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# THE DEMOCRACY PROJECT



## The Democracy Project: Reversing a Crisis of Confidence

**WASHINGTON, June 26, 2018** – Even as Americans remain committed to the ideals of democracy, a majority see democracy in the United States as weak and getting weaker, according to a national survey jointly commissioned by Freedom House, the George W. Bush Institute, and the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement.

With democracy and democratic institutions under attack globally, the three organizations engaged two polling firms, one Democratic and one Republican, to survey Americans' attitudes about democratic principles and institutions at home and support for U.S. policies that advance democracy abroad.

The survey found that a clear majority—55 percent—see American democracy as “weak,” and 68 percent believe it is “getting weaker.” These statements drew majority support among all races, genders, age groups, levels of education, income brackets, and political parties, indicating that such concerns go well beyond personal party preference.

A narrow majority (50–43 percent) agreed that America is in “real danger of becoming a nondemocratic, authoritarian country,” a concern significantly greater among nonwhite women (62 percent). Certain groups that perceive less benefit from living in a democracy, especially racial minorities and women, are notably less convinced of the merits of the democratic system, which was found across multiple issues raised in the survey.

The poll and accompanying focus groups suggest that Americans' frustrations with the health of their democracy are rooted in diverse and long-standing problems, especially perceptions of racism and discrimination and the role of big money in politics.

“We're grateful to launch this major public opinion research study in collaboration with Freedom House and the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement,” President George W. Bush said. “Like our partners, the Bush Institute is proud to create a resource for others who share our commitment to democracy and freedom. We hope this work can be a step toward restoring faith in democracy and democratic institutions.”

“The findings of the Democracy Project confirm we can't take our freedoms for granted—we have to work for them, and we have to defend them,” former Vice President Biden said. “It's also a reminder that our democracy has never been perfect, and we can't be complacent if we hope to continue to lead in the 21st century. By identifying key

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challenges, we can keep working—Democrats and Republicans, together—to strengthen and reinforce the values that form the foundations of our democracy.”

“Americans are deeply worried about the health of their democracy and want to make it stronger,” said Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House. “There appears to be a crisis in confidence in the functioning of our democracy, and it is not a party-line issue. Intense concern about the health of democracy spans Republicans, Democrats, and independents; voters and nonvoters; the young, middle-aged, and older Americans; and people of every race and background.”

The findings are drawn from 10 focus groups conducted with different segments of the American public in Arizona, Indiana, Missouri, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania between March 12 and April 18, 2018, and from a nationwide telephone survey of 1,400 adults, conducted between April 28 and May 8, 2018. The margin of sampling error on the random survey of 1,400 respondents is +/-2.6 percent. (*For more on the methodology, visit [www.democracyprojectreport.org/report](http://www.democracyprojectreport.org/report)*).

## Key Findings

- The American public’s support for the concept of democracy remains strong and expansive. In contrast to the period before World War II, when the appeal of fascism and communism was spreading through Europe and the United States, there is no evidence in the current research of a recent decline in support for the *idea* of democracy. A full 60 percent of respondents believe that it is “absolutely important” to live in a democracy, rating it at 10 on a 1–10 scale. In total, a large majority of 84 percent rated the importance at between 6 and 10.
- **Certain groups that may perceive less benefit from the current system—notably nonwhite Americans—are less convinced of the importance of living in a democracy.** While 60 percent of respondents overall said living in a democracy is “absolutely important,” the figure was 54 percent for nonwhite respondents and 64 percent for their white counterparts. Fewer than half of nonwhite respondents (42 percent) said they were satisfied with “the way democracy is working in our country,” compared with 51 percent of white participants.
- **Young adults feel less strongly about the importance of democracy than respondents over age 29.** While 81 percent of the younger participants gave the importance of living in a democracy a rating of between 6 and 10 on a 10-point scale, only slightly less than the public overall, just 39 percent gave it the maximum rating of “absolutely important”—far below the 60 percent figure for respondents as a whole. However, past studies that followed subjects over a long period of time have found that people tend to develop stronger support for living in a democracy as they age.

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- **Americans are frustrated with racism and discrimination and the corrosive influence of money in politics.** The survey presented a list of issues and asked respondents to choose the two that are most concerning to them when it comes to democracy in America. The most frequently selected topics were “big money in politics” and “racism and discrimination.”
- **Most Americans believe protecting the rights of individuals and small groups should be a priority in our democracy.** A 54–39 percent majority believe “in our democracy, it is more important that the majority does not trample on the rights of individuals and small groups,” rejecting the alternative statement that “in our democracy, it is more important that the will of the majority prevails.” Different respondents likely have different groups in mind when they hear this question. But there is general support for the idea that in a democracy, representatives elected by the majority do not have a mandate to impose their policies without regard for the rights of the minority.
- **The researchers tested messages and actions that may be used to galvanize support for democracy. The advocacy message that resonated the most featured both a warning and a call to action.** Respondents reported feeling more favorable toward the American democratic system after hearing a message that promoted civic engagement as a means of preventing their freedoms and rights from being “whittled away.”
- **A majority of Americans support the idea that democracy and human rights should play a role in U.S. foreign policy.** Overall, 71 percent of the public favor “the U.S. government taking steps to support democracy and human rights in other countries.” When presented with arguments for and against such support, respondents signaled much stronger agreement with the former than the latter. The moral argument seems to be the most persuasive: A 91 percent majority agree that “we can’t control what happens in the world, but we have a moral obligation to speak up and do what we can when people are victims of genocide, violence, and severe human rights abuses.”

An 84 percent majority agrees that “when other countries become democratic, it contributes to our own well-being.” And a 67–22 percent majority believes that “when other countries are democratic, rather than dictatorships, it often helps make the U.S. a little safer”—rejecting the alternative statement that “there is no impact on US security when other countries move away from dictatorship and become democracies.”

The Democracy Project survey was designed and conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, a Democratic polling firm, and North Star, a Republican polling firm. The research received generous support from the Knight Foundation.

**A copy of our full report, including a complete data set, is available at [www.democracyprojectreport.org/report](http://www.democracyprojectreport.org/report).**

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## Democracy Project Partners

**Freedom House** champions democracy worldwide by documenting threats to freedom, supporting frontline activists, and advocating for political rights and civil liberties.

**The George W. Bush Institute** is an action-oriented, nonpartisan policy organization that develops leaders, advances policy, and takes action to solve today's most pressing challenges.

**The Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement** at the University of Pennsylvania is founded on the principle that a democratic, open, secure, tolerant, and interconnected world benefits all Americans.

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