

political contestation rather than near universally accepted norms, their evaluation of democracy in any setting is necessarily more precarious than the evaluation of a proceduralist holding more minimal criteria.

A second front of concern is that the opinion survey asks respondents to rate each characteristic of democracy on its own, rather than in relationship with other goals for the respondent. Voters might say that free and fair elections or freedom of association is essential to democracy in the abstract, but when application of those values leads to political results contrary to other values they hold, they must compromise on one of the two. Connecting to my work under review in this Critical Dialogue, if voters care more *intensely* about the political result than about the democratic norm, their action might follow politics rather than norms.

Indeed, one might even define democratic backsliding as a change in relative intensity for political outcomes versus democratic norms. Americans might continue to endorse free speech and fair elections as before, but if their perception is that the policy consequences of elections are of greater salience—as might be the case with increased polarization between the party coalitions—voter willingness to swallow political defeat in deference to democracy might decline. Despite the rhetoric of “Stop the Steal” around election fraud, my suspicion is that many who entered the Capitol on January 6, 2021 did so more to prevent what they saw as an unacceptable Biden presidency than to prevent certification of a stolen election.

More broadly, if readers adopted the perspective on public opinion presented in John Zaller’s 1992 book, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, they might be concerned about the empirical enterprise of *Democracy’s Meanings*. Many Americans have not thought carefully about what features they deem essential to a democratic system. Their opinion survey responses might simply reflect “what they’ve heard” from the elite political rhetoric in their information milieu. Proceduralists might give responses reflecting the rhetoric they hear about the rule of law and fair elections, and indeed the authors find proceduralists more likely identify as conservative and Republican. Maximalists might give responses reflecting the rhetoric they hear about inequality and disenfranchisement, and indeed the authors find that maximalists more likely identify as liberal and Democratic.

Under this Zaller-type story, the relevant influence on meanings of democracy would be elite rhetoric, rather than individual opinion. Democratic backsliding would follow, then, from a change in the elite rhetoric surrounding norms of democracy. My sense is that there is ample evidence of this phenomenon taking place. Research documenting and quantifying this trend so we can better understand its causes and evaluate its effect on individual citizens strikes me as a natural and important part of the project started in this book.

If elite rhetoric drives public opinion on the meaning of democracy, it does imply a potential problem of accountability, as the authors suggest. Political elites who defy norms of democracy might use rhetoric to influence the public’s definition, upend the evaluative criteria that might have been held against them, and proceed with their action without risk of voter retribution. It is crucial to understand whether voters hold ethical standards for democratic conduct external to elite rhetoric.

The authors, on my read, accept the premise that the United States is experiencing democratic backsliding and argue that public opinion is part of the story: “We are struck by the democratic deficit that faces the United States. Americans are socially divided, and yet, they share a set of expectations for good governance that are woefully unfulfilled” (p. xiii). I am not certain why they make this claim. Although it is true that the authors classify 40% of American opinion as maximalist, 50% is either proceduralist or moderate. Therefore, we should not expect that the maximalist position should gain full representation in public policy. We might instead expect some kind of weighted average, which I would suggest is roughly what we have. The American state enacts massive redistribution that counteracts some, though not all, of the recent increase in income inequality. The Congressional Budget Office, for example, estimates that federal taxes and means-tested transfers increase income for households in the lowest quintile by 64% and decrease incomes in the highest quintile by 24% (“The Distribution of Household Income, 2019,” Washington, DC, Exhibit S-1). This is not to say that the extent of federal efforts toward economic equality matches the perceptions of many Americans about what the American democracy *should* be doing, only to push back on claims that the effort is demonstrably inadequate.

Davis, Gáddie, and Goidel’s book pushes scholarly inquiry of democratic decline into the public mind and highlights that how individuals (scholars not excepted) define democracy directly influences any evaluation of its functioning, vibrancy, and backsliding.

Response to Seth J. Hill’s Review of *Democracy’s Meaning: How the Public Understands Democracy and Why It Matters*

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Before we begin, we would like to thank Seth Hill for his careful read of our work. His criticisms are largely on the mark. They reflect both the limitations of our data and our imagination. In an ideal study, we would have captured elite discourse surrounding questions of democracy,

carefully theorized, and tested how such discourse was reflected in public understandings of democracy. We suspect, as Hill observes, that public understandings shift in accordance with elite cues, similar to the process outlined by John Zaller (1992) in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Indeed, we would take this criticism a step further. Elite understandings of democracy shift as elites perceive strategic advantages in advancing procedural or substantive understandings of democracy, and public understandings of democracy follow suit.

Public understandings of democracy, we argue, are not set in stone either in terms of the specific understandings that emerge from a given set of data or the level of public support for any given definition. The democratic ground shifts beneath the public's feet. Were we able to accurately reflect democracy's meanings over time, we expect shifts in meaning would be dynamic and thermostatic (Christopher Claesen, "In the Mood for Democracy? Democratic Support at Thermostatic Opinion," *American Political Science Review*, 114, 2020). These shifts would not constitute backsliding, at least as the term is generally used, but would instead reflect ongoing conflict over democracy's meanings.

For many Americans, our democratic political system is running a deficit when it comes to providing procedural and substantive goods. Some of these Americans believe that our democracy has gone too far in its efforts to assure economic and political equality, thus violating their more limited procedural definition of democracy. Others believe that democracy has not gone far enough and that the political system has failed to live up to its promise of economic prosperity. There is no single set of substantive or procedural outcomes that would leave subscribers to these very different definitions of democracy equally satisfied.

One of our contributions is that we show that one's understanding of democracy does not neatly align with partisan or ideological identification. Yes, there is sorting, but there are a nontrivial number of self-identified conservatives and Republicans who believe democracy has overpromised and underdelivered when it comes to material goods. In this respect, our findings fit well with recent research by Andrew Little and Annie Meng ("Subjective and Objective Measures of Democratic Backsliding," 2023) who find that democratic backsliding mostly reflects subjective evaluations rather than objective indicators. We take this a step further: democratic backsliding reflects the inherent tension between procedural and substantive understandings and the thermostatic swings between a more limited procedural democracy and a more expansive substantive democracy.

If there is one place where Hill misreads our work, it is here: we do not accept the evidence of democratic backsliding but instead forcefully argue against it. Democratic backsliding assumes a single elite definition of democracy that the public does not share. Dissatisfaction with democracy, what others have characterized as democratic

backsliding, is rooted in a belief that the American political system is not democratic enough and has not lived up to the promise of economic prosperity, the protection of political and procedural rights, or majority rule.

Frustrated Majorities: How Issue Intensity Enables Smaller Groups of Voters to Get What They Want.

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In contemporary politics, there is no shortage of pundits and scholars identifying frustrated majorities (and governing minorities) as the root cause of our most recent "crisis of democracy." In *Democracy in America* (2020), Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, for example, make the case that the solution to America's latest democratic crisis is to empower majorities so that public policy better reflects the public will. Seth Hill thinks differently. Frustrated majorities arise because political candidates are attempting to win popular elections by securing the most votes. They are not ignoring voters or are constrained by institutional design; they are simply responding to voter intensity in ways that increase the probability that they will be elected.

In his ambitious new book *Frustrated Majorities*, Hill sets out to explain why majorities in the American political system frequently lose to more committed minorities. At first glance, this is a story we know well. On issues like gun control and abortion, popular majorities lose to minority factions. These are issues where intensity of opinion, and not just direction of opinion, matters. No reader will be surprised by this observation. "Frustrated majorities" is perhaps *the* defining descriptor of the American political system. James Madison intentionally designed the US Constitution to frustrate majority factions driven largely by passion, rather than reason and, as a result, easily duped by demagogues and "pretended patriots."

What is missing from popular and scholarly laments, according to Hill, is an explanation for *why* politicians appeal to committed minorities, rather than less committed majorities, as a viable (and perhaps even optimal) electoral strategy. Using game theory, Hill develops a model, based on what he coins "intensity theory," for how this works. Candidates want to win the most votes, they know the preferences of voters on issues, but remain uncertain about the intensity of public attitudes. Within this context, intensity is revealed by the costs voters are willing to pay to achieve their policy goals. Intensity matters because candidates need to know which potential voters will vote