



A REPUBLIC, If We Can Keep It

Citizens, Parties, and the Health of American Democracy

Lee Drutman (New America)

MEMO PREPARED FOR CONFERENCE: A REPUBLIC, IF WE CAN KEEP IT

On April 12-13th, 2018, researchers, scholars, journalists, and policymakers came together at New America in Washington D.C. to address questions about the health and resiliency of American democracy. This conference considered questions such as: Can a liberal democracy and representative government persist in the United States? Are we experiencing a breakdown of democracy? Are checks and balances that are built into the political system and the mediating institutions that link citizens and government strong enough to sustain liberal democracy?

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Lee Drutman, New America

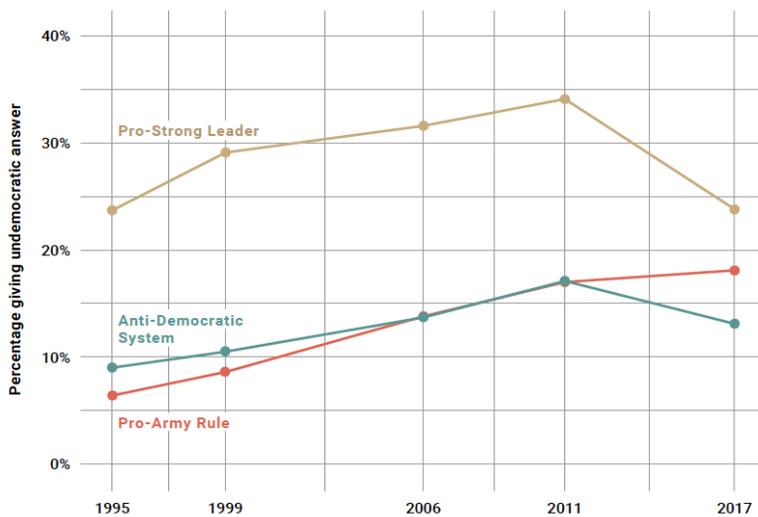
Memo prepared for the “A Republic, If We Can Keep It” conference, Washington, D.C., April 2018

In recent years, there has been a growing concern that American citizens are turning away from democracy. In survey data, support for alternatives to democracy appears to be rising, and some recent research has suggested that it was younger voters who were losing faith the most in America’s democratic traditions (Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017).

Then Donald Trump was elected president, putting an exclamation point on these concerns. Here was a man who threatened to jail his political opponent if he won, and threatened not to accept the results if he lost. And yet, 63 million Americans voted for him, either because they liked his brash anti-system rhetoric, or simply because he wasn’t Hillary Clinton.

More than a year later, there is some good news, some mixed news, and some bad news about public opinion. The good news is that Trump may be giving authoritarianism a bad name. In a new report, *Follow the Leader: Exploring American Support for Democracy and Authoritarianism*, Larry Diamond, Joe Goldman and I found that the percentage of Americans who expressed support for a “strong leader who doesn’t have to bother with elections or Congress” fell to levels not seen since the mid-1990s.

Undemocratic Attitudes in the U.S. Over Time

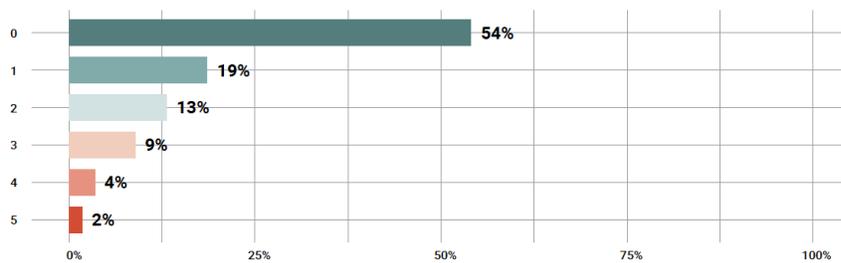


Source: Pre-2017 data shown is from the World Values Survey. 2017 data is from Voter Study Group’s 2017 VOTER Survey.

Our report asked voters five questions about democracy, the same battery the World Values Survey has asked for years. On each of the five questions we asked, three quarters or more of all respondents provide at least some support for democracy, and half or more express support for the strongest pro-democratic option. By contrast, depending on the question, between an eighth and a quarter of respondents provide an answer that does not support democracy

However, the mixed news is that only a slim majority of Americans (54 percent) consistently express a pro-democratic position across all five of our measures. If we look across our battery of questions, almost half of our respondents do not support democracy on at least one of the five survey questions. This pattern indicates that the overall high percentages on each question may mask some deeper softness in support for democracy.

Number of Times Each Respondent Withheld Support for Democracy



Nineteen percent of respondents express one nondemocratic position, 13 percent express two nondemocratic positions, and 15 percent express three or more nondemocratic positions. Notably, 29 percent of respondents show at least some support for either a “strong leader” or “army rule.”

The bad news is that support for a “strong leader” is becoming a partisan issue. The highly polarized state of our two-party system accentuates the danger. If Trump transgresses more seriously against democratic norms, many Republicans might go along with him simply out of distrust of or enmity toward the Democrats. And many others might simply disengage from politics, unhappy with either alternative and deeply frustrated with the whole political system. This creates its own set of problems, since we also find (like many before us) that those who are most disengaged from politics are no great lovers of democracy.

Enter Donald Trump

Why should we worry about Trump? The first reason is that Trump’s illiberal style of politics fits the authoritarian leanings of a significant portion of his electoral base. Support for a “strong leader who doesn’t have to bother with Congress or elections” is much higher among Trump primary voters (32 percent) than among voters for any other primary

candidate, Republican or Democrat.

The supporters of authoritarian leadership tend to be the least educated and the most culturally conservative. They're much more likely to say that being of European heritage is very important to being an American, and that we should increase surveillance of mosques and single out Muslims for airport screenings.

To the extent that this mix of attitudes is a defining feature of Trumpism, and Trumpism is taking over the Republican Party, this presents a serious challenge to American democracy. Many Americans identify as Republicans, and most of the time, voters look to their party leaders to tell them what they should think about the issues.

Thanks to strong support from conservative media and explicit or implicit support from Republicans in Congress, Trump is redefining what it means to be a Republican. We don't know yet how much his leadership will erode support for democracy among his loyal base, but without powerful conservative voices offering an alternative vision of what it means to be a Republican, it's unlikely that most Trump voters will push back on his illiberal impulses on their own.

American voters have never been the bulwark of democratic tolerance

In many ways, the fact that the American public harbors many intolerant anti-democratic attitudes should be old news. Indeed, when social scientists studied America's democratic attitudes in the wake of the horror of Nazi Germany, they found that Americans, as a whole, were not all that tolerant (Stouffer 1955). Many had authoritarian leanings (Adorno et al. 1950). And ordinary people were capable of remarkable cruelty. (Milgram 1969, Zimbardo 1972)

To take the totality of the findings, it seemed remarkable that despite the just-below-the-surface potential for authoritarianism, American politics did not dissolve into a maelstrom of illiberal intolerance and violence. (Lipset 1960, Sullivan and Transue 1969). And arguably, a lot of the South was never really much of a democracy until the 1970s. (Mickey 2015)

But in broad national strokes, midcentury American politics trended to the bland, consensual, and technocratic. Dwight Eisenhower, not Joseph McCarthy, was president.

And so, in the postwar glow of rising prosperity and what appeared to be highly stable American democracy, social scientists stopped looking into the illiberal darkness of the human soul and moved on to other questions.

But these old questions about the tangle of thin blue lines and hard red lines that

protect American democracy now seem relevant once more. With Trump as president, we find ourselves asking again: How strong is support for democracy in America really? Could Americans actually let an authoritarian strongman trample on our democratic norms?

In the past decade or so, political scientists have returned to the topic of authoritarianism in America, boasting new measures and methodologies to overcome the previous round of criticisms. And once again, the same basic dynamics have shown up — individuals who hold “traditional” views on culture and race tend to also hold “authoritarian” views about strict parental discipline and hierarchy (these parenting attitudes that now stand in for broader authoritarian leanings). And under conditions of high threat, these authoritarian attitudes take on a more central role in our political thinking. (Stenner and Feldman 1997, Stenner 2005, Hetherington and Weller 2009, Hetherington and Suhay 2011)

But if these attitudes always existed below the surface, what was it that kept us from asking big questions about them for decades and collectively worrying about their potential to disrupt society?

The short answer is that political elites successfully marginalized these attitudes. Whatever differences the parties and their leading candidates had, they retained a strong respect for the democratic process and the things that buttressed it — rule of law, a free press and other civil liberties, electoral integrity, and basic decency and respect for political opponents.

As political scientist Herb McClosky concluded in a 1964 article, the stability of American democracy depended on “political influentials.” These leaders, he wrote, were distinguished by:

their strong approval of democratic ideas, their greater tolerance and regard for proper procedures and citizen rights, their superior understanding and acceptance of the rules of the game and their more affirmative attitudes toward the political system in general ... the evidence suggests that it is the articulate classes rather than the public who serve as the major repositories of the public conscience and as the carriers of the Creed. Responsibility for keeping the system going, hence, falls most heavily upon them. (McClosky 1964)

Whatever anti-democratic rumblings might exist among the masses, party activists and elected officials seemed to provide an adequate buffer, as preachers of and adherents to the democratic tradition.

This is obviously not the case anymore. The Republican Party of Donald J. Trump is a far, far cry from the Republican Party of Dwight D. Eisenhower.

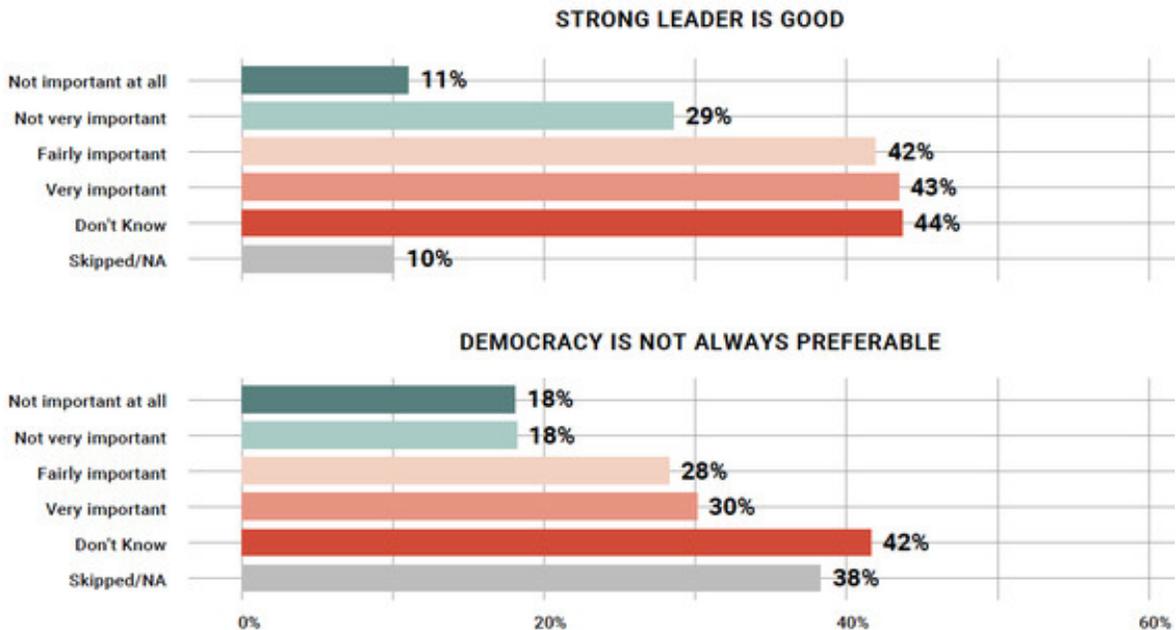
Who supports a “strong leader”?

In the *Follow the Leader* report, we focused on how people responded to the possibility of our country being run by a “strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections.” About a quarter of Americans think this is a good system.

What do we know about these individuals?

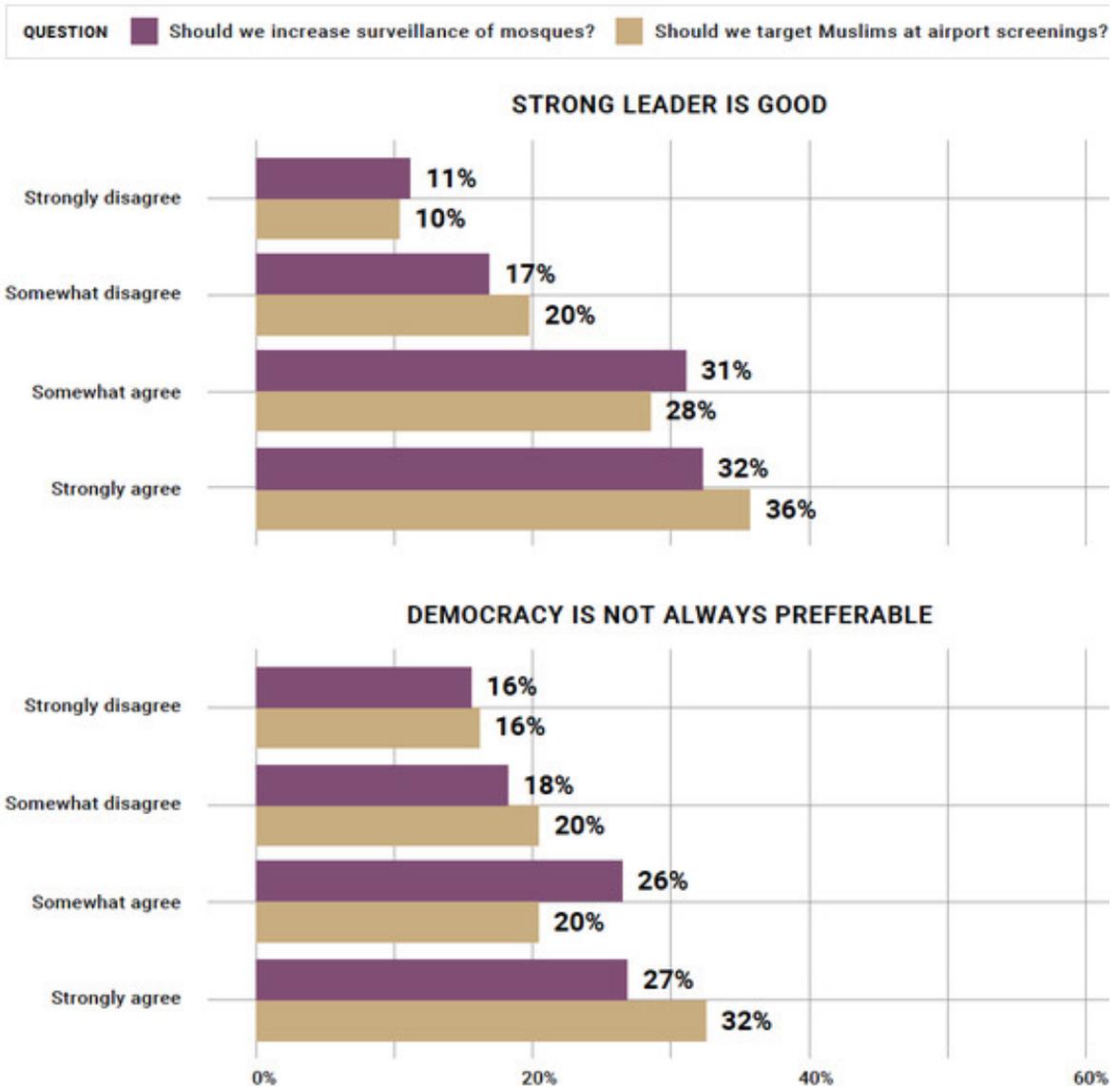
For one, many want America to be a European (read: white) nation. In our survey, we asked people how important European heritage is to being American. While most respondents said it is not at all important (47 percent) or not very important (27 percent), 9 percent said it is fairly important and 8 percent said it is very important. An additional 9 percent said they “don’t know.” And those who said they think it is important or “don’t know” (presumably because they’re too ashamed to say) think a strong leader is good. They also aren’t great fans of democracy.

Percentages Favoring a Strong Leader and Open to Democratic Alternatives by Perceived Importance of European Heritage to Being an American



Similarly, among those who think it’s time to increase the surveillance of mosques, or think it’s important to target Muslims at airport screenings, chances are significantly higher that they also think we ought to have a strong leader.

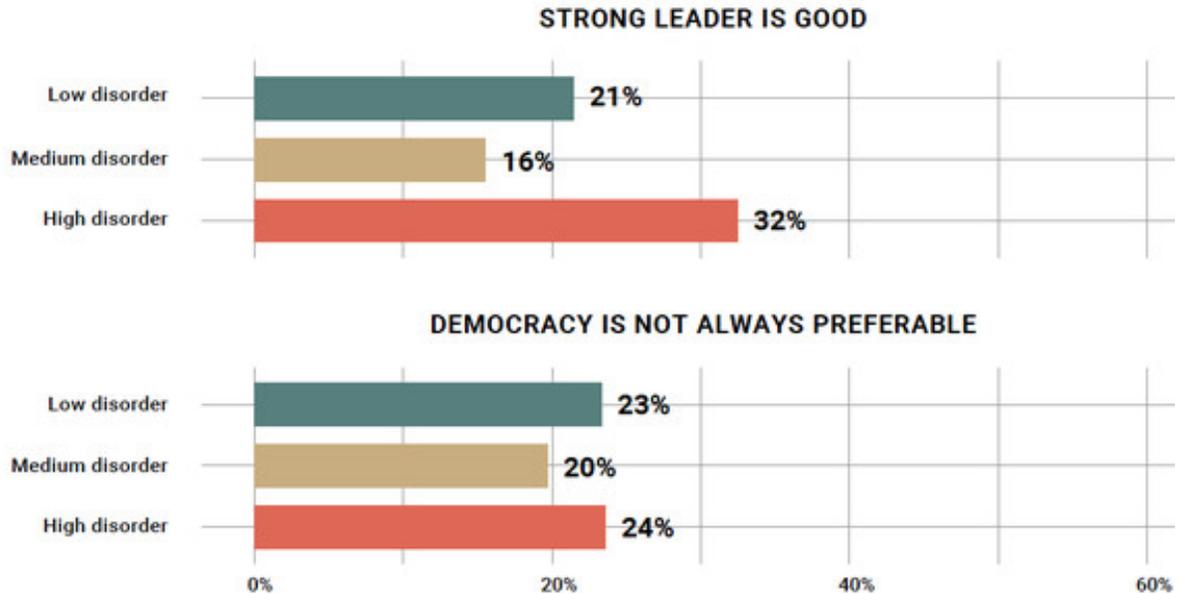
Percentages Favoring a Strong Leader and Open to Democratic Alternatives by Views on Muslims



We also found that people who perceive higher levels of disorder in their own communities (we asked people whether crime, drugs, and alcohol are problems in their community) were more likely to support a strong leader.

It's hard to tease out causality here, but a general finding in the literature on authoritarianism is that when people feel a sense of a physical threat, particularly if it's racialized, they are more likely to manifest authoritarian attitudes.

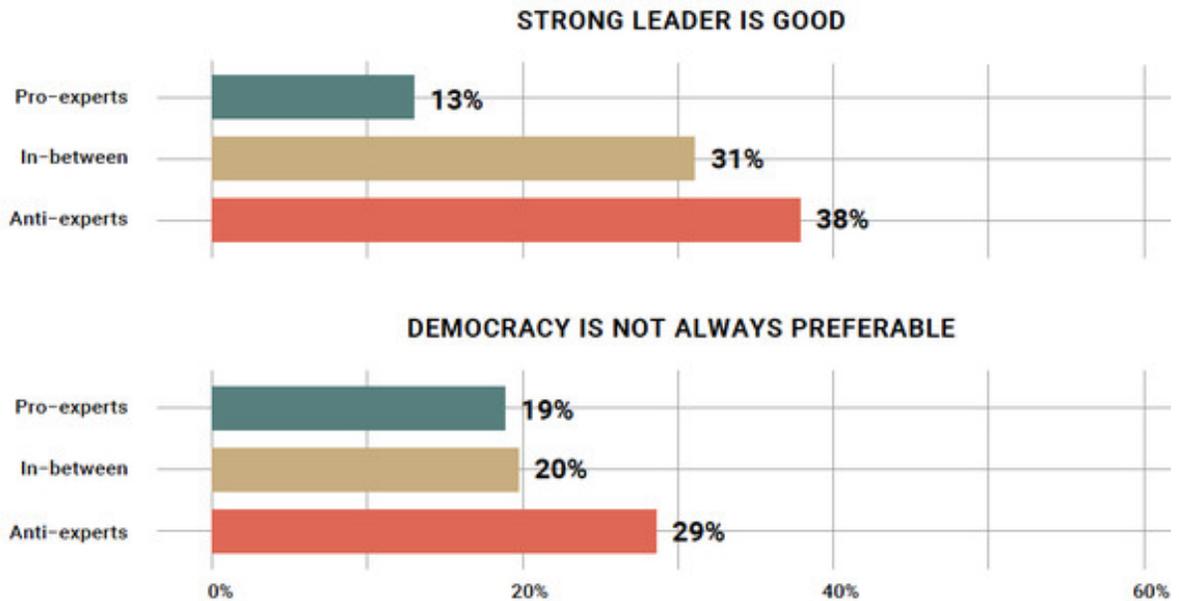
Percentages Favoring a Strong Leader and Open to Democratic Alternatives by Perception of Community Disorder



So to the extent that both Trump’s [“American carnage”](#) rhetorical flourishes and [Republican campaign ads](#) emphasize pervasive disorder and racial threat, these attitudes might be activated even further.

We also found those who distrust experts are more likely to support a strong leader and to be less supportive of democracy. This has been another Trump and increasingly Republican push point: You can’t trust the experts; you can’t trust the establishment. And if you can’t trust them, *whom can you trust?*

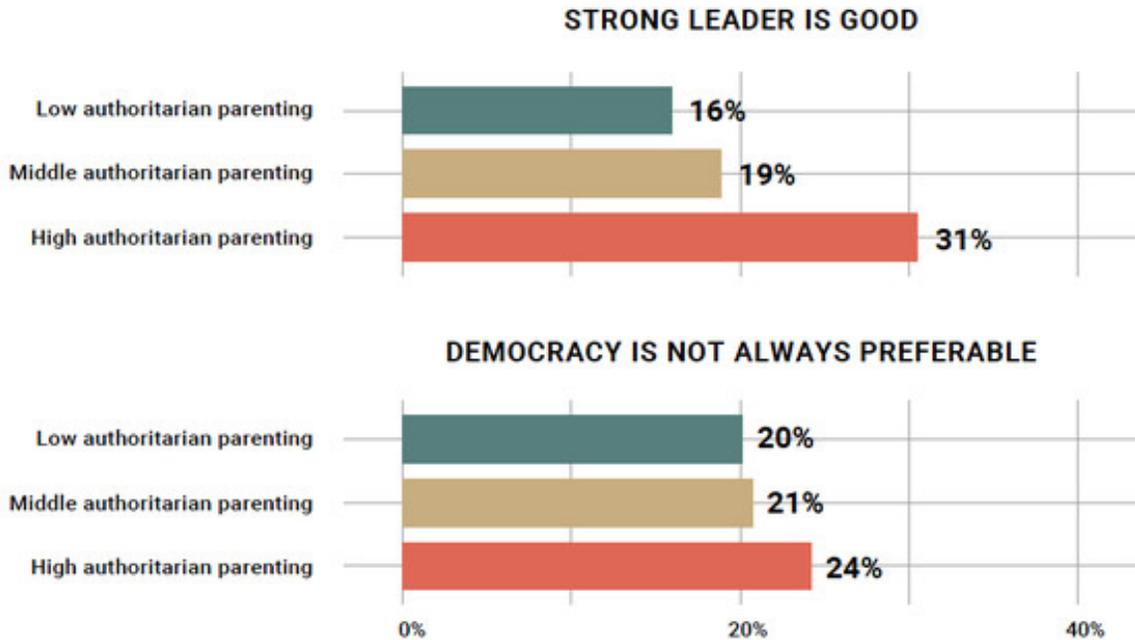
Percentages Favoring a Strong Leader and Open to Democratic Alternatives by Mistrust of Expert



Again, we can't evaluate causality because we don't have panel data on these questions about public support for of our democracy. But we can certainly speculate on the connection. If experts can't be trusted, then how do we know whom to trust? Such a world seems uncertain, chaotic.

One note of caution here for scholars of authoritarianism. The report also looked at the parenting scale that's now the standard measure for authoritarianism. There's a clear correlation between authoritarian parenting and support for a strong leader, but more than two-thirds of those who hold high authoritarian parenting views reject a "strong leader." So while there's clearly something here, we should be careful about over-interpreting from authoritarian parenting attitudes.

Percentages Favoring a Strong Leader and Open to Democratic Alternatives by Authoritarian Score



The bottom line is this: The forces of authoritarianism are collecting in the Republican Party, and the chaos-and-threat rhetorical politics of Trumpism are key correlates of anti-democratic attitudes. The more Trump and fellow Republicans stoke fears of immigration, of Muslims, of crime and drugs and “American carnage,” and the more they disparage elites and experts, the more they are increasing attitudes that correlate to anti-democratic views.

When we conducted this survey in July 2017, we found that the vast majority of Republicans and conservatives opposed a strong leader who didn’t have to bother with elections, and the vast majority reaffirmed their preference for democracy. This is obviously good news.

The big lingering question remains: What happens if these views collide with partisan loyalty? What happens if Trump fires Muller? What happens if he refuses to accept election results and calls “fraud” or foreign interference? What happens if he proposes postponing an election?

We don’t know. We’ve never had this clash. That’s because we’ve never had such a powerful political leader with so little respect for basic democratic processes. And when there is a genuine anti-democrat in charge of a party, we don’t know how strong people’s stated attachments to democracy really are, especially if they conflict with their partisan loyalties.

And, most frightening, in a time of extremely high partisanship, driven more and more by affective loyalties and hatred of the other party we don’t know how much democratic transgression Republicans (in Congress, the media, and in the mass public) would tolerate if

it meant keeping Democrats from gaining power. (Mason 2016, 2017, Mason and Wronski 2018, Abramowitz and Webster 2016, 2017, 2018, Iyengar and Kuperman 2018)

In a two-party system, there is no other option for those who don't want Democrats to gain power. There might soon be no party of conservatism *and* liberal democracy. If so, voters will have to pick one or the other.

The Problem with the Two-Party System

Back in 1950, when both major parties were broad, moderate parties with overlapping appeals, many of America's leading political scientists wrote a report in which they bemoaned this state of affairs.

In their report, *Towards a More Responsible Two-Party System*, they saw two national parties that were but loose confederations of state and local parties, incapable of bringing forward coherent programs to the voters, and carrying them out when they got in power.

Thus, instead of elections giving voters a meaningful choice between well-thought-out alternatives to pressing national political problems, voters encountered a muddle. What happened in Washington seemed to have little connection to what happened at the ballot box.

This seemed to the authors an untenable situation, one that would fail to generate legitimate responses to emerging domestic and foreign problems whose scale and scope demanded strong, responsible parties. To accomplish this, they recommended a massive centralization of the two parties so that national party leaders develop carefully-researched policy alternatives, which voters could then authoritatively legitimate through a simple majority vote.

And if the American political parties failed to heed their advice? The authors issued a dire warning:

If the two parties do not develop alternative programs that can be executed, the voter's frustration and the mounting ambiguities of national policy might also set in motion more extreme tendencies to the political left and the political right. This, again, would represent a condition to which neither our political institutions nor our civic habits are adapted. Once a deep political cleavage develops between opposing groups, each group naturally works to keep it deep. Such groups may gravitate beyond the confines of the American system of government and its democratic institutions.

Assuming a survival of the two-party system in form though not in spirit, even if only

one of the diametrically opposite parties comes to flirt with unconstitutional means and ends, the consequences would be serious. For then the constitution-minded electorate would be virtually reduced to a one-party system with no practical alternative to holding to the "safe" party at all cost. (95)

In line with the political scientists' advice, the two parties did indeed develop "alternative programs." Without a doubt, we now have the clear choices the report's authors recommended.

The problem, it turns out, was with the "can be executed" part. More coherent, non-overlapping parties did *not* give us "executable programs." Instead, because our system of checks and balances and decentralized authority was designed specifically to prevent *against* the "tyranny of the majority," polarized parties gave us gridlock and a steady erosion of procedural consensus, and mounting frustration.

Parties and candidates then channeled this mounting frustration into increasingly bold and exaggerated promises about how they would fix that dysfunction. In particular, one party, the Republicans, spent the last decade with egregiously and cynically unimplementable promises about shrinking the federal government and repealing Obamacare, when they should have known better. That party is now more than "flirting" with unconstitutional means and ends. And the consequences are indeed "serious."

While the APSA report's prediction is spookily prescient, I'm less optimistic than the APSA committee that the American voters will pick the "safe" party, because I'm less confident that the American electorate is as "constitution-minded" as the authors claimed.

Note that this report was published in 1950. That was before social scientists made two important discoveries about the American electorate – that Americans are not all that tolerant, and that partisanship is a "a pervasive dynamic force shaping citizens' perceptions of, and reactions to, the political world." (Bartels 2002)

Instead, as noted above, scholars discovered that there was no deep abiding support for civil liberties, tolerance, and procedural rule-following among the electorate. Tolerance and respect for democracy instead depended on political elites, who were the keepers and teachers of the democratic traditions.

And if partisanship is so pervasive, and Americans are not deeply attached to tolerance and procedural "norms," and we have a two-party system, and voters have deep frustration with how things are going, then it's not a surprise how got to this current moment, when the future stability of our democratic constitutional order is an open question.

In the debate about whether democracy is in decline in the west, there's some important cross-national variance. In a response to the widely-discussed democratic decline findings of Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk, Pippa Norris compared support for democracy across Western democracies and found whatever cohort decline existed, it was largely limited to Anglo-American democracies, which tend towards two-party systems. (Norris 2017)

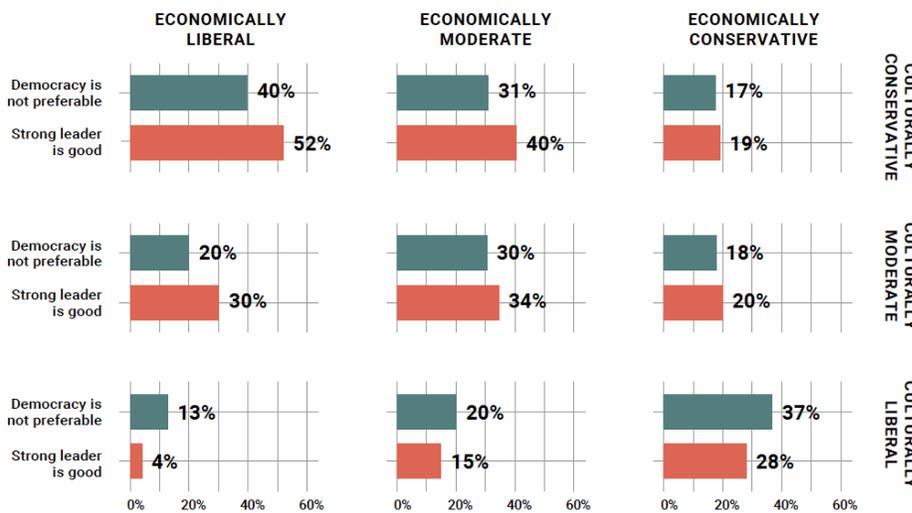
By contrast, in parliamentary democracies with proportional voting, there has been no

consistent erosion in support for democracy. As Norris argues by way of explanation, "parliamentary democracies with PR elections and stable multiparty coalition governments, typical of the Nordic region, generate a broader consensus about welfare policies addressing inequality, exclusion, and social justice, and this avoids the adversarial winner-take-all divisive politics and social inequality more characteristic of majoritarian systems."

But there's another piece of the puzzle that might be relevant here.

As part of the *Follow the Leader* report, we broke down voters based on their attitudes on cultural issues and economic issues, and then looked at how different combinations of attitudes corresponded to attitudes towards democracy.

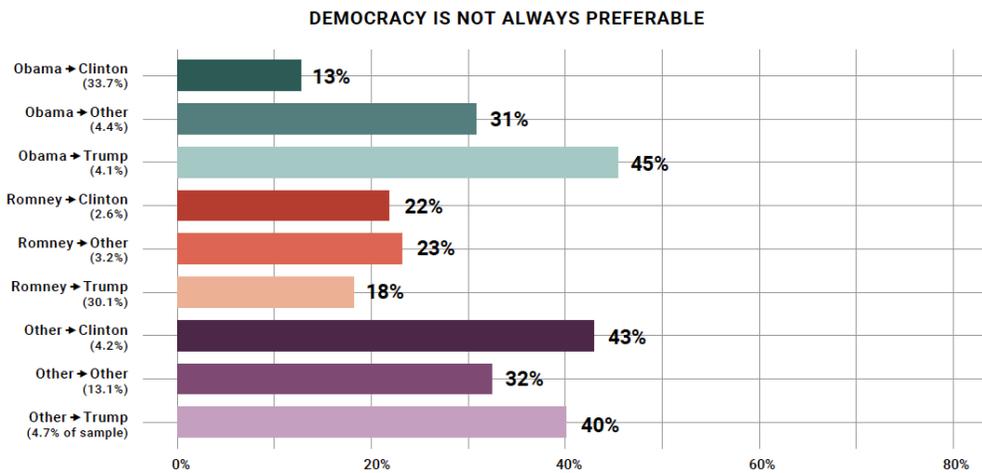
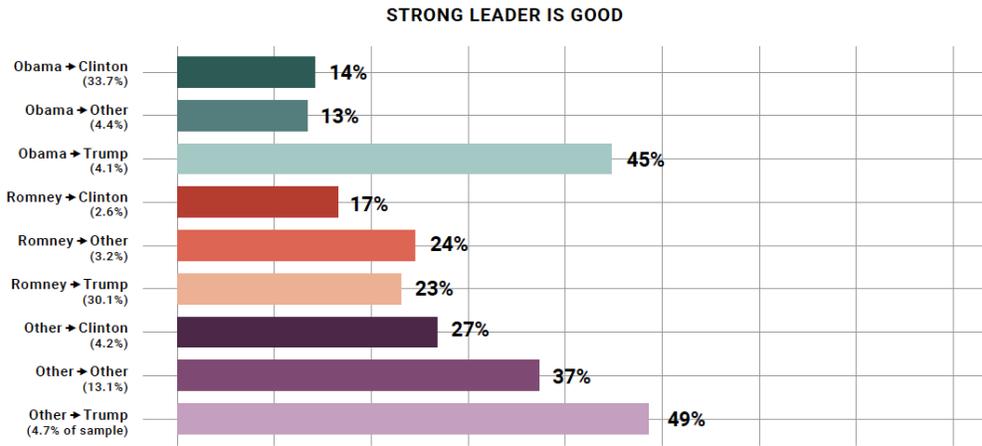
Percentages Favoring a Strong Leader and Open to Democratic Alternatives by Economic/Cultural Ideology



Those who were most consistently liberal across both dimensions were the biggest boosters of liberal democracy. But note that the most anti-democratic sentiments came from those in the “off” dimensions, individuals who hold mixes of views that neither party represents, or those who fell in the middle.

We also looked at similar attitudes based on 2012-2016 voting pattern, and found some notable patterns. Obama-Trump voters had among the highest levels of anti-democratic sentiments, as did voters who went from not voting for a major party candidate in 2012 to voting for Trump. Together, these Obama-Trump and Other-Trump voters make up nine percent of the electorate, and almost half of them think a strong leader who doesn't have to bother with Congress or elections is a good thing. (The “Other” category includes third party candidates or not voting at all)

**Percentages Favoring a Strong Leader and Open to Democratic Alternatives
by 2012–2016 Voting Pattern**



What explains this pattern? Well, to start: Some Americans are engaged in politics and some aren't. Those who are engaged, and follow politics more closely, tend to be more attached to democratic and procedural norms, and also tend to be more ideologically "coherent." That is, they know "what goes with what," at least as the two parties have defined what goes with what. And most of all, they tend to be loyal partisans. (Converse 1964, Kinder and Kalmoe 2017)

Those who aren't as engaged in politics have less attachment to the parties, and are more adrift from the so-called "ideological coherence" of the two parties. It's not surprising they'd think democracy's not a great system, and have weaker attachments to it. It sure doesn't seem to represent them well. And they're not socialized into the its norms.

Causation is tricky here. Presumably people who are less educated about politics are less likely to be loyal partisans and therefore know "what goes with what." But also, presumably if they feel un-represented, they might think: why bother to engage in the first place? So, there's a bit of a reinforcing feedback loop here, though I'd put the most emphasis on lack of engagement and education coming first.

What does this suggest as a policy response? The conventional wisdom is that we

should spend more on civic education, and do what we can to expand voting participation. All this sounds nice, and more civic education is always a good thing.

But we have to be careful here. If we're asking for more engagement from people who feel un-connected to the parties, and who hold negative views of democracy, we run two risks.

The first risk is that we're bringing more people with anti-democratic views into the electorate, which further increases the electoral power of an anti-system populist candidate who promises to blow it all up. Maybe they'd eventually become socialized into the party system.

But this raises a second problem — that we'd likely just produce more strong partisan voters. After all, the more politically engaged people become, the more they become strong partisans. This makes sense, since if you're going to become involved in politics, you must think it matters who's in charge. Once you pick a team, you tend to start engaging in motivated reasoning about politics, disregarding information that undermines your side. So, a more engaged electorate becomes a more strongly partisan electorate. And since hyper-partisanship is an obvious danger to our political system, more public participation doesn't solve *that* problem.

Do we then want an electorate that is less engaged, less well-educated, and in which the political parties are incoherent overlapping coalitions that don't stand for much at the national level? Sure, it made for consensus-oriented moderate politics at the national level. But then we're back at the problems the writers of the 1950 APSA report identified, in which voters didn't really have much meaningful choice. And more significantly, whatever bipartisan consensus existed only existed because both parties took civil rights off the agenda. Also, there's that pesky arrow-of-time problem

This points to an even larger problem, one that won't simply be solved by Democrats winning more elections as the party of the "constitutionally-minded." (As the APSA report predicted one party would become.) In some ways, if Democrats win landslides in 2018 and 2020, the problem will be even worse, because it would likely entail the continued Democratic conversion of educated suburban Republicans, and hasten a partisan cleavage would become more and more a fight over basic democratic institutions like voting rights and a free press, leaving Republicans a party of Ted Cruzes and Steve Kings, of Roy Moores and Louis Gohmerts. And then things will really get ugly.

Towards a solution: electoral reform

The obvious challenge then becomes how to shift the axis of political conflict back away from a battle over the nature of America and its political institutions, and to non-existential "normal politics." argument over public policy and its implementation. The answer has to involve somehow scrambling the current party system, so that the being a Democrat or being a Republican is not wrapped up in these fundamental zero-sum questions about the

basis of American democracy.

This points towards efforts to expand ranked-choice voting, which are gaining steam, and also towards more incipient efforts to move our elections away from zero-sum winner-take-all single-plurality winner affairs towards proportional, multi-winner elections.

This means changing our electoral institutions. I recognize this is a major under-taking, and broad electoral system change is never easy. Anything less seems like taking buckets to a flood when we know the levees have broken. And plenty of democracies *have* changed their electoral institutions. (Blais et al 2005, Calvo 2009, Leeman and Mares 2014, Cox et al. 2016)

There are big important conversations to have here on the best way forward. But first we have to admit that we have a problem. And the problem right now is that the two-party system is trapped in a doom loop that it can't get out of on its own without significant collateral damage.

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