

Everyone Says Democracy

Research and political reasoning



Democracy measurement, institutional commitment and candidate choice

Start without advance reading

You can start here without reading a journal article beforehand. The two article explanations inside this assignment provide the research you need. Read them as part of the activity and return to them while answering. The original articles and further reading are available for optional follow-up.

Research words in everyday language

A claim is a conclusion you want to check. A hypothesis is a possible explanation. A mechanism is the sequence of steps through which something happens: who acts, what they do, and how that could produce a result.

A rival explanation is another plausible cause of that same result. A prediction says what you would expect to see if an explanation were right. Your job is to compare those predictions with evidence, not guess which opinion your instructor prefers.

An outcome is the result being measured. The population is the group you want to understand. The sample is the people actually studied. The unit of observation is who or what each record describes; a number's unit tells you whether it is a count, a percentage, hours, or score points.

The numerator is the number being counted. The denominator is the whole group used to calculate a percentage: 8 out of 20 means 8 divided by 20. A percentage-point difference subtracts one percentage from another.

An association means two things appear together in the data. It does not by itself tell you which caused which. Random assignment puts people into conditions by chance; a comparison then asks whether changing a feature changes the measured result.

A study's limits tell you what its evidence cannot establish. An uncertainty interval is a range describing how uncertain an estimate is under the analysis used. When an interval for a difference includes zero, it does not clearly distinguish a difference from no difference. That does not prove the true effect is exactly zero.

You do not need to memorize technical names or article statistics. Use the explanations, worked examples and records on screen. In your answer, make the reasoning visible: a specific detail, what it supports, and what remains uncertain.

The research question

These recent articles connect a measurement problem with a political puzzle. Claassen and colleagues test a more concrete way to measure support for liberal democratic institutions; Wunsch and colleagues investigate how different democratic understandings relate to candidate choices. They are a complementary pairing rather than a head-to-head published dispute.

Article A tests support for specific liberal democratic institutions. Article B measures understandings of democracy and relates them to ratings of randomized candidate features. Comparing them changes the questions one needs: a coherent support score cannot substitute for a democratic-status judgment or a choice under competing benefits. Their constructs overlap without being identical; neither study estimates the whole chain from citizen response to a party's institutional action.

This packet contains the complete teaching explanations for the two core articles and links to the primary texts. It keeps article findings separate from invented local cases. Read the primary texts when checking a citation, design detail or contested inference.

Article A Conceptualizing and Measuring Support for Democracy: A New Approach

Christopher Claassen and 21 coauthors (2024 / 2025 issue). Comparative Political Studies. 58(6): 1171-1198 · DOI 10.1177/00104140241259458

Dates

Online July 2024; issue 2025. The 19 national samples were fielded in 2022-23; these are not October 2026 opinion estimates.

Access

Free published-version PDF in the University of Glasgow repository · CC BY.

Lens

Ask about concrete rights and institutions rather than assume everyone means the same thing when endorsing “democracy.”

Read first

Start with the explanation on this screen. Then check what was compared, what was found, and what remains uncertain. The journal article link is optional.

Sections

Read Our Measurement Approach; Data and Research Design; Examining Item Heterogeneity; Deriving and Validating a Concise Battery; and note 8 on measurement equivalence.

Reading summary

A broad democracy question leaves institutional commitments unclear. This study tests concrete questions across 19 samples and develops a shorter scale of support for liberal democratic institutions. It also shows why institutional support, satisfaction with government performance, and comparable national scores require separate attention.

[Complete publisher text](#)

Research explanation

In everyday terms: saying “I support democracy” can mean different things to different people. This study asks more concrete questions about elections, rights and limits on leaders to find out what people support.

Suppose a survey asks whether democracy is a good system. One respondent imagines competitive elections. Another imagines an elected majority able to carry out its program.

Another imagines courts and journalists able to challenge that majority. They can all answer yes while disagreeing about a concrete institutional conflict. An attractive word can also invite agreement without much reflection. Claassen and colleagues therefore ask what a democracy-support question actually measures.

Their target is support for liberal democracy: elections together with freedoms, equal legal rights, and constraints on government power. Here liberal describes institutional protections, not a left-wing party or an American partisan identity. An executive is the president, prime minister, or government making and implementing decisions. Constraints allow other institutions, including courts and parliament, to examine and sometimes block those decisions. Winning an election does not remove these constraints.

The authors start from eight components in the V-Dem definition: expression, association, voting rights, elected decision-makers, fair elections, judicial oversight, legislative oversight, and equality before the law. Concrete items make a stated conflict observable. As a different-topic analogy, asking whether a music association is “fair” does not tell us whether its members support open auditions, equal appeal rights, or a jury elected by members. A useful measure names its institutional target rather than trusting the appealing label.

Method

The researchers field 17 questions in 19 national samples. Most are online samples recruited using demographic targets rather than random selection from the population. They then use factor analysis: a statistical way to check whether answers to different questions move together as a common underlying commitment would predict. They compare a single commitment with separate electoral and liberal commitments.

They also investigate questions that do not fit the common pattern. Finally, they select seven questions that cover much of the concept while cohering more consistently. Testing a measure asks whether it captures the intended commitment; it does not itself test an election or make someone more committed.

How consistently answers fit together and coverage are different tests. Dropping an item can make answers move together more strongly while removing an important part of the concept. A within-context score may still be informative even when direct cross-country ranking is unjustified. Check how respondents interpret the item as well as how answers correlate.

Findings

A general commitment connects many answers, but particular institutions can have distinctive patterns. The shorter seven-question scale usually performs better than the full set as one combined measure. It leaves out elected decision-makers, whose questions did not fit consistently. Satisfaction with how democracy is working also differs from support for its institutions.

Limits

The samples and wording differ, and the study does not establish that national scores are directly comparable. Local conflict is a plausible interpretation of some unusual patterns, not a causal effect isolated by the surveys. The scale can improve diagnosis without revealing a person's complete understanding or guaranteeing a vote.

Technical details

Table 3 lists 19 samples fielded during 2022–23. Portugal and Taiwan use probability samples; most others use online quota samples, while Turkey uses stratified online recruitment. The main models are fitted separately for each sample.

The 17-item models use ordinal confirmatory factor analysis and include an orthogonal acquiescence factor to account for a tendency to agree with differently framed questions. One- and two-dimensional models fit similarly; the full unidimensional model satisfies all three reported fit thresholds in six samples.

The concise set contains FreeExp2, FreeAssc1, UniSuff1, FFElect2, JudCnstr2, LegCnstr1, and EqLaw1. It covers seven of eight institutional components and omits elected decision-makers. Cronbach's alpha is generally acceptable, with Peru just below .70; item selection may make later retest reliability lower.

Note 8 explicitly discusses non-equivalence across languages, samples, and wording. The full scale does not establish even configural equivalence. Do not present country mean differences as a validated ranking. In the main analyses sample weights are not used; weighted checks are discussed in the supplement.

Replications: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZVXV2K>. Published-version PDF read in full; no correction located in checked publisher metadata and DOI searches on October 12, 2026 Seattle time.

Evidence receipts

The question changes the measure

The battery asks about specific rights and institutional limits. A yes to a general democracy label does not answer each of these questions.

One commitment is an empirical question

Factor analysis tests whether answers fit together. Some institutions connect less consistently with the shared pattern; the authors do not assume every respondent endorses every component together.

A shorter scale has a coverage cost

The seven-item version improves how consistently answers fit together but omits support for elected decision-makers. A convenient score cannot capture every institutional issue.

A score is not an election result

The study validates a measure of institutional support. It does not follow these respondents into an election or demonstrate that a particular answer determines an individual vote.

Article B The Demand Side of Democratic Backsliding: How Divergent Understandings of Democracy Shape Political Choice

Natasha Wunsch, Marc S. Jacob, and Laurenz Derksen (2025). British Journal of Political Science. 55: e39, 1–22 · DOI 10.1017/S0007123424000711

Dates

Published online March 17, 2025. The main Polish experiment was fielded July–August 2021; it does not report the 2023 election as an experimental outcome.

Access

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Lens

Stronger commitment to liberal democratic principles relates to stronger rejection of candidates who weaken them, including candidates from the respondent's own party.

Read first

Start with the explanation on this screen. Then check what was compared, what was found, and what remains uncertain. The journal article link is optional.

Sections

Read From Understandings of Democracy to Support for Political Candidates; Research Design; Individual-level Understandings of Democracy and Candidate Preferences; and the conclusion.

Reading summary

A Polish hypothetical-profile experiment relates measured democratic understandings to responses to candidate features. Stronger liberal understanding accompanies stronger rejection of non-liberal positions, including own-party candidates. Generalized worldview matching is not supported. Stronger majoritarian understanding relates to support for non-liberal judicial positions but not the analogous public-media positions. Candidate attributes are randomized; understandings are not.

[Complete publisher text](#)

Research explanation

In everyday terms: this study asks why people who say they support democracy may still prefer candidates who weaken its protections. It compares people's views of democracy with their choices between fictional candidate descriptions.

Why can a candidate weakening democratic institutions win votes from people who say they support democracy? Democratic backsliding means gradual weakening of rights, competition, or government constraints; voting can continue during it. A familiar account focuses on tradeoffs: voters dislike the institutional action but prefer the candidate's party or policy. Wunsch and colleagues add a question that this account can overlook. Do voters hold the same understanding of democracy and the same commitment to its liberal protections in the first place?

The authors measure three understandings. A liberal understanding emphasizes elections and equal rights protecting people from government abuse. Non-liberal here means restricting these rights or checks, not holding conservative policy views. A majoritarian understanding treats majority decisions as overriding minority objections in all circumstances. An authoritarian understanding treats public order and governing efficiency as reasons for restricting freedoms. These are continuous measures that can overlap within a person, not three fixed kinds of citizen. Majority decision-making itself is compatible with liberal democracy; the issue is whether a majority is entitled to remove its limits.

Two mechanisms could connect these understandings to choices. Strong liberal commitment might make institutional violations matter more in choosing a candidate. Alternatively, everyone might favor a candidate matching their own understanding, including voters with stronger authoritarian views. These predictions differ. Being relatively indifferent to a violation is not the same as wanting the violation; observing support for a candidate cannot decide which process produced it.

Method

In a Polish online survey, respondents complete twelve hypothetical elections, each with two randomly generated candidate profiles. Profiles include party, policies, age, gender, and statements about judicial appointments and public media. This conjoint experiment—varying several candidate features together—helps estimate how a feature affects a choice or rating while other features vary.

The study separately asks what respondents regard as essential to democracy. It links these measured understandings with the weight each person gives candidate features. The final analysis has 1,979 respondents after preregistered attention and speed exclusions. Random candidate descriptions make profile comparisons informative, but respondents' democratic understandings were measured rather than assigned.

Findings

Stronger liberal understandings accompany stronger rejection of non-liberal candidate positions, including own-party candidates. The broader claim that every worldview consistently seeks matching candidates is not supported. This does not mean every narrower association disappears: stronger majoritarian understanding is associated with greater support for majoritarian or authoritarian judicial-appointment positions, but not the corresponding public-media positions. A generalized model can fail while an attribute-specific relationship survives. Party affiliation explains only a small portion of variation in measured understandings.

Limits

The choices are hypothetical and concern Poland in 2021. The study's coding of judicial appointment positions is context-specific, not a universal verdict on every country's appointment procedure. Because understandings were not randomized, their association with choice does not prove that a civic course changing attitudes would change actual votes.

Technical details

The main survey recruited 2,910 respondents July 12–August 12, 2021 through Inquiry. The preregistered analytic sample is 1,979. Respondents complete 12 paired choice tasks and rate 24 candidate profiles on a seven-point scale.

Seven candidate attributes are randomized, including two institutional attributes: judicial appointments and the role of public media. The authors code cross-party judicial selection and independent public reporting as liberal; alternative government or party-leader appointment positions and government-serving media positions represent non-liberal variations in this study.

Understandings use nine essential-to-democracy items, three each for liberal, majoritarian, and authoritarian orientations, with an ordered three-factor model. The constructs may covary and are not mutually exclusive categorical assignments of citizens.

Individual marginal component effects are estimated from each respondent's candidate ratings, then regressed on measured understanding scores with party and socioeconomic controls. Randomization concerns candidate features, not citizens' understandings. The study checks robustness, including alternative individual-effect estimation.

The main regression supports H1a on liberal commitment rather than H1b on generalized congruence. Majoritarian attitudes do have specific associations with judicial candidate positions; it would be inaccurate to claim that every non-liberal orientation has no behavioral relationship.

Replications: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/AKYFQ3>. Full publisher text and published PDF read; no correction located in checked metadata and DOI searches on October 12, 2026 Seattle time.

Evidence receipts

The study connects attitudes with a choice

Respondents' understandings are measured separately from their repeated ratings of randomly varied candidate profiles. This distinguishes a belief about democracy from a response to a particular candidate.

The strongest result concerns liberal commitment

People with stronger liberal understandings give candidates' democratic positions more weight and are more willing to reject non-liberal own-party profiles. This association persists with party and socioeconomic controls.

Tolerance need not be enthusiasm

The general idea of matching beliefs and candidates hypothesis is not supported. Stronger majoritarian understanding relates to more support for non-liberal judicial-appointment positions, but not the analogous public-media positions. Weak rejection, indifference, accepted cost, and positive demand remain different claims.

An intervention remains a new question

The study does not randomly change democratic understandings. Civic education is a proposed practical response, not an experimentally demonstrated cause of changed votes in this paper.

Further reading

Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States

Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svobik (2020). American Political Science Review. 114(2): 392–409 · DOI 10.1017/S0003055420000052

Free author-hosted PDF; publisher access may vary.

This study investigates the partisan and policy price of rejecting candidates who violate democratic principles. A US candidate-choice experiment and evidence from Montana's 2017 special election show why support in principle can weaken when defending it means accepting an unwanted political outcome. It gives the Bellmore tradeoff account a stronger empirical foundation.

What comparison would show whether a voter recognizes a violation but accepts it to obtain a preferred policy?

[Complete publisher text](#)

Rationalizing Democracy: The Perceptual Bias and (Un)Democratic Behavior

Suthan Krishnarajan (2023 issue / 2022 online). American Political Science Review. 117(2): 474–496 · DOI 10.1017/S0003055422000806

Publisher abstract verified; full-text access may require an institutional subscription.

Citizens may change their judgment of what counts as democratic when a preferred policy is at stake. Survey experiments in the US and other democracies investigate this perceptual process. That differs from recognizing an action as undemocratic and accepting the cost: it changes the perception of the action itself.

How would you separate a stable majority-centered understanding from a judgment that changes when the same action produces a preferred outcome?

[Complete publisher text](#)