

UMass Lowell Center for Public Opinion
Citizen Attitudes about Democratic Values and American Democracy
June 27, 2017 – July 6, 2017

N=1,000 American adults
Sampling error +/- 4.3 percentage points for all respondents

See <http://uml.edu/polls> for full questionnaire/topline results and detailed methodology disclosure.

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HIGHLIGHTS

In the summer of 2017, the Center for Public Opinion at UMass Lowell surveyed a representative sample of 1,000 American adults on their attitudes about their beliefs in democratic values central to the American democratic creed. We find general support for these values, but also find a considerable degree of uncertainty about these questions. When contextualized with information about contemporary American democracy, we find that this support erodes in a predictable partisan fashion.

FINDINGS:

On individual questions about the democratic creed, there is large majority support for American democratic principles; the support for these principles is strongest among those with higher levels of education.

- 62% of American adults agree that people in the minority should be free to try to win majority support for their opinions; 29% are uncertain and 10% disagree.
- 75% of American adults agree that public officials should be chosen by majority vote; 16% are uncertain and 10% disagree.
- 78% of American adults believe in free speech for all, no matter what their views might be; 13% are uncertain and 8% disagree.
- 89% of American adults agree that no matter what a person's political views are, they are entitled to the same legal protections as anyone else.
- 82% of American adults agree that people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions without fear of punishment; 12% are uncertain, and 6% disagree.
- 75% agree that the media should be able to report the news without government censorship.
- We find wide bipartisan support for all of these questions, noting two exceptions. First, 73% of Democrats agree that people in the minority should be free to try to win majority support for their opinions, compared to 63% of Republicans. A similar difference is seen on the assertion

that public officials should be chosen by majority vote: 82% of Democrats agree, compared to 71% of Republicans.

- The biggest demographic differences are found by level of education. Those with at least a college degree are consistently more likely to support all aspects of the democratic creed. For example, there is a 19-point difference between those with post-graduate education (90%) and those with a high school degree or less (71%) who support the statement that “I believe in free speech for all, no matter what their views might be.”

Democrats and Republicans do not believe that members of the opposite party will defend democratic values if those are counter to their interest.

- Freedom of speech: 37% of Republicans believe that Democrats will not defend the principle *no matter what*, while 41% of Democrats believe that Republicans will defend the principle *no matter what*.
- Freedom of religion: 31% of Republicans believe that Democrats will not defend the principle *no matter what*, while 37% of Democrats believe that Republicans will defend the principle *no matter what*.
- Freedom of the press: 38% of Republicans believe that Democrats will not defend the principle *no matter what*, while 28% of Democrats believe that Republicans will defend the principle *no matter what*.
- The right to peaceably assemble: 44% of Republicans believe that Democrats will not defend the principle *no matter what*, while 33% of Democrats believe that Republicans will defend the principle *no matter what*.
- Freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures: 39% of Republicans believe that Democrats will not defend the principle *no matter what*, while 31% of Democrats believe that Republicans will defend the principle *no matter what*.
- Separation of power with an independent judiciary: 30% of Republicans believe that Democrats will not defend the principle *no matter what*, while 27% of Democrats believe that Republicans will defend the principle *no matter what*.

In an experimental setting, we find that Democrats and Republicans are less likely to adhere to elements of the democratic creed when they are faced with challenging frames.

Summary: The four experiments reveal that adherence to democratic values is very much colored by what political scientists call motivated reasoning. That is, individuals have a difficult time decontextualizing their views about the democratic creed from their views about partisan politics.

Experiment 1 – Freedom of Speech: We asked a control group, “Do you think that controversial figures should be allowed to speak on college campuses or do you think that there are legitimate reasons why a college might prohibit them from speaking?”

We then offered two possible treatments to two randomly selected groups. In the first treatment, we specified *“controversial figures like conservative activist Ann Coulter,”* and in the second treatment we specified *“controversial figures like liberal activist Michael Moore.”*

- In the control group, 49% of Democrats and 53% of Republicans chose the free speech position.
- In the first treatment (Ann Coulter), Democratic support drops 5 percentage points and Republican support increases by 19 percentage points.
- In the second treatment (Michael Moore), Democratic support increases 10 percentage points and Republican support increases by 3 points.

Experiment 2 – Independent Judiciary: We asked a control group, *“Do you think that it is appropriate for a sitting president to openly criticize members of the judicial branch of government or do you think that it is inappropriate?”*

We then offered two possible treatments to two randomly selected groups. In the first treatment, we specified that, *“As you may know, a federal judge recently issued an emergency hold against President Trump’s immigration executive order. After the ruling was announced, President Trump used Twitter to criticize the decision, referring to the judge as “this so-called judge” and stating that “if something happens, blame him and the court system.”* In the second treatment, we specified, *“As you may know, during his 2012 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama criticized the Supreme Court’s decision on Citizens United. Obama stated, “Last week the Supreme Court reversed a century of law that, I believe, will open the floodgates for special interests, including foreign corporations, to spend without limit in our elections.”*

- In the control group, 78% of Democrats and 38% of Republicans said it was inappropriate for a sitting president to criticize the judicial branch. We note here that even without prompting, there is a considerable degree of polarization on this issue.
- In the first treatment (Trump), Democratic support for an independent judiciary increased 10 percentage points, while Republican support, somewhat unexpectedly, also increased by 15 percentage points.
- In the second treatment (Obama), Democratic support drops by 52 percentage points, while Republican support increases by 32 percentage points.

Experiment 3 – Right to Free Assembly: We asked a control group, *“If members of a group hold a rally to protest and some of the participants in the rally chant derogatory terms, do you think they should have the right to hold another rally or do you think that their right to hold rallies should be forfeited?”*

We then offered two possible treatments to two randomly selected groups. In the first treatment, we specified that, *“If members of the group Black Lives Matter held a rally to protest police brutality and some of the participants chanted derogatory terms for police officers...”* In the second treatment, we specified, *“If members of the Alt-Right held a rally and some of the participants chanted derogatory terms for minorities...”*

- In the control group, we found that 73% of Democrats and 54% of Republicans supported a group’s right to hold another rally.
- In the first treatment (Black Lives Matter), Democratic support for the right to hold another rally increased 10 percentage points, while Republican support for the right to hold another rally dropped 5 percentage points.

- In the second treatment (Alt-Right), Democratic support decreased by 7 percentage points, and Republican support increased by 11 percentage points.

Experiment 4 – Freedom of the Press: We asked a control group, “If a journalist runs a story with unnamed sources criticizing a well-known elected official, should the elected official be able to force the journalist to name their sources or should the journalist be allowed to protect their sources?”

We then offered two possible treatments to two randomly selected groups. In the first treatment, we specified that, “*If a journalist runs a story with unnamed sources stating that the Trump administration had colluded with Russia to influence the election, should the Trump administration be able to force the journalist to name their sources or should the journalist be allowed to protect their sources?*” In the second treatment, we specified that, “*If, during the Obama Administration, a journalist ran a story with unnamed sources claiming that President Obama had ordered the NSA to gather intelligence on U.S. citizens, should the Obama administration have been able to force the journalist to name their sources or should the journalist have been allowed to protect their sources?*”

- In the control group, 71% of Democrats and 52% of Republicans said that journalists should be allowed to protect their sources.
- In the first treatment (Trump/Russia), Democratic support increases by 16 percentage points, and Republicans support decreases by 4 percentage points.
- In the second treatment (Obama/NSA), Democratic support decreases by 1 percentage point, and Republican support increases by 29 percentage points.