

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the case of a word like democracy, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides . . . Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different.

—George Orwell (1946)

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

—Lewis Carroll (1871)

In mid-July of 2018, former U.S. president Barack Obama gave a curious speech in South Africa at a celebration of what would have been Nelson Mandela’s 100th birthday. As emeritus figures, public speaking is an expected, though somewhat banal retirement exercise for past presidents. Think of an aging band being trotted out to cover their 30-year-old hits—everyone remembers the songs but they’re never as good as the original recording. However, on this occasion, Mr. Obama had neither a domestic press to worry about nor the pressures of appearing nonpartisan. He was, in some sense, freer to speak his mind in a public venue than he had been in over a decade.

This celebration of Mandela’s birthday was a tribute to his singular service as a transcendent political figure—a commemoration of the rejection of apartheid’s racial authoritarianism. It was, by extension, a celebration of democracy, and Mr. Obama had been asked to speak on the subject.

Usually, such speeches about democracy are the dross of public lectures. What is there to say about democracy other than to speak its praises in some garish way that creates a thin veneer of a concept that barely resembles its complicated reality? From Jefferson to Lincoln to Churchill to fictional senators in galaxies far, far away—nearly all public figures claim to love democracy.¹ In that sense, Orwell's epigraph that opens this chapter was right in noting that speakers usually describe democracy with the sort of platitudes that permit audiences to nod along with statements describing the wonders of democracy without having to grapple with either its substance or whether its practice lives up to its promise.

Unlike those bland invocations of democracy's virtues, however, Obama's lecture left little to the imagination. He began by describing how the last 100 years had seen a flourishing of pro-democratic attitudes across the world, arguing that the "rule of law and civil rights and the inherent dignity of every single individual" were the fundamental principles of democracy. He then listed the inventory of items usually associated with standard depictions of it: Democracy "depends on strong institutions and it's about minority rights and checks and balances, and freedom of speech and freedom of expression and a free press, and the right to protest and petition the government, and an independent judiciary, and everybody having to follow the law."²

These are the old saws, and it would have been fair to leave it at that. No one would have complained nor disagreed with these sentiments; in fact, they received polite applause. But this is where Obama's speech becomes much more intriguing. The former president's depiction of democracy quickly pivoted from a discussion of civil equality to economic egalitarianism—"those of us who believe in freedom and democracy are going to have to fight harder to reduce inequality and promote lasting economic opportunity for all people." In his words, democracy not only involved the production of civil goods like freedom and equality, but necessarily shaped *material well-being*. The plot thickens.

His speech later expanded on these ideas, noting that "humans don't live on bread alone. But they need bread . . ." The implication here is obvi-

1. We are, of course, referring to Senator Palpatine's remark, "I love democracy. I love the Republic" in *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*. A poor movie, albeit a memorable quote.

2. Barack Obama, Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, Johannesburg, South Africa, July 17, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?448781-1/president-obama-delivers-2018-mandela-lecture>

ous. Subsistence is simply not conducive to democracy, and “. . . when economic power is concentrated in the hands of the few, history also shows that political power is sure to follow—and that dynamic eats away at democracy.” Of course, bald corruption in the public view is bad, but Obama warned that it was not the only danger that threatens democracy. “Sometimes it may be straight-out corruption, but sometimes it may not involve the exchange of money; it’s just folks who are that wealthy get what they want, and it undermines human freedom.” A democracy that allowed for empty bowls and empty bellies was unsatisfying.

Connecting the sustainability of civil freedoms and institutional checks and balances to economic parity is no accident. The theory of democracy unpacked here involves more than process-based levers. In fact, it confronts the finding that democracy sometimes performs badly for its poorest citizens (Ross 2006). Freedom of speech is no salve if citizens cannot enjoy some basic standard of living. As Obama concluded, “We’re going to have to worry about economics if we want to get democracy back on track.”³

These ideas draw upon some of the classic tensions found in questions about the nature of democracy. Is democracy merely a form of preference aggregation via popular and free elections? Or should it be judged by the condition of its citizens? One would be hard-pressed to depict Obama as a social democrat, and, yet, his argument implies that democracy necessarily incorporates both the production of welfare and civil liberty goods. And he is hardly alone in linking these outputs together. This “maximal” or substantive view of democracy is woven throughout many of the social democracies of Europe. It is the view of democracy for which Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) are known, and the view of democracy that someone like Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) abhors.

While the basis of the American founding rests on the marketization

3. Of course, some might find these statements ironic coming from the former president, whose left-leaning colleagues complained about his administration’s modest pursuit of the sort of redistributive welfare policies that would have alleviated some of the inequality that he lamented in South Africa. Politics is hard and hindsight is clearer than foresight, but that criticism is not without merit. We leave it to the reader to discern his commitment to these sentiments, but they are a useful framing tool, if only for their demonstration that democracy’s promises—even by the well-intentioned—are often unrealized. In fact, this speech highlights that the *political* remedies for achieving “more” or “better” democracy are bitterly debated, even among members of the same party.

of liberal ideas that lend a “minimalistic” quality to democracy, the ebbs and flows of democracy’s promises suggest that not only is it dynamic, but that democracy is more than an empty set of processes or levers. It is a living thing that produces political goods, and the scope and nature of those outputs vary tremendously. In a very real sense, then, democracy is inescapably ideological in nature.

While scholars have long understood these implications—debating them ad nauseam from Plato to Lipset—it is less clear whether the American mass public understands democracy in these terms. How do ordinary citizens connect democracy to the production of civil and welfare goods? What do they know about the meanings of democracy? And do these understandings matter? That is, do they affect subsequent political attitudes and behaviors?

This book investigates those questions.

Democracy and the Mass Public

Understanding democracy lies at the heart of academic political science (Key 1966; Dahl 1956). In this vein, fundamental questions regarding governance have traditionally animated interest in democracy—are citizens capable of governing? Why is democracy privileged over other alternatives? Do citizens favor democratic over nondemocratic rule?

Yet, for all of the theorizing about the value of democratic self-governance and the capacity of citizens to pursue it, the *meaning* that the average citizen assigns to the concept of democracy remains elusive. Historically, even as individuals report that they are satisfied with or support democracy (Norris 2011), their understanding of the core features of democracy remains ambiguous (Baviskar and Malone 2004) and context dependent (Schaffer 1998; Canache 2012). This lack of clarity is troublesome given wide-ranging concerns about the capacity of democracy to withstand populist assaults (e.g., Crozier et al. 1975; Inglehart and Norris 2019), coupled with a recent chorus of journalists and scholars who contend that democracy is in crisis (Diamond 2016; Foa and Mounk 2016; Mechkova, et al. 2017; Page and Gilens 2020; Abramowitz 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). It is important, then, to distinguish between whether democracy is functioning optimally or as promised *and what citizens expect from it*.

In this book, we explore what the public thinks about democracy and why it matters. We argue that how individuals conceptualize democracy is, in a meaningful sense, ideological—the weaving of liberalism into the fabric of American democracy binds the functional nature of civil liberties (Beetham 2005) to the underlying market economy (Polanyi 1944; Ebner 2011). Within this context, it is possible that an individual’s specific conception of democracy constitutes more than naïve or abstract support for a set of process-based institutional rules, but, instead, an evaluative framework of social, political, and economic preferences. In turn, the meanings that citizens associate with democracy are necessary for understanding their support for political institutions. In this sense, what others have referred to as popular democratic backsliding (i.e., poor ratings of democracy among the mass public) may instead reflect a gap between how citizens understand democracy’s obligations and the outputs they observe in practice.

While democracy means different things to different people, we will show that the meanings the public assigns to democracy can be characterized by four unique, composite understandings of democracy’s “essential” features. These understandings structure normative beliefs about how democracy *should* function and evaluative beliefs about how government *is actually* performing. This, in turn, is critical for understanding the apparent fragility of democratic support in the contemporary era. If we are to gauge the health of democracy by the democratic commitments of ordinary citizens, we must begin by asking what they believe democracy means, how they believe it should function, and, crucially, what conditions they believe it should produce.

Categorizing Democratic Meanings

In the first chapter, we introduce the idea that the functional meaning of democracy is often misunderstood in American politics. It is simply not a value-neutral concept. Democracy is not “only” a collection of institutional mechanisms that govern elections and produce representation but can be conceptualized and judged by the nature of its outputs. Laurence Whitehead (2002, 3) captures these tensions in his text on democracy and democratization:

“[D]emocracy” is best understood not as a predetermined end-state, but as a long-term and somewhat open-ended outcome, not just as a feasible equilibrium but as a socially desirable and imaginary future. This constructedness means that there can be no single ‘cook book’ recipe for democracy applicable to all times and places. It must be the court of democratic opinion (rather than a stipulative definition) which arbitrates disputes over precisely what should count in each setting.

For our purposes, this description raises a number of pointed questions. How do public understandings and expectations (the court of democratic opinion) constrain or enable democratic processes and outputs? Under what conditions do democratic processes produce outputs and results that are democratizing? And, under what conditions do they create outcomes that, though achieved through democratic processes, undermine democracy? Answering these questions reveals that “democracy,” as an aspirational ideal, often creates the optical illusion of a moving goalpost. Moving closer to the ideal sheds light on inequalities and other procedural and institutional failings not apparent from a distance. The closer we move to democracy as an aspirational ideal, the further away it can appear.⁴

Against this backdrop, our approach to studying democracy is both intuitive and inductive, and it probably runs against the grain of much contemporary political science, which is deductive and formal in its approach and logic. Rather than imposing our expectations (or biases) on how the public should think about democracy, we instead let patterns involving beliefs about democracy emerge from survey data. The results of our analysis reveal four different views about the “essential” characteristics of democracy, which incorporate how Americans connect democratic

4. This is not a new conclusion. In 1911, Robert Michels identified the iron law of oligarchy, or the proposition that democratic organizations and, by extension, societies cannot remain democratic for very long. He argued that elected leaders develop distinct interests from the people who elected them, eventually leading to the concentration of power away from the citizenry. Consider, for instance, wild, bipartisan public support for COVID-19 relief and unified GOP opposition of it among elected officials. Chris Hayes (2012), in *The Twilight of the Elites*, argued that this tendency implies that democracy occasionally needs waves of reform to reset the disparities between the elected and their electors. The political unrest in America in 2021 seems to draw on these themes. As citizens are made aware of political dysfunction, they inevitably recognize deep fissures in the democratic project. They are, to put it bluntly, stuck in “doom loop” (Drutman 2019).

processes to civil and material equality. Before outlining what to expect in the remainder of this book, we begin by providing a brief overview of the groups that make up this democracy typology.

Minimal democracy, defined only (or primarily) as a set of participatory processes, may yield preferable outcomes to authoritarian states, but that is not necessarily guaranteed (Przeworski 1999). “Even as an idea (let alone as a practical expedient),” writes John Dunn (2019, 123), democracy “wholly fails to ensure any regular and reassuring relation to just outcomes over any issue at all . . . The idea of justice and the idea of democracy fit very precariously together.” Indeed, fear of unrestrained majorities and their potential to deprive minorities of their rights—especially property rights—serves as a foundational pillar of the United States Constitution and a rebuke to most minimalistic approaches to democratic governance.

As we demonstrate in subsequent chapters, most Americans reject such a skeletal definition of democracy. Instead, about 20 percent of the respondents surveyed here prefer a *procedural* version of democracy that combines a love for democratic processes with the protection of individual rights. On balance, these folks see democracy in crisis when it expands beyond process and the protection of individual rights (or, perhaps stated differently, when the mass public begins taking democratic outputs seriously and demands greater economic equality). For procedural democrats, democracy is not designed to promote equality, per se, or assure that democratic citizenries have access to basic necessities. It exists largely as support for a narrow definition of individual rights.⁵ Members of this class are well educated, quite politically conservative, and mostly white. Throughout the remainder of the text, we will refer to this version of democracy as “mini-

5. Former President Donald Trump’s litigation efforts to overturn the 2020 election results illustrate this point. Aside from the cynical manipulation of partisan preferences, the hollering about election rigging revealed different underlying assumptions about what constitutes democracy and, critically, whose votes—and, thus, rights—should count. The notion that Black and urban votes were less legitimate or subject to partisan manipulation is a historic argument from white conservatives, especially but not exclusively in the South, dating back to the post-Civil War Reconstruction era and recurring throughout the next 150 years. Efforts to shape election rules to avoid “corruption” and “illegality” by suppressing Black voters or fracturing the white vote have manifested through electoral gerrymandering, subjectively implemented voter registration requirements and rules, voter purging and challenges to voter eligibility, and also the use of violence (see Woodward 1955; Kousser 1974, 1991; Bullock, Gaddie, and Wert 2016; Bullock, Buchanan, and Gaddie 2015; Mickey 2015).

mal” or “procedural,” and we will refer to people who subscribe to this view as “minimalists” or “procedural democrats.”

As the foil to more minimal views of democracy, substantive, or *social*, democracy involves an expansive understanding of democracy that balances favor for both democratic processes and outputs. Persons with these views embrace the protection of individual rights and freedoms of speech but tie these ideas to economic equality and the provision of basic necessities. These citizens want more, not less, democracy, and they are particularly sensitive to the failure of American democracy to solve long-standing economic problems and to advance a more equitable and just society (by reducing, for example, racial inequalities). Regardless of process, substantive democrats believe democracy fails when its policy outputs disproportionately benefit the wealthy. Comprising about 40 percent of our sample, these persons are generally, but not exclusively, liberal, encompassing a mix of self-identified liberals, conservatives, and moderates concerned about issues broadly related to fairness and equality. We refer to this set of meanings as “social” or “maximal” democracy, and label persons belonging to this class of our typology “social democrats” or “maximalists.”

Residing somewhere in between procedural and substantive views of democracy is, for a lack of any better word, a moderate perspective.⁶ Their support for civil liberties is not quite as full-throated as their proceduralist counterparts, and while moderate democrats are more committed to economic equality and social welfare than procedural democrats, the meaning they assign to democracy is not quite as expansive as substantive democrats. Even so, they concede that there is a role for democracies in providing some basic necessities to its citizens. If a thermostatic model of public opinion accurately describes public support for democracy—that is, citizens’ support for democracy recedes as democracy strengthens and intensifies as democracy weakens (Claasen 2020)—these moderate democrats likely play a critical role in controlling the temperature. About 30 percent of our sample comprises this moderate view of democracy.

6. While this label is a bit bland, it more or less corresponds to Merkel’s (2014) “middle-ground” group of democratic theories. “Moderate” is a word often misunderstood and abused in the discussion of public opinion. People who hold some left-leaning and some right-leaning views, for example, are often described as moderate—as if the average of the two opposite beliefs makes them “balanced.” In our case, moderate is actually literal: these people take a tempered view of democracy’s relationship to rights and welfare goods, but they are not, strictly speaking, *neutral*.

Finally, the last category of our democracy typology includes people who demonstrate little commitment to democracy as a set of processes or outcomes. These folks are effectively *indifferent* to the form and shape of democratic governance. That is, these persons do not seem to hold meaningful beliefs about many qualities of democracy. About 10 percent of people hold these views.

Taking stock of the categories that form our typology, it seems that indifference to democratic processes and outcomes is limited, which casts some doubt upon allegations about low support for democracy. Instead, the “crisis” we confront involves the ongoing conflict over the definition and reach of democratic governance. The public meanings of democracy are not shared, but contested, and these contested definitions yield an intense struggle.⁷ In the remainder of the book, we explore these tensions, the attitudes that accompany them, and what they mean for prevailing political debates.

Outline of the Book

Our central argument involves the idea that people have firm expectations about democracy that shape how they evaluate it. These understandings of democracy structure how the mass public grades democratic governance, their preferences across a range of issues, and how they think about political parties and political representation. In short, operating definitions of democracy set a baseline for how citizens believe democratic governments should function and the outcomes democracies should produce. In this sense, public understandings of democracy are not merely the subject of high school civic lessons or uncritical socialization processes; they matter across a range of interconnected attitudes and beliefs.

We begin by examining classic definitions of and disagreements about democracy in chapter 2. Though there is widespread agreement on democracy’s necessary conditions (e.g., free and fair elections, opportunities for meaningful participation, and political equality), there is little agreement

7. For example, the GOP efforts to delegitimize electoral bureaucracy are not efforts to totally jettison elections but, instead, to rig the rules of the game in their favor. The underlying notion of popular self-governance remains intact, even as the machinery of democracy is fundamentally transformed. In turn, it is not surprising that the public views the health of democracy through a partisan lens.

on the conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for it to flourish. The potential combinations of processes, institutions, and outputs are endless, yielding models of democracy rather than a single shared understanding of what democracy ought to look like (Held 2006; Merkel 2014). In chapter 2, we emphasize the contextual dependence of our understandings of democracy, outline how these understandings have changed over time, and identify the inherent tensions that frustrate democratic governance.

In chapter 3, we draw from this historical and philosophical material as we begin to engage the problem of measuring how the public thinks about democracy. Even if democratic features were well understood, democracy requires balancing tradeoffs between competing, rather than consensual, values, which promotes conflict over democratic meanings. This conflict actually dovetails with the advent of public opinion polling, which transformed our understanding of democracy, first, by advancing a conceptualization of democracy as the aggregation of individual opinions and, second, by challenging whether citizens were capable of guiding policy decisions.

This overview guides us to a critical point: we need a different approach for categorizing and evaluating public understandings of democracy. Our solution involves polling a list of survey items that were designed to disentangle whether people think about democracy mostly in terms of its production of civil political goods like rights and liberties, or whether they also link democracy to welfare goods like basic necessities, social mobility, and economic equality. We pair these questions with other survey instruments that ask whether citizens distinguish between the institutional features that govern how democracies actually operate and the normative, political values that give democracy its functionality. This data—the essential characteristics of democracy—serves as the backbone of the rest of this book.

In chapter 4, we use a semi-supervised, machine learning approach to construct a typology from this data that reflects how citizens connect these ideas. Rather than imposing judgement on citizen's beliefs based on either elite or academic definitions as to what constitutes democracy, we instead examine how citizens connect various processes, institutions, and outcomes spontaneously by letting the data sort people into the different categories of democratic meanings that we introduced above. This variance in public understandings of democracy has important implications for the study of democratic attitudes. Where scholars have repeatedly cautioned

about declining democratic commitments (i.e., democratic backsliding), such statements often ignore that citizens understand democracy in fundamentally different ways. Procedural and social democrats may be equally dissatisfied with democracy but for very different reasons. On balance, we find that citizens want more, not less, democracy. In fact, the modal class of democratic meanings in the data is neither a procedural nor moderate view, but a *social* one.

If beliefs about equality, access, fairness, and justice often fall under the general umbrella of ideology, then to what extent do these expectations overlap with our categories of democratic meanings? In chapter 5, we analyze how a variety of political and social preferences affect one's categorical view of democracy. We find that, while symbolic group attachments like partisanship and ideology are weakly related to democratic meanings, beliefs about government intervention, attitudes about race, and income sort people into competing classes of democratic meanings. Procedural democrats are least inclined to support broader definitions of equality; in contrast, individuals who adopt substantive (or social) understandings of democracy express the greatest support not only for racial but also economic equality, which is grounded in views about individualism and the role of the state. These analyses help illustrate that the democratic typology is not a conventional "ideology," per se, but does function as a cohesive, political worldview encapsulating how state power and resources should be allocated.

If operating definitions of democracy are distinct from traditional measures of ideology, then do they help us to explain how citizens think about policy-making processes and political representation? In chapter 6, we explore the relationship between democratic meanings and beliefs about political compromise and the role of political parties. We find that attitudes about the matters of bargaining, negotiating, and compromise in democratic politics—what Justice David Souter called in *Johnson v. DeGrandy* the "obligation to pull, haul, and trade to find common political ground" (512 U.S. 997 [1994])—vary considerably among the classes. We also discuss the connection between the democracy typology and populist attitudes, particularly antipathy toward elected officials, unelected experts, and other political elites necessary for a functioning democracy.

Understanding the role of public understandings of democracy in evaluations of democratic performance is the focus of chapter 7. Here, we investigate how different meanings of democracy affect support for it.

These results indicate a durability and resilience to democratic support—an overwhelming majority of Americans are dissatisfied with democracy, yet they nonetheless believe in the merits of democracy as a political system. This is not to suggest that “democratic backsliding” is not occurring—one of the political parties, after all, is mired in xenophobia (Bartels 2020), plainly scornful of governing (Mann and Ornstein 2012), and fomented a literal and violent insurrection in the halls of Congress. Rather, democracy historically lives in a perpetual state of existential crisis, which contributes to the United States’ pattern of expansion and retrenchment of democratic-ness.⁸

In turn, perhaps the true test of democratic support resides not in abstract commitments, but in public and elite reactions to violations of democratic norms. What do citizens do when their beliefs about democracy are challenged by the behaviors of favored political elites? In chapter 8, we evaluate whether citizens recognize antidemocratic behaviors and, once recognized, how they respond. It also gives us the opportunity to explore the relative importance of democratic commitments compared to partisan affiliation and symbolic political ideology. The peril of democracy is supposed to arise from ordinary citizens either not recognizing or being unwilling to punish norm-breaking by leaders and backtracking on their commitments to procedural justice when it suits them. We explore Americans’ views toward norm-breaking using a dozen hypothetical norm violations derived from recent current events. While there is broad consensus regarding behaviors that are perceived as inappropriate, we find stark differences across the democracy typology in evaluations of the severity of norm-breaking, which has important implications for understanding why democratic support remains high, even as democratic outputs remain poor.

Finally, in chapter 9, we discuss our findings and their implications for understanding the contemporary challenges that face democracy. The reality of multiple, often competing, understandings of democracy leads us to reframe, if not reconsider, claims that democracy is in crisis and that the public is backsliding from its democratic commitments. On balance, our findings reveal a public that wants more democracy, not less, but that is divided over what exactly “more democracy” means—in other words,

8. It is not helped by partisan polarization, a fragmented media system bound to the horserace frame, and a social media ecosphere that proliferates misinformation among the politically engaged (Goidel 2014).

on a fundamental level, it is struggling to *democratize*. We end by reflecting on democracy as an aspirational ideal and what that means for public understandings of democracy and the study of democratic attitudes. This involves briefly addressing former-president Donald Trump's post-election attacks on democracy and democratic legitimacy during the waning days of his administration. While it is tempting to view these attacks as arising solely from an authoritarian impulse, they also reflect the challenges that emerge when democratic meanings are explicitly contested, and partisans believe that "democracy is on the ballot." In the aftermath of the 2020 election, nearly four in five Trump voters (78 percent) believed the election outcome was marred by outright fraud and unfair processes (Norris 2020), and approximately half of Trump voters believe Trump "rightfully won" the election (Kahn 2020). They believed this, not because they wanted to jettison democracy, *per se*, but because they disliked specific democratic outputs. While these citizens were too easily misled and greatly misinformed, they acted not to end democracy but to save it by "stopping the steal." Ironically, this effort was not to save democracy for the many, but rather to save it for themselves—a horrifying, but hardly unique, attempt to remake the meanings of democracy for exclusionary ends.

Summary

Throughout this book, we attempt to speak plainly about democracy. Our goal is not to paint a portrait of it that critical observers of history and the present would not recognize. We are neither historians nor theorists, and we sit upon the shoulders of a considerable amount of research that has discussed the tensions we raise. As empiricists, we try to measure the qualities that Americans think are essential to democracy, and we hope to supply the reader with an honest snapshot of democracy at the start of a new decade and in the wake of what has been one of the most enduring challenges to democracy's institutions in the memory of most of her citizens.

We conclude here by returning, briefly, to Mr. Obama, whose comments opened this introduction. Linking democracy to human flourishing is an admirable perspective. Yet, it should be clear that his depictions of democracy's existential virtues sometimes fall short of its practical supply of democratic goods, particularly in the American case. From the initial federal response to the COVID-19 virus, to the lack of preparation for

apocalyptic winter conditions experienced by Texans in early February 2021, and to Georgia and Wisconsin's attempts to dramatically restrict the franchise—democracy's production of political goods too often leaves Americans wanting. In turn, the exportation of American democracy across the world comes with a deep irony. Even as politicians lecture far off lands about the basic contours of what makes democracy successful, the American people labor under a system whose own constitution is increasingly unloved by democratizing nations (Law and Versteeg 2012).

This book offers one window into how a democratic citizenry views such matters, yet it is but one piece to a larger puzzle. In the end, to understand American democracy requires acknowledging that its nature and meanings are fluid, and that the struggle for democracy is one in which citizens play one, but hardly the only, part.⁹

9. This is captured well by remarks made by President Joe Biden on July 16, 2021. Referring to the January 6th insurrection, he observed: "I never anticipated, notwithstanding no matter how persuasive President Trump was, that we'd have people attacking and breaking down the doors of the United States Capitol. I didn't think that would happen. I didn't think we'd—I'd see that in my lifetime. But it's reinforced what I've always known and what I got taught by my political science professors and by the senior members of the Senate that I admired when I got there: that every generation has to re-establish the basis of its fight for democracy." Retrieved from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/16/remarks-by-president-biden-before-air-force-one-departure-4/#:~:text=But%20it's%20reinforced%20what%20I,literally%20have%20to%20do%20it>