

Understanding what democracy means proves key to supporting it, study finds

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Winston Churchill famously said, "Democracy is the worst form of government—except for all those other forms that have been tried."

However, that presumes people agree on what the term actually means.

"Not everybody understands what [democracy](#) is, and understanding of democracy is tied to support for it," said Valery Dzutsati, visiting assistant professor of political science at the University of Kansas.

"Moreover, misunderstanding is also tied to not supporting it."

His new article, titled "Under the Veil of Democracy: What Do People Mean When They Say They Support Democracy?" and published in *Perspectives on Politics*, uses global cross-national survey data that demonstrates individual variation in the understanding of democracy is linked to democratic support across countries and regime contexts. The results suggest one must consider divergent conceptualizations when analyzing opinions of democracy.

Co-written by Hannah Chapman of the University of Oklahoma, Margaret Hanson of Arizona State University and Paul DeBell of Fort Lewis College, the article notes there is no such thing as a perfect democracy.

"There cannot be because we as humans are not perfect," Dzutsati said.

So what country is closest to the textbook definition of this system of government?

"That's a controversial question because specialists also have very different views on what is a democracy, how to define it and how to rank it," he said.

Dzutsati points out, for example, how some of the most celebrated democracies (the U.S. included) often end up with a two-party system. And, theoretically, these should be less effective since they feature limited choices.

"But at the same time, we do see multiparty systems in Europe which are so multiparty that they become dysfunctional," he said.

"Coalitions are hard to build because there are so many parties and each of them holds a small share of votes, so it is easy to block decisions. It is perhaps a 'better' democracy in a way, but it's not functional. You want

to live in a functional society because roads need to be built and things need to be kept in order."

The researchers based their findings on the last three waves of the World Values Survey, including the most recent one from 2017–2022. The analyzed data encompasses 85 countries. According to their conclusions, an individual's knowledge of democracy is fairly low on average.

"A significant proportion of respondents conflate things like army rule or religious cleric rule with manifestations of democracy," Dzutsati said.

"What it means for us as educators is we need better education so that people understand what a democratic political system is. And, by the way, the U.S. is not an exception. A lot of Americans who say they support democracy also say they support a strong man's rule—a strong man who is a man of action who does things no matter what, disregarding the legislature and elections if needed."

Then should America still be deemed a democracy?

"With a fair amount of confidence, I would say yes. Why? Because voting still matters," he said. "You can disagree with a variety of things, but you cannot disagree with the fact that this country can change very significantly through voting."

Dzutsati was raised in North Ossetia (in the southwest of European Russia). As part of the former Soviet Union, his country's official system of government described itself as "democratic centralism." Interestingly, he said the Soviet Union had voting but didn't actually have elections.

"That was because for every electable position there was only one candidate," he said.

"You did go to voting booths, and it was made like a public holiday held usually on Sundays. There would be events and food. People would come and cast their ballot, which didn't mean anything. It was simply a confirmation of the existing order."

Contemporary Russia is in a very similar situation absent the Communist [ideology](#), he said. Many Russians do not see a better alternative to Vladimir Putin's regime, which vigorously promotes the belief of Putin's indispensability along with the idea that no true democracy exists anywhere. Incidentally, support for democracy is among the lowest in Russia according to World Values Survey data.

Dzutsati earned his doctorate in political science from Arizona State University. He is an expert in politics and conflict of Eurasia and Eastern Europe, and his past work includes "[Secessionist conflict as diversion from inequality: The missing link between grievance and repression](#)" and "[Russia's Syria War: A Strategic Trap?](#)" (co-written with Emil Souleimanov).

He said the last decade has been quite insightful when researching the ebbs and flows of democracies, particularly in the U.S.

"One big error we had a few years ago is we had this kind of linear view of development. The world and this country are becoming more and more democratic. Everything is fine. You don't have to do anything. Sit and relax. That's not the case," Dzutsati said. "I hope we have learned this lesson."

More information: Hannah S. Chapman et al, Under the Veil of Democracy: What Do People Mean When They Say They Support Democracy?, *Perspectives on Politics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1017/S1537592722004157](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592722004157)

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