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Sustainable Democracy

Guardians of Democracy?

Americans' Public Expectations of the Press & Democracy in Election 2024

Summary: Researchers at the University of South Florida's Center for Sustainable Democracy, in partnership with researchers at Rutgers University, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Kansas, conducted a nationwide YouGov panel survey to better understand attitudes about American democracy, the 2024 election campaign, and democratic engagement with politics. Wave 1 of the survey was fielded from September 13-25, 2024 (n = 1,450 U.S. adults). Wave 2 of the survey re-contacted respondents in Wave 1 from October 16-29, 2024 (n = 1,037 U.S. adults). Topline results are reported below with a margin of error of +/- 3%.

The U.S. public believes it is important for political news stories to focus on how democracy functions. Large majorities reported that it is either somewhat or extremely important for political news stories to focus on balances of power in government, U.S. election processes, government protections of rights, fairness of legal procedures, and quality of information released (see Figure 1).

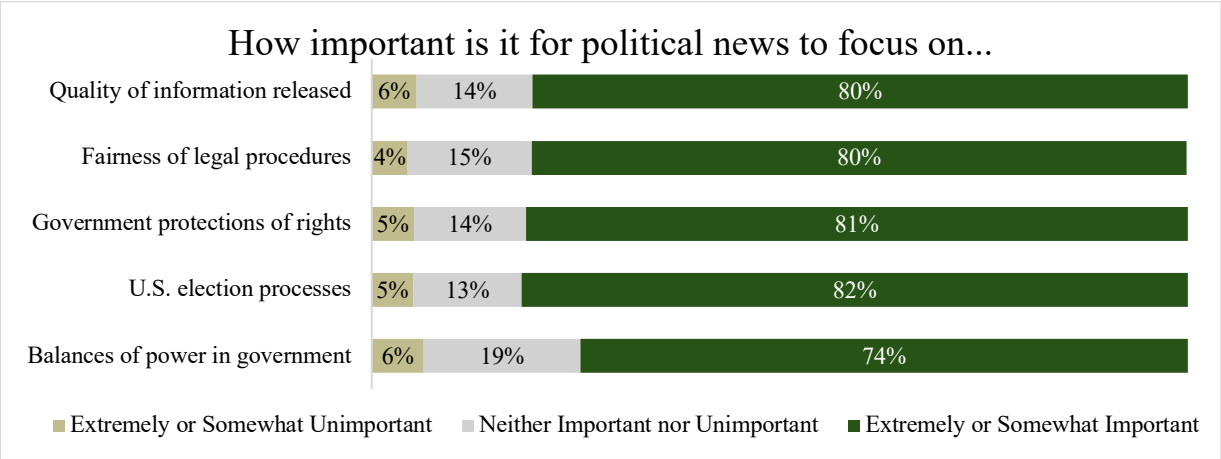


Figure 1. Belief in importance of news stories covering processes of democracy, September 2024.[i]

There were partisan differences in the belief that it is important to cover these news topics. In some cases, belief that democratic processes were important to cover *declined* slightly between September and October 2024.

- Democrats were more likely than Independents to believe that U.S. election processes, government protections of rights, and quality of information are important to cover.[ii]
- Belief that the quality of information released by political officials was important to cover decreased slightly between September and October 2024.[iii]
- Between September and October 2024, Republicans decreased their belief that fairness of legal procedures was important to cover.[iv]

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Some Americans believe that *calling* a politician a threat to democracy is uncivil. Respondents provided an example of a politician behaving uncivilly, and the answers give us insight into Americans' beliefs about democracy. Examples of impoliteness, name-calling, and negative campaign attacks came to mind for many people (39% in September; 45% in October).[v] Specific examples indicate that some people believe it is uncivil to call President Trump or another politician a threat to democracy:

- "Hillary Clinton calling former President Trump a 'threat to democracy' during a TV interview within hours of the second assassination attempt on Trump's life!"
- "Rhetoric by the democrats describing Donald Trump as a 'threat to democracy.'"
- "Accusing their opponents of being a threat to democracy"

Other Americans believe that *being* a threat to democracy is uncivil. Examples of politicians violating democratic norms came to mind for many people as well (49% in September; 47% in October),[vi] including abusing power, spreading misinformation, discriminating against specific groups, threatening to put opposing politicians in jail, etc. Some people explicitly mentioned democracy in their examples, for instance:

- "Threatening democracy"
- "Spreading lies that actively hurt democracy"
- "Threat to democracy; Wants to be a dictator Will overthrow the government"

Journalists should not assume that Democrats and Republicans approach democracy in the same way. The differences between incivility examples appear to be partisan (see Figure 2).[vii] In September 2024, for instance, Republicans were more likely to provide an incivility example related to impoliteness (including calling a politician a threat to democracy) compared to Democrats. Democrats were more likely to provide an incivility example related to violations of democracy norms (including a politician being a threat to democracy) compared to Republicans.

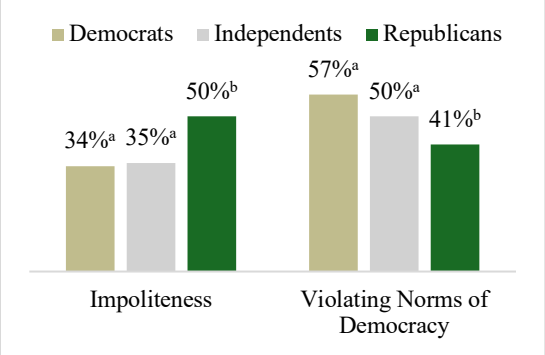


Figure 2. Types of incivility provided by Democrats, Republicans, and Independents in September 2024. Different lowercase letters indicate significant differences at $p < .05$.

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Analysis Information

[i] Note that only respondents who completed both wave 1 and wave 2 were included in this figure, and the percentages were computed using wave 2 weights that were post-stratified on 2020 presidential vote choice, political interest, and ideology as well as a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-categories), race (4-categories), and education (4-categories).

[ii] We ran a series of mixed ANOVA using survey wave as the repeated measure, partisanship (Democrat, Independent, Republican) as a between groups measure, and each democratic process as an outcome in separate ANOVA tests. The tests were weighted using the wave 2 weights described in (i) above. Compared to Independents, Democrats believed it was significantly more important to cover U.S. election processes (Democrats: $M = 4.33$, $SE = 0.05$; Independents: $M = 4.13$, $SE = 0.05$; Republicans: $M = 4.33$, $SE = 0.05$; $F(16.41,1200.93) = 6.14$, $p < .01$), government protections of rights (Democrats: $M = 4.38$, $SE = 0.05$; Independents: $M = 4.15$, $SE = 0.05$; Republicans: $M = 4.24$, $SE = 0.05$; $F(16.96,1224.49) = 6.22$, $p < .01$), and quality of information (Democrats: $M = 4.32$, $SE = 0.05$; Independents: $M = 4.14$, $SE = 0.05$; Republicans: $M = 4.28$, $SE = 0.05$; $F(10.95,1345.65) = 3.65$, $p < .05$). When using the wave 2 weights, there was also a significant difference between Republicans and Independents in their belief that it was important to cover U.S. election processes, but this difference was not significant when the data were not weighted.

[iii] The mixed ANOVA tests described in (ii) above also indicated that belief that quality of information released was important to cover decreased slightly, but significantly [$F(1,898) = 8.63$, $p < .01$], between September ($M = 4.31$, $SE = 0.03$) and October 2024 ($M = 4.19$, $SE = 0.04$).

[iv] The mixed ANOVA tests described in (ii) above also indicated that, between September ($M = 4.38$, $SE = 0.06$) and October 2024 ($M = 4.14$, $SE = 0.07$), Republicans significantly [$F(2,898) = 3.46$, $p < .05$] decreased their belief that fairness of legal procedures was important to cover.

[v] All respondents who completed wave 1 and wave 2 are included in these percentages because we are not testing differences between the waves. The percentages were computed using either wave 1 (for September) or wave 2 (for October) weights that were post-stratified on 2020 presidential vote choice, political interest, and ideology as well as a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-categories), race (4-categories), and education (4-categories).

[vi] All respondents who completed wave 1 and wave 2 are included in these percentages because we are not testing differences between the waves. The percentages were computed using either wave 1 (for September) or wave 2 (for October) weights that were post-stratified on 2020 presidential vote choice, political interest, and ideology as well as a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-categories), race (4-categories), and education (4-categories).

[vii] Note that all respondents who completed wave 1 were included in this figure, and the percentages were computed using wave 1 weights that were post-stratified on 2020 presidential vote choice, political interest, and ideology as well as a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-categories), race (4-categories), and education (4-categories).

YouGov Survey Information

Wave 1 (September 13-25, 2024): YouGov interviewed 1577 nationally-representative U.S. adults who were then matched down to a sample of 1450 to produce the final sample. The respondents were matched to a representative sampling frame on gender, age, race, education and three-point party identification based upon the American Community Survey (ACS) public use microdata file, public voter file records, the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration supplements, the 2020 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll, and the 2020 CES surveys, including demographics and 2020 presidential vote. Benchmarks for three-point party identification and political interest were estimated from the 2020 Congressional Election Study (CES2020). The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, region, and home ownership. Post-stratification of weights occurred based on 2020 presidential vote choice, political interest, gender, age, race, and education.

Wave 2 (October 16-29, 2024): YouGov re-contacted 1037 nationally-representative U.S. adults from Wave 1 to produce the final Wave 2 dataset. Sampling frame matching and benchmarks were similar to Wave 1. The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, region, 2020 presidential vote choice, and home ownership. Post-stratification of weights was similar to Wave 1.

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Survey Sample Comparison

	State of Democracy Survey Sample Wave 1 (*n* = 1450)	State of Democracy Survey Sample Wave 2 (*n* = 1037)
Gender		
Female	50.4 %	50.7%
Male	48.1 %	48.3%
Other/Non-Binary	1.5 %	1.0%
Age		
18-24	10.9 %	10.5%
25-34	17.9 %	18.5%
35-44	17.4 %	17.2%
45-54	13.7 %	13.8%
55-64	18.9 %	18.8%
65+	21.1 %	21.2%
Race		
Black/African American	12.5%	12.5%
White/Caucasian	65.8%	65.4%
Hispanic	10.9%	11.4%
Asian	3.6%	3.1%
Native American	1.5%	2.0%
Two or more	3.7%	3.7%
Other	2.0%	1.9%
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	16.1%	16.0%
Non-Hispanic	83.9%	84.0%
Education		
Less than HS	5.9%	9.0%
HS or Equivalent	32.4%	28.9%
Some College/AD	27.8%	29.6%
Four-Year College or Higher	33.8%	32.5%
Region		
Northeast	18.2%	18.0%
Midwest	19.6%	19.6%
South	38.2%	38.5%
West	23.9%	23.9%
Party Affiliation		
Democrat	31.8 %	31.4%
Independent/Other	40.6 %	40.5%
Republican	27.6 %	28.1%



About our Research Team

Ashley Muddiman (PhD, University of Texas at Austin) is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas. She is a faculty affiliate with the Center for Democratic Governance (University of Kansas) and the Center for Media Engagement (University of Texas). Muddiman's research broadly explores political media effects. More specifically, she studies political incivility, including citizens' perceptions of incivility as well as the effects of political incivility in online settings. For more information, please visit **her faculty page**.

Joshua M. Scacco (PhD, University of Texas at Austin) is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. Scacco also is the founding and current Director of the Center for Sustainable Democracy in the College of Arts & Sciences at USF. He specializes in political communication, media content and effects, and quantitative research methods. For more information, please visit **his faculty page**.

Jianing Li (PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison) is an assistant professor in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University. Li's research uses computational social science to advance theory building in how people communicate about and believe in truth and falsehoods. For more information, please visit **her faculty page**.

Adam Saffer (PhD, University of Oklahoma) is an associate professor of strategic communication in the Hubbard School of Journalism & Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota. As a communication network researcher, Saffer takes a sociological approach to questions about how individuals, groups, and organizations use and are influenced by communication networks. For more information, please visit **his faculty page**.









The Center for Sustainable Democracy (CSD) is a nonpartisan, multi-disciplinary research center focusing on challenges posed to and opportunities for democracy and civil society in the 21st century. Sustainable democracy means governance, information, and societal processes that empower people to make informed decisions and engage in public life. CSD emphasizes research and engagement regarding how political and civic leaders, journalists, and everyday individuals sustain democratic life in Florida, the United States, and globally. Founded in 2023, the Center for Sustainable Democracy is housed in the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of South Florida.