form of institutions – for example, institutional quality (Wagner, Schneider and Halla 2009), procedural fairness (Magalhães 2016) and the salience of corruption (Christmann and Torcal 2017) – are all associated with satisfaction.

Economic explanations also follow a similar logic. Satisfaction is higher among citizens who expect the national economy to improve in post-communist Europe (Mishler and Rose 1996) and where macroeconomic performance is stronger across the European Union (Quaranta and Martini 2016), and it fell where austerity was imposed from outside during the euro crisis (Armingeon, Guthmann and Weisstanner 2016). All but one of the 40 tested economic relationships on the performance side are significant. Smaller literatures extend the performance logic to trust and social capital (Zmerli and Newton 2008), to the information environment, where social-media news use and perceived misinformation go with lower satisfaction (Ceron and Memoli 2016; Nisbet, Mortenson and Li 2021), and to events, where a COVID-19 lockdown raised satisfaction (Bol et al. 2021) and scandal elections were followed by lower satisfaction (Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012).

Diffuse support involves socialization, values and political experience

The socialization tradition predicts that support for democracy develops through learning, and education is among the correlates of diffuse support that is most routinely significant, and in the widest range of settings, from post-communist Europe (Waldron-Moore 1999; McAllister and White 2017) to sub-Saharan Africa (Evans and Rose 2007, 2012; Asomah and Dim 2021) and South Asia (Farooq, Bouwhuis and Muis 2025). Cross-national comparisons also suggest the relationship is stronger in more democratic countries (Kołczyńska 2020). Cultural explanations that locate support for democracy in, say, religious traditions, inherited values or psychological dispositions, are more mixed. The values, religion, and dispositions family is most often tested against democratic principles (53 of its 65 papers), although the corpus offers little support for the claim that particular cultural traditions are incompatible with democracy.

This is especially the case with religion, where the evidence points away from blanket incompatibility with democracy (Tessler 2002; Jamal 2006). Where religion does matter, the dimension measured shapes the relationship: in priming experiments, private religious belief lowers support for democracy while communal religious practice raises it, and cross-national survey data show a similar split (Ben-Nun Bloom and Arikan 2013a, 2013b). The Asian-values debate runs along similar lines. Of seven dimensions of Asian values, only one, a dislike of adversarial politics, is associated with lower support for

democracy (Park and Shin 2006), although work that isolates hierarchical and paternalistic strands of Confucian thought finds them more consistently at odds with liberal-democratic commitments (Chang, Wu and Weatherall 2017; Xiao and Zhang 2025; Lee and Tsai 2026). Among dispositions, authoritarianism is the one most often found to predict lower support (Canetti-Nisim and Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Gryniuk 2018; Kaftan 2026).

However, the most-cited diffuse-support work traces regime preference not to culture but to political experience. In new democracies, citizens who judge that democracy delivers political goods such as civil liberties and free elections prefer it more (Bratton and Mattes 2001; Evans and Whitefield 1995). As concern about democratic backsliding has intensified, scholars have pivoted to asking what erodes diffuse support in established democracies. Today, later generations of Americans appear less supportive of democracy (Claassen and Magalhães 2023), perhaps because they have seen it strain under the weight of gridlock and polarization. In this vein, partisanship often renders citizens unwilling to punish undemocratic candidates (Graham and Svolik 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021); and ethnic antagonism and national collective narcissism are associated with antidemocratic attitudes (Bartels 2020; Marchlewska et al. 2022; Miller and Davis 2021).

Whither spillover?

Despite the academic distinction between specific and diffuse support, one remaining question in this literature that goes largely unanswered involves the relationship between the two kinds of support. Easton expected them to be linked over time: diffuse support can be, in part, the product of "spillover effects from evaluations of a series of outputs" (Easton 1975, 446). By implication, persistent dissatisfaction with outputs should eventually erode it. Yet Easton was also careful to note that the connection between political dissatisfaction and acceptance of the regime is unpredictable. In fact, the critical-citizens argument implies that the two can stay apart for long periods (Norris 1999). On this view, the gap between citizens' commitment to democratic ideals and their disappointment with how democracy performs, which Norris calls a "democratic deficit," need not signal erosion of diffuse support and may instead reflect rising expectations among citizens who value democracy more, not less.

Elections are the natural place to look for these relationships, since every contest produces a clear set of losers whose evaluations of democratic performance might fall. Indeed, whether an electoral loss spills into commitments to democratic principles is the central question of the losers'-consent tradition (Anderson et al. 2005). The winner-loser literature is the largest single cluster in the corpus, yet almost none of it can speak to spillover. Of 138 findings, 122 concern regime performance (almost always

satisfaction with democracy). However, 15 papers relate a respondent's side winning or holding power to a principle-level outcome, and in eight of them it is *winners*, not losers, who become less enamored with democratic ideals. Supporters of winning parties value checks and balances less (Mazepus and Toshkov 2022), incumbent supporters are less willing to constrain the executive (van der Brug et al. 2021), and partisans tolerate norm-eroding policies and undemocratic candidates when their own side benefits (Simonovits, McCoy and Littvay 2022; Graham and Svolik 2020; Driscoll et al. 2025). The remaining papers qualify that pattern, producing effects that vary by country (Gidengil, Stolle and Bergeron-Boutin 2021), or party (Kingzette et al. 2021), or that disappear with controls (Sadowski 2024). Suggestively, the threat to democratic principles may come less from disaffected losers than from permissive winners (e.g., Cohen et al. 2023; Fjelde and Olafsdottir 2025; Teas 2026).

Direct tests of spillover outside elections are also scarce. Only 23 of the 442 included papers measure both a performance-level and a principle-level outcome. The handful that use performance evaluations to predict principles find a positive link (Evans and Whitefield 1995; Sarsfield and Echegaray 2006; Chasukwa 2019), although an older aggregate study found that poor state performance went with lower confidence in institutions but not with weaker support for democracy (Weil 1989). The context-dependent economic effects (e.g., Cordero and Simón 2016; Teixeira, Tsatsanis and Belchior 2014) and the thermostatic response of democratic mood (e.g., Claassen 2020) are perhaps the closest the corpus comes to observing how that reservoir of support drains or refills.

A literature of separate communities

To this point, I have highlighted important trends in measurement and modeling within the work researching support for democracy. What is less clearly understood, however, is how any given work or subsets of work are nested within the wider community of published literature on support for democracy. One way of making sense of this literature, however, is assessing its networked structure. For this task, I built a within-corpus citation network to assess the shape of research communities within this work. In this network analysis, an edge runs from paper A to paper B whenever B appears in A's reference list. Papers were matched to OpenAlex by DOI or through a Crossref bibliographic search. Of the 498 keyword-search records, 472 works were matched, with 447 articles having a reference list in OpenAlex. The result is some 2,488 unique citations among corpus records. That total includes citations to and from records later excluded at screening; the tests below use only the 1,946 citations in which both papers were included and coded.

Figure 5 illustrates that the network has one dense center belonging to the performance literature. All ten of the most-cited papers within the corpus are either evaluation and performance papers or measurement critiques of satisfaction with democracy, led by Anderson and Guillory (1997), Linde and Ekman (2003) and Canache, Mondak and Seligson (2001). The regime-preference literature, by contrast, forms a looser cluster on the periphery, organized around a few widely read papers (e.g., Bratton and Mattes 2001; Magalhães 2014; Graham and Svolik 2020).[9] Several patterns emerge. First, the outcome literatures exhibit siloing: evaluation and performance papers send 93% of their within-corpus citations to other evaluation papers (56% expected), and regime-preference papers send 73% to their own family (28% expected). Second, the divide between principles and performance is asymmetric. Principles papers send about a quarter of their citations (24%) to performance work, but performance papers send only 7% the other way, so the larger performance literature is largely self-referential and is read more than it reads. Finally, papers cluster by explanation as well as by outcome. Even among papers studying the same outcome, those that share a predictor family cite each other nearly twice as often as chance would predict (ratio 1.9).[10] Moreover, this divide is not simply geographical, although the two sides do study different places: performance research concentrates on Europe, while studies of Asia and of the Middle East and North Africa fall mostly on the principles side.[11]

[9] Using simulations, we can show whether the boundaries are real rather than an artifact of group size. For each grouping, I compare the share of citations that stay within a group with the share we would expect if papers cited each other without regard to group. To get that expected share, I shuffle group labels across papers 2,000 times while holding the citation network fixed, which accounts for how large each group is. Because the labels move across papers, this baseline does not account for differences between groups in how much their papers cite or are cited. The ratio of observed to expected citations is 1 when papers cite across groups as often as chance predicts and 2 when they stay within their own group twice as often. By outcome family, the ratio is 2.1: 85% of citations stay within the citing paper's family, against 40% expected. When labels are shuffled only among papers with similar citation activity (terciles of citations made and received), the ratios shrink but remain well above 1: 1.45 for outcome family and 1.44 for principles versus performance (1.29 and 1.28 when region is also held fixed; all $p < .001$). I treat these as lower bounds, since the activity strata partly absorb the divide itself.

[10] These boundaries largely hold up against the obvious objections. They do not depend on how citations were collected, on authors citing themselves, on a handful of highly cited papers, or on when papers were published. Under each of these checks, the outcome-family ratio stays between 2.0 and 2.2 and the principles-versus-performance ratio between 1.8 and 1.9.

[11] Comparing papers only within the same journal weakens that contrast further (1.45). That is to be expected: journals specialize, and specialized venues contribute to the formation of separate reading communities.

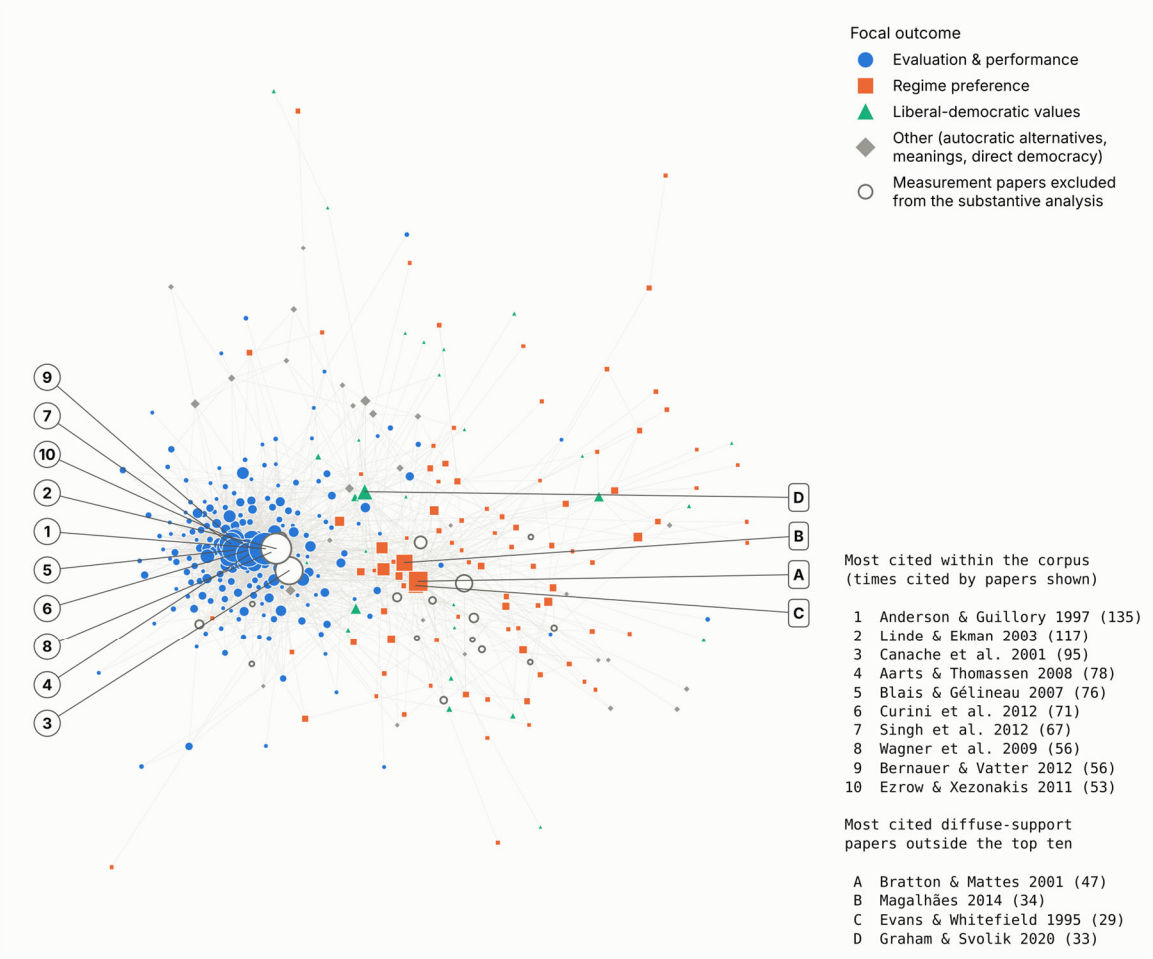


Figure 5. Who cites whom in the SFD corpus. Nodes include all corpus papers, as well as measurement papers involving support for democracy; edges are citations taken from OpenAlex reference lists. Node size is the number of times a paper is cited by the other papers shown, which runs slightly below its citations from all corpus records. Focal outcome family is shown by both color and shape (circle: evaluation and performance; square: regime preference; triangle: liberal-democratic values; diamond: other families); hollow circles are measurement papers excluded from the substantive analysis. Numbers 1–10 mark the ten most-cited papers, and letters A–D mark the most-cited diffuse-support papers outside the top ten.

Further, in the contemporary period, the two literatures do not exhibit signs of convergence. The outcome-family ratio rose from about 2.0 in the early 2010s to between 2.1 and 2.2 since, and the principles-versus-performance ratio has held near 1.8 in every period since 2010 (see Footnote 9). The boundaries were in place by the early 2010s and have not softened, even as within-corpus citation grew roughly tenfold; papers published since 2020 account for most of the citations in the network (1,383 of 1,946). Over the same decades, the field tilted toward the larger community. Regime performance was the focal outcome of

a quarter of the papers published before 2000, but of more than half of those published since 2017. Thus, while the two traditions share a common ancestry, they have not necessarily developed together.[12]

Limitations and shortcomings

Of course, no study such as this is immune from shortcomings. The SFD corpus reflects what title-based keyword searches of Google Scholar return, *not* the whole literature: well-known work whose titles use other vocabulary is missed.[13] It also covers journal articles only, leaving out books and edited volumes, where several of the field's foundational works appear.[14] Title searches also favor papers that advertise a recognizable outcome, so work that bridges the two traditions may be underrepresented. Additionally, scholars have uncovered a great many "significant" relationships between various covariates and support for democracy, but observational research is, of course, plagued by omitted variables and by what Gelman and Loken (2014) call the garden of forking paths. Of the 712 tested relationships, 637 (89%) are significant or mixed, that is, significant in at least some of the specifications the authors report. The rate barely varies from 90% in observational designs to 88% in experimental ones, and between 81% and 97% across the 13 predictor families. With many surveys, waves, countries, items and model specifications to choose from, analytic flexibility alone can generate significant results, so a covariate that is significant in one paper may say less than it seems.[15] Thus, statistical significance alone does little to parse "strong" from "weak" explanations in the literature.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, one glaring limitation produced by this project involves contemporary tensions borne from public support for unapologetically antidemocratic and illiberal parties and politicians (c.f. Druckman 2024). Positive affect towards and electoral endorsement of these groups and officials is a signal of (a lack of) public commitments to democracy. However, this form of support for

[12] The outside works cited most often across the corpus are its conceptual foundations: Easton's (1975) reassessment of political support (cited by 111 corpus papers), *Losers' Consent* (101), *Critical Citizens* (92), *The Civic Culture* (78) and *Democratic Deficit* (77). Even these divide along the same line. Easton is cited by 61 evaluation papers but only 25 regime-preference papers, and *Losers' Consent* almost entirely by evaluation papers (82 of 101).

[13] Consider, for example, Oser and Hooghe's 2018 paper titled, "Democratic ideals and levels of political participation: The role of political and social conceptualisations of democracy." It is a paper that explicitly measures beliefs about the "meanings" attached to democracy, but was excluded from analysis given the title keyword search.

[14] For instance, *Democracy's Meanings* (Davis, Gaddie, and Goidel 2022) explores not only how people conceptualize democracy but explicitly tie those meanings to democratic support. It does not appear in the SFD corpus due to being both a book and its title not containing the appropriate key word combinations.

[15] Preregistration, multiverse analyses that report results across reasonable specifications, and replication on independent survey programs would all be valuable.

democracy is largely absent from the SFD corpus. In several established democracies, large shares of voters now support parties and leaders that actively work to weaken democratic institutions. In Brazil, a former president was convicted of plotting a coup to remain in office after losing the 2022 election. In the United States, an ousted president attempted to overturn the 2020 election; upon returning to power in 2024, party officials and surrogates have degraded voting access and election administration capacity (Miller and Morris 2026). In France, the Rassemblement National has proposed amending the constitution by an Article 11 referendum to enshrine "national preference," a route that would bypass Parliament and the Constitutional Council. It also answered Marine Le Pen's 2025 embezzlement conviction by denouncing a "tyranny of judges." A vote for these politicians or parties is, thus, a choice with direct consequences for democracy – a preference that is arguably more consequential than any survey response about whether democracy is the best form of government but one that is almost never framed as a literal measure of democratic support.

The closest the corpus comes to that analysis is the small set of studies on revealed support (n = 10), which ask whether voters punish candidates who behave undemocratically. Their answer is sobering. In Graham and Svolik's (2020) experiments, only a small fraction of American voters were willing to abandon a preferred candidate who took an undemocratic position, presumably because polarization raised the price of doing so. But these designs largely rely on hypothetical candidates in forced-choice experiments. Observed support for real parties committing real harm against democracy is a simple and appropriate behavioral measure, but treating support for a particular party as anti-democratic imposes a normative judgment on that party, and political scientists studying mass attitudes are often reluctant to render such verdicts.

However, researchers need not feel such pressure because expert-coded data can pass judgment accordingly. The V-Party dataset scores nearly every relevant political party worldwide on an Anti-Pluralism Index: low commitment to the democratic process, demonization of opponents, encouragement of political violence and disrespect for minority rights (Lührmann et al. 2020; Medzihorsky and Lindberg 2024). By that measure, the U.S. Republican Party's rhetoric by 2018 more closely resembled ruling parties such as Turkey's AKP and Hungary's Fidesz than typical center-right governing parties in established democracies (Lührmann et al. 2020). Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party (PSL) scored 0.95 on the 0–1 index in 2018, the election that brought him to power, above Fidesz (0.91) and close to the AKP (1.00 in 2015). France's National Front, renamed the Rassemblement National in 2018, scored 0.49 in 2017: well below those parties, but above the British Conservatives (0.35) and far above Germany's CDU (0.05) (Lindberg et al. 2022). Linking vote choice or party identification in the CSES, ESS or national election studies to these scores would supply a measure of explicit support for illiberalism that doesn't require researchers to

interject their normative sentiments. Doing so would also connect to the measurement problem documented above in that respondents can endorse democracy in the abstract while voting for parties that dismantle it. In fact, if the outcome that matters for backsliding is whether citizens withhold support from parties that attack democratic institutions, then a literature built on abstract endorsement and satisfaction measures is probably studying the wrong thing. Ignoring this facet of support for democracy is done at the field's peril.

Looking ahead

Understanding support for democracy is a long-running project. As polling has become cheaper and more efficient, the proliferation of survey projects has followed suit. Yet despite the considerable lay and scholarly attention paid to these attitudes, integrative research has lagged. The SFD corpus is an attempt to close that gap by mapping 442 papers on what predicts support for democracy, how that support is measured, and who reads whom.

Moving forward, there are still questions left unanswered or evidence that is less straightforward than one might assume, which I organize into four broad areas.

*Spillover***.** First, does sustained dissatisfaction with democratic performance erode diffuse support? How fast, and, critically, for whom? Panels that measure both kinds of support before and after elections, economic crises and changes of government could answer this question. However, because specific support maps so cleanly onto the winner-loser framework, investigations of spillover must likely account for the asymmetric nature of performance evaluations.

*Representation***.** Next, are election winners, rather than losers, the main electoral threat to diffuse support? To what undemocratic ends might losers go to reestablish power? To what extent are electoral winners willing to restrict their opponents' rights once they obtain power? Measures of democratic support that focus predominantly on abstract regime preferences likely miss how illiberal behaviors may be permitted among winners and losers at different rates.

*Measurement***.** Third, scholars have made much of (the failure of) norms in the intervening years since 2016. How should these commitments be operationalized? Can survey measures reveal democratic commitments, or is behavioral research necessary to illustrate when and under what circumstances the proverbial "rubber meets the road" when it comes to support democracy? In a similar vein, under what conditions can people be encouraged to punish norm-breaking politicians? Much of the SFD corpus uses easy-to-measure attitudinal measures like support for army rule, but many citizens of democracy have virtually no experience with such conditions. What does it *mean* for citizens to endorse anti-democratic

forms of government? To what extent does the discipline's reliance on long-running survey measures obscure how citizens *really* feel about democracy?

*Generalizability***.** Finally, how far do findings from Europe-centered survey programs travel to the regions those programs cover thinly? Massive survey research programs like the ESS and WVS have permitted cross-national survey research to flourish, but to what extent are the relationships between covariates and support for democracy idiosyncratically related to (institutional) context? Do the results of studies conducted in western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) countries travel outside the boundaries of this context?

To various degrees, the papers included in the SFD corpus tackle some of these questions. Yet, there are substantial holes for future research to plug. Of course, no single study can answer all these questions; the process of literature building is, after all, iterative and prevailing events can shift research foci in unexpected ways. The support for democracy literature has grown large and productive, but it has yet to become a cumulative one.

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