

Survey: Fraud-free elections, free speech, key to democracy

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A survey of U.S. political science professors a month into Donald Trump's presidency shows that fraud-free elections tops a list of 19 principles as most essential to democracy, as do free speech and a free press.

Political scientists at Dartmouth College, the University of Rochester and Yale University collaborated on the survey as part of an initiative they called Bright Line Watch. They wanted to get the experts' reading on the status of democratic practices and potential threats to American democracy.

Dartmouth professor John Carey said the group's motivation was impatience with many news articles saying "the sky is falling" with regard to the status of American democracy since Trump's victory. He added: "What we're doing is not motivated by a partisan agenda; it's really an intellectual agenda."

Participants were asked to rank principles on how important they are for a democratic government, and then rate them on how well they describe the United States now. Clean elections and equal voting rights were ranked as high priorities for democracy.

One principle, that elections be free from foreign influence, was regarded by the vast majority as essential or important. But less than half thought the U.S. mostly or fully meets this standard, and a number said they weren't sure if it did. The results probably speak to how new and

unsettling the prospect of foreign interference is for many [political scientists](#), said Yale University professor Susan Stokes, who co-organized the survey.

"My own hunch is that anxiety about this issue is related not just to reporting that there was Russian influence (in the November presidential election), but also to reports of the insidious nature of that influence—that it was carried out in a highly clandestine manner through hacking, and that its true nature may never be revealed," she said.

U.S. agencies, including the FBI, have been probing Russian interference in the 2016 election. Three congressional committees are conducting separate investigations into the issue, including contacts between Russian officials and members of the Trump campaign and administration.

The principle of all votes having equal impact on election results ranked low on the priority list for democracy, "probably reflecting long-standing institutions of electoral exclusion and wide socioeconomic inequalities that have been matters of concern for many years," the study said.

Rated as least essential is that politicians campaign without criticism of their opponents' loyalty or patriotism.

The group surveyed 9,820 professors at 511 U.S. institutions by email Feb. 13-19, and received 1,571 responses. The survey sample was compiled from a list of U.S. institutions represented in the online program of the 2016 meeting of the American Political Science Association conference.

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