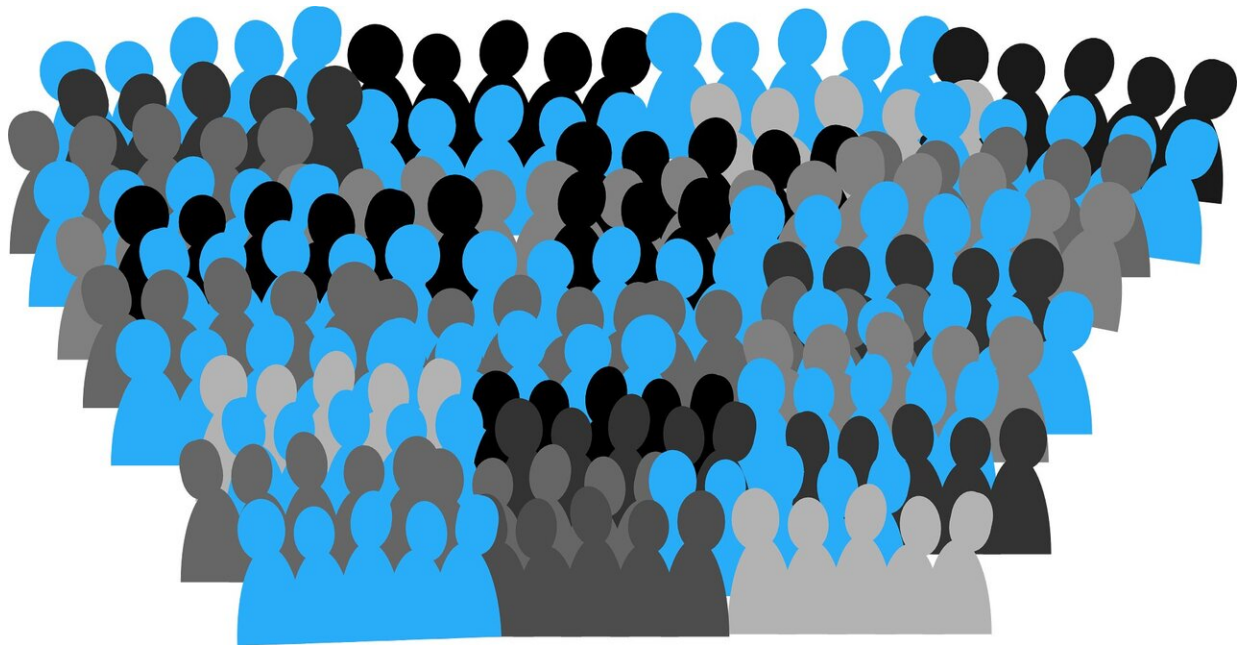


# Q&A: Democracy means different things to different people

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Texas A&M University Professor Dr. Kirby Goidel reflects on the "march of democracy" as America's 247th birthday nears. A professor of political science in the Bush School of Government and Public Service, Goidel studies democratic governance.

## **How has the meaning of democracy in America**

## **evolved since July 4, 1776?**

The American Republic was crafted with an inherent and intractable tension. For most of our history, "we the people" have believed in the democratic principles, i.e., that government is based on the consent of the governed, but we have rarely agreed on what that means. Who counts as "we the people?"

What does consent of the governed mean? Is the role of the public to simply choose between competing parties? Or should they play an active role in the policy-making process? I explored these questions in a recent book with my colleagues Dr. Nick Davis (University of Alabama) and Dr. Keith Gaddie (Texas Christian University). We concluded that much of our political history reflects contested understandings of what democracy means. In other words, even if we largely agree in the abstract that democracy is "good," we do not agree on what democracy means when it comes to how democracy is practiced. Nor do we agree on whether specific decisions or processes are "democratic."

Over time, the United States has unquestionably become more democratic. In textbooks, this is portrayed as the "march of democracy," that the progress toward a more free and democratic society is the inevitable result of the seeds planted by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. This is the story we like to tell ourselves. It is not the story that emerges from a careful read of political history.

Democratic progress has often been slow. It has come in fits and starts. Each wave of democratic progress has been met with resistance and often with a backlash against the expansion of democratic rights to marginalized and excluded populations. In short, nothing about the "march of democracy" has been easy, nothing has been gained that didn't occur without a fight, and we have, on occasion, taken two steps forward and one step back.

## **Can you put in perspective the current political climate as compared to the last 247 years? Is democracy naturally full of strife?**

My colleagues and I argue that democracies exist in a perpetual state of crisis. By this we mean democracy is never guaranteed, it is always at risk of failing, and the meaning of democracy is always contested. Just a couple of examples (and our history is replete with examples):

- During the Great Depression (and before World War II), advisors suggested FDR might have to temporarily assume dictatorial powers to get through the [economic crisis](#) and save the republic.
- In 1973, scholars wrote "The Crisis of Democracy" arguing that democracy was failing because democratic governance couldn't live up to the expectations it has created. This, of course, follows the turmoil of the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War.

The most recent crisis of democracy, the one we are living through now, is unique in terms of its specific contours (e.g., political polarization). The fact that we are living through a democratic crisis is not.

## **You argue there's such a thing as 'too much democracy.' What do you mean by that?**

Democracy can come in a variety of shapes and forms. We have largely defined American democracy in terms of public input into the political process. As a result, we have a system that is remarkably responsive to public demands but is remarkably immune from collective political accountability. As a result, each [election cycle](#), 90+% of incumbents are reelected, even as public trust in government and public approval of

Congress declines. We like our government less and less but continue to send the same people back to Washington. How is this possible?

Elected members of Congress do a good job representing the views of their constituents. They do a bad job in terms policy-making. Or perhaps better stated, they do a bad job solving the problems we care about. We have created a system where members of Congress are rewarded for being on the right side of an issue (relative to their constituency) even if they don't do much other than voice support or opposition for their side.

As a result, too many members of Congress seek publicity but they don't do the hard work of crafting legislation, negotiating compromises, and working to solve problems. Even if they did this work, they would likely be criticized for working toward solution (because this requires compromise) rather than simply articulating a position statement. There is a political cost for being part of a solution.

Congress as an institution fails, even as individual members are succeeding by being reelected over and over again. Redistricting helps here. It is easier to represent a safe Democratic or safe Republican district, and most members now fear a primary challenge from their base more than they fear a general election challenge from the opposition party.

Now, what if we decided to build a system where [democracy](#) was defined as collective accountability rather than individual responsiveness? What if we gave politicians room to compromise, make deals, and solve problems? Where we said responsibly addressing problems was more important than representing constituency viewpoints?

**How do you think American independence has been**

## **narrated by us? Have we told this story in honest ways?**

We need myths, they help guide us and shape who are and what we become. Our founding is based largely on a myth of divinely inspired Founding Fathers crafting a government of, by and for the people.

What we fail to recognize is that they were human beings, self-interested and politically motivated. Recognizing this makes this period even more fascinating. They created an amazing (if flawed) political system, but more importantly, one based on a set of aspirational ideals—individual political and economic freedom, self-determination, the consent of the governed.

At its best, our myths have guided us to be better, to recognize how (and where) our reality fails to live up to our ideals and to work to correct that reality. At their worst, our myths have made us resistant to change. They have entrenched the powerful while marginalizing and alienating the powerless. This is often captured by a "if you don't love it, leave it" mentality. How about we love it for what it is but commit to making it better? Or work to assure that the gap between our aspirations and ideals shrinks rather than grows?

## **Is there anything you'd like to add?**

I would just reiterate an early comment. Democracies exist in a perpetual state of crisis. Their future is never guaranteed. Yet, if they are fragile, they are also resilient. I recognize that is a contradiction, but it goes to the core of how democracies change over time. They are challenged, they progress, they fail, they push forward and fall behind. Our commitment, I think, has to be to the ideals, and not a specific shape or form.

And one more thing that I routinely tell my classes. There are two sins in American politics. First, believing we have made no progress, and nothing is any better than it was 20 or 40 years ago. We do tend toward nostalgia, a belief that somehow things used to be better. If we look carefully though, we can see the progress we have made.

The second is believing that we have done enough, or that no future changes or reforms need to be made because this is as good as it gets. Democracy is dynamic, it will transform and change. The question is, "What will it transform into?" As a government based on the "consent of the governed," we get to decide that.

Provided by Texas A&M University

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