

# The State of Democracy in America: Public Attitudes on Who We Are and How We Move Forward

**Joshua M. Scacco '08**

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Dr. Joshua Scacco is Associate Professor in the Department of Communication and Founding Director of the Center for Sustainable Democracy at the University of South Florida.

I want to use this as an opportunity to present a couple of data points of things that the Center for Sustainable Democracy is looking at in terms of the research that we've been doing on the state of democracy in the United States. I also want to use this more as a kind of a question and thinking session.

There's a lot going on in the world right now. There's a lot going on in the United States right now. I know from working at a public higher education institution in Florida that it's harrowing right now. I also know that in our private higher education institutions; it's also harrowing in different ways and in similar ways. I want to talk briefly about a couple of contextual factors that are swimming around in my brain and keeping me up at night in terms of thinking about American life and would love your thoughts on those- the dynamics in the 2024 election campaign in terms of some of the data that we collected- then thinking about the road ahead.

A couple of contextual factors that are important for at least understanding where we're at right now. One is, and I'm sure many of you are no stranger to the fact that public trust, the sorts of expectations that we have of our governing institutions in the United States- not just our government, but also when we think about religious institutions and civic organizations- are at historic lows. And they have been that way for some time. What we were talking about at one point was that these were new trends. These declines in public trust that started in the sixties and the seventies and have cascaded from then, these have now become calcified issues, so low levels of trust in government, in media, in news, and technology. You look across most areas, except for the military, and you do see relatively low levels of public trust. This is important to understand in terms of a moment like Elon Musk coming in and talking about taking a chainsaw to the federal government and understanding the sorts of layers upon distrust that that is built upon. That, I think, is important.

The second is [economic life]- and I was thinking about this because I was here in 2018 giving a talk with the G. Graybill Diehm Lecture and one of the key components that I talked about in that particular lecture, which I think is still relevant, is this question of economic life. What does that look like

and how is that tied to social circumstances in the United States and the world? The questions related to economic dislocation- what does that look like? What does that mean? We are now multiple decades removed from monumental economic decisions that were made that globalized U.S. life. At the same time, it created the source of upheavals that continue to course through many of our communities. Understanding this particular moment [the third], we have Donald Trump potentially announcing some monumental tariff decisions tomorrow [the fourth], in terms of what that's going to look like, is important for understanding where we're at.

Again, one of the other vital things is- and this is what I constantly talk to my grad students about and other faculty with this particular work- if you've been following these many of these developments, you begin to realize it's a lot later than we think, in terms of understanding the confluence of what we're talking about here. We were talking about many of these things when I was a student here in the early 2000s, and we're now twenty years removed from that. These are no longer emergent trends. These are the bedrock ideals of American life, and that's troubling. I also think recognizing and dealing with that is better than saying, "Oh, these are emergent," they're not emergent anymore. They're here. They have been here.

Then you connect that with these questions about social connectedness and cohesion, which is one of the big things that, oftentimes in my work, I go back to: How are communities connected, but also how are people connected, particularly post-pandemic? What does that look like? By understanding that some of what we saw in 2024 is, in a lot of ways, particularly among younger people and subsets of younger individuals, particularly young men, are reactions to what happened to them during COVID. The questions of whether or not these are cohort effects or whether or not these are something else, I think we are in the midst of trying to understand what that looks like. That's something that's ticking in the back of my mind. Honestly, that third one is probably the one that will keep me up to about 4:00 AM thinking about it, because one of the key indicators in understanding support for Donald Trump is individuals who report higher levels of loneliness and less connection. You see greater levels of support for Donald Trump, and you also see, in a lot of ways, greater levels of support for things like authoritarianism and other forms of government other than democracy.

Finally, we have continued to rapidly advance technology. It seems like every time we're having a conversation, we're talking about rapidly advancing technology in some kind of way. Now we're back and we're talking about AI [artificial intelligence]. We know this because a lot of our conversations, at least on the teaching side, are now "How do we deal with AI?" But on the administration side, in a lot of ways, our colleges and universities are unfortunately on the other side of, "Well, how can we make money off of it," if we're being honest.

I say all that because that's also layered with questions about the continued influence of social and digital media platforms, and even more importantly, who owns these spaces. We see a progression of multi-billionaires putting stakes in large communication platforms, then ending up on the road to the White House, but not getting elected, and being a very prominent kind of person or set of people behind the scenes. All you have to do is look at Donald Trump's inauguration and see that in front of even the members of Congress were tech billionaires who control very large sectors and have influence over very large sectors of technological life in the United States. All these things exist in the back of my mind in terms of what we're thinking about here.

In September and October of last year, our center went into the field with a panel survey in September, and then we recontacted the same individuals in October. I'll just start by saying we were not interested in the horse race. A focus by many, including academics, media people, or news people, on the horse race game dynamics of our politics have helped get us to this point in terms of avoiding the really difficult questions that we should be asking. We did include a horse race question on the survey, but we didn't publicly release it because we're using it as a factor to help explain some other processes we monitor.

We had a representative sample of Americans nationwide, and we asked specific questions about the state of American democracy and social and digital media related to democracy. We had a top-line question of how satisfied people are with democracy in the United States. The big headline, which, to people who look at other data, so the World Values Survey or other sorts of national and international trends on democracy, is that a majority of Americans when asked about the state of democracy are dissatisfied with it. They were dissatisfied coming into the 2024 campaign.

This is important because it emerges in exit polling that democracy was a key component of why people were voting. There were many individuals who saw the exit polls and thought it benefited one particular candidate who was emphasizing democracy in their campaign. If that's the case, you were not listening to Republicans and how they were talking about what they deemed to be threats to democracy.

The key component is that coming into the November election, Republicans and Independents were the main partisan groups, or nonpartisan groups, who were dissatisfied with the state of American democracy. Only Democrats reported overall satisfaction with American democracy coming into the election, which is a very interesting sort of telling point. When I looked at the data, and I saw particularly the numbers among Independents, I was like, "That doesn't seem good." I expected, in some ways, Republicans to report things like this because of the last several years, the messaging that they had received in the lead up to and after the 2020 election. But these numbers among Independents were also a little bit disturbing. So, the majority of American adults were dissatisfied with American democracy.

Table 1. Satisfaction with how democracy is working in the United States

	<b>Very Satisfied Sept.</b>	<b>Very Satisfied Oct.</b>	<b>Somewhat Satisfied Sept.</b>	<b>Somewhat Satisfied Oct.</b>	<b>Not Too Satisfied Sept.</b>	<b>Not Too Satisfied Oct.</b>	<b>Not Satisfied Sept.</b>	<b>Not Satisfied Oct.</b>
<i>U.S. Adults</i>	9.3%	10.9%	35.4%	37.5%	33.0%	33.1%	22.3%	18.4%

We also asked a standard question that's asked on other international surveys about support for types of government, and we asked specifically about support for a strong leader form of government. The description was essentially support for a strong leader who can rule without interference from Congress or the judiciary. What we saw was that roughly a third of individuals surveyed support a strong leader form of government.

Table 2. Support [good or bad] for a strong leader form of government

	<b>Very Good Sept.</b>	<b>Very Good Oct.</b>	<b>Somewhat Good Sept.</b>	<b>Somewhat Good Oct.</b>	<b>Somewhat Bad Sept.</b>	<b>Somewhat Bad Oct.</b>	<b>Very Bad Sept.</b>	<b>Very Bad Oct.</b>
<i>U.S. Adults</i>	9.4%	8.2%	25.7%	22.6%	24.0%	27.6%	40.9%	41.5%

In September, we saw amongst Democrats and among Republicans, actually very strong support. Specifically, what we did in these particular instances was we gave partisans the opportunity to support or not a strong leader from their own political party. We asked them, if this person is from your own camp, what do you think? What we find is that we saw a spike amongst Democrats for a Democratic strong leader and a spike amongst Republicans for a Republican strong leader. Then, by October, these had fallen back into the thirties. This is one of those interesting campaign moments. It occurs right after the first official debate meeting between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. This comes after some comments about General Milley and the surfacing of JD Vance’s past comments about Trump being “America's Hitler.” I think what happened was Republicans kind of got spooked by publicly reporting that they were supportive of these types of leaders. I think that's partly the reason we might have seen some of this fallback here. Independents were fairly consistent between September and October. They're like, “No, we don't want a strong leader from either political party,” which I thought was interesting.

We also asked about social media's effect on the United States, and this did not move that much between September and October. A majority said that social media is more of a bad thing for democracy in the United States. When we broke it down, people believe they are more informed due to social media. Although these perceptions are good, misinformation also is a consistent challenge. Respondents also feel more divided in their political opinions. They also, in general, think that people are less accepting of those who are different because of social media. They're willing to say that social media has made people

willing to embrace violence as a solution to political problems and less civil. So, not great in terms of perceptions of very prominent communication infrastructures in American life.

*Table 3. Attitudes about social media and democracy*

<i>U.S. Adults</i>	<b>More Sept.</b>	<b>More Oct.</b>	<b>Less Sept.</b>	<b>Less Oct.</b>	<b>Not Much Impact Sept.</b>	<b>Not Much Impact Oct.</b>
Informed about current events.	60.3%	56.2%	24.7%	26.0%	15.1%	17.8%
Divided in their political opinions.	72.4%	73.2%	8.8%	8.9%	18.8%	17.9%
Accepting of people from different backgrounds and experiences.	30.6%	29.1%	39.0%	42.0%	30.4%	28.9%
Willing to embrace violence as a solution to political problems.	53.6%	52.4%	18.5%	17.3%	27.9%	30.3%
Civil in the way they talk about politics.	13.2%	13.6%	69.7%	68.5%	17.1%	17.9%

I have colleagues right now who are in the field, trying to get at the source of why people like Elon Musk. What is it? Because there is a very broad-based appeal for, in some ways, and for some supporters, Elon Musk. Understanding why that's the case is important for understanding why he has been granted such access at this particular moment. I think some of this has to do with the ways in which he has a hand in many different sectors of American life and thus the attention afforded to him.

We think about citizenship and civics, with students we oftentimes emphasize the tangible things that we all know and have done: volunteerism, civic organizations, protesting, petitioning, all of these things like getting involved in government, getting involved in your communities and those types of things.

One of the things I've also started talking to my students about, is their attention, where is it? What I've realized is students are actually cognizant about where they put their attentional resources. They just don't want to focus it on a lot of the things that we're putting in front of them. If we begin to think about ways in which we talk about things like citizenship and civics, the ways in which we're going to talk about it in a room amongst each other as academics are probably going to be a bit different than how we should be talking with our students who are sitting in our classes. So, one of the things that I've been talking to my students about is how they can think about their attention and how they give it or not to political leaders, as one way in which they can have some sort of power in understanding what they can do as an everyday citizen. Donald Trump is a preeminent example, but only one example of the ways in which attentional resources can be directed. So, understanding Donald Trump's power is, in a lot of ways, understanding our attention to him.

The second is thinking about how our educational institutions can build community. That is very important right now. The solidarity not only within our institutions, but also across institutions, what does that look like? Universities and colleges, beyond the associations that they're involved in, are not very good at building that broader-based community for what is potentially going to be coming for higher education in the United States. The lessons that I pulled, and I think others have pulled, from places like Hungary, Brazil, Venezuela, Italy, and other places where we have seen significant erosion in democratic base support are going to be important for thinking about where higher education goes. It's tough because higher education institutions often try to act as autonomous, competitive agents with one another, and that becomes a big challenge.

The final note I'll make is we're navigating the regime structure we're currently in. Based on how we could assess some metrics, we're in that state that's kind of democracy, but also the emergent competitive authoritarian regime structure where everything seems like democracy on the surface. The mechanisms of democracy for governance are not being used. Checks and balances, for instance, are not being used. Federal capture of the bureaucracy, the courts, those types of things. We need to consider these dynamics, alongside the public opinion, in considering paths forward for democratic governance.