

Affective Partisan Polarization and Support for Democratic Norms in Utah

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Summary of Findings

- Utahns show a high level of *affective partisan polarization*: negative feelings towards supporters of the opposing party and positive feelings towards co-partisans. This level of polarization is comparable to that found at the national-level.
- This polarization of partisan affect is accompanied by the kinds of characteristics that Utahns attribute to supporters of the opposite party. Utah partisans are much less likely to see supporters of the opposite party as *open-minded, honest, and intelligent*, and much more likely to see them as *mean, selfish, and hypocritical*. This, too, is comparable to what we find at the national-level.
- Evidence that Utahns support basic democratic norms is mixed. While there appears to be majority support for the principles of the *freedom of speech*, even for those with sharply different views from their own, and the *right of peaceful protest*, support for other principles appears to be tenuous. Support for the rule of law and the necessity of elected leaders to work within the normal limits of rules and procedures appears strong in the abstract, but less so in specific applications.
- Support for republican, or even more direct forms of, democracy is strong, but non-trivial minorities of those surveyed in Utah appear to be open to some form of dictatorship, whether civilian or military.



Analysis

How much do Republicans and Democrats in Utah dislike each other, and what impact does that have on citizens' support for democratic norms? Those were the motivating questions behind the 2022 UVU Civic Thought and Leadership Initiative Survey. In short, we found that there is a good deal of animosity between the supporters of the two major parties in Utah, and that it has a modest effect on their support for such principles as the rule of law, the tolerance of opposing political views, and the value of political compromise.

Affective partisan polarization refers to the tendency to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively. This is distinct from ideological polarization, which refers to the sharpness of the differences in political views across the parties. Instead, this focuses more on the emotional, or affective, aspect of partisanship: the extent to which we respect those on the opposite side of the political aisle, and acknowledge their humanity. Kingzette et al (2021) demonstrated that, at the national-level, the level of this polarization among citizens negatively influences their support for basic democratic principles. Guided by this research, we sought to determine the extent to which such polarization is exhibited by Utahns, and if it has a similar effect on support for democratic norms.

Affective Partisan Polarization in Utah

There is some anecdotal evidence for the argument that we might not find the same level of shared partisan animosity in Utah compared to the rest of the country. In discussions of Utah politics, reference is often made to "the Utah Way," where Republicans and Democrats in the state government often work together to pass legislation. Furthermore, Utah garnered national attention in 2020 when both major party candidates for Governor, Spencer Cox and Chris Peterson, appeared together in a commercial eschewing partisan conflict in the midst of an election campaign against each other. This was held up as a refreshing model of bipartisanship that other politicians should emulate. The question, of course, was whether or not they would.

To what extent does this public display of mutual respect and amity among political elites translate down to the electorate? Decades of research on political attitude formation holds that political elites model attitudes and behaviors to citizens, who then tend to shape their own attitudes and behaviors to match (Zaller, 1992; Druckman et al 2013, Banda and Cluverius, 2018). However, state public officials are not the only actors that model such behavior. The discourse among national political actors can, and does, have a much more substantial effect on mass political attitudes even within the context of state or local politics (Hopkins, 2018). Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that national political elites have become



increasingly polarized over the past several decades (Poole and Rosenthal, 1984; McCarty et al, 2007; McCarty, 2018).

Given this evidence, it is reasonable to be skeptical of the claims that Utah is different and somehow immune from these influences. Even so, the insurgent presidential candidacy of Evan McMullin in 2016 and his ongoing presence in the Utah political scene as a reaction to political divisiveness, suggests that it is a question well-worth investigating.

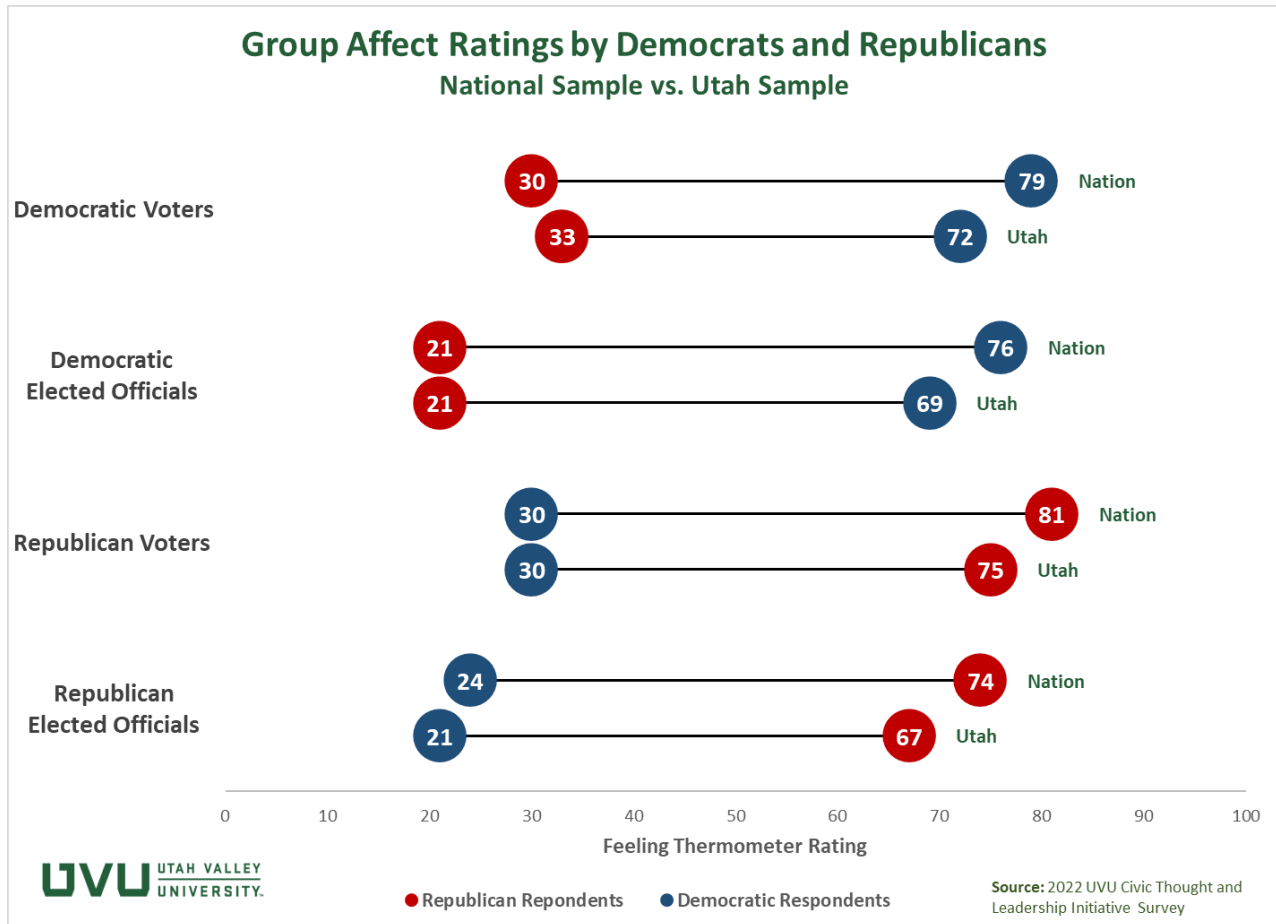
To that end, we administered parallel surveys to both a sample of 1000 Utahns and 5000 Americans to compare their levels of affective partisan polarization. We measured affective polarization using a commonly used instrument known as a “feeling thermometer.” Respondents are prompted to rate how coldly or warmly they feel towards specific groups on a scale from 0 to 100, where a rating of 0 indicates extreme negative views of the stimulus group and 100 indicates extreme positive views. We asked respondents to rate their feelings toward voters of each of the two major political parties, and of the elected officials from each of those parties as well.

We can then compare the views of those affiliated with one party towards those of the opposite party to see how polarized their views are of each other. The results of those comparisons for both the Utah sample and national sample are shown in Figure 1 below.

Each point represents the average feeling thermometer rating for each group listed on the left, as scored by Democrats (blue dots) and Republicans (red dots) in each sample. Not surprisingly, the data show that in both samples Democratic respondents rate fellow Democrats more highly than they do Republicans, and the opposite is true for Republican respondents. Of note is the rather wide gap between each pairing, which is clear evidence of the partisan affective polarization discussed above.

In addition, and of particular relevance to the question at hand, is that the gap in partisan affect in the Utah sample is similar to that in the national sample. The divide between Republicans and Democrats in their ratings is slightly smaller in the Utah sample, suggesting that there is modest evidence of less polarization compared to that of the nation as a whole. Even so, the difference is not stark enough to conclude that Utah politics are substantially unique in this regard. The affective polarization that has been documented at the national level is clearly evident in Utah as well.

Figure 1



Affective Polarization and Partisan Animosity

These negative feelings then manifest themselves more concretely when respondents are prompted to evaluate how well various adjectives describe supporters of the parties. The results shown in Figure 2 clearly indicate that Utah partisans are much less likely to believe that positive attributes describe supporters of the opposite party than they are to believe that negative attributes do.

There is some modest evidence of some graciousness exhibited on both sides of the political divide towards the opposition on a few attributes. Republican respondents are twice as likely than Democrats are to agree that the terms “Open-minded” and “Generous” describe their



opponents, and Democrats are more than three times as likely to describe Republicans as “Patriotic” than the other way around. Even so, these are still distinct minorities in the sample.

More significant are the wide margins who believe that negative attributes describe supporters of the opposite party. Utah Democrats are more likely to describe Republican voters as “Mean” and “Selfish,” than Utah Republicans are about Democratic voters, but both sets of partisans are most likely to refer to each other as “Hypocritical.”

These results are comparable to those found in the national sample. Clearly, finding a path towards amicable political compromise is difficult under these circumstances. This is especially problematic in a governmental system that was founded on the principle of compromise and placed it at the center of its operation.

Partisan Animus and Support for the Norms of Democratic Society

Kingzette et al (2021) posited that affective partisan polarization works to erode support for basic democratic principles when those principles become politicized by political elites, who ultimately undermine them through political rhetoric and actions to advance their own partisan agendas. This is a particularly troubling development given the central role that political elites play in fostering the continued operation of the political system in a democratic society.

Decades ago, research into the role of mass opinion on the longevity of a democratic society revealed a very troubling observation: The level of support among the mass public for basic principles of democracy was on tenuous grounds. Support for key democratic norms such as tolerance of opposing political views and support for the rights of others to promote and pursue those views, and the value of the rule of law and constitutional limits on the power of elected leaders was not as pervasive as one would hope to find in order for a democratic republic to continue to operate.

If that were true, scholars asked, then how had the United States continued to exist for so long? The answer lied in the role of political elites in fostering those values themselves. The empirical evidence showed that political elites exhibited greater support for those values than the average citizen. As long as those we put into positions of authority continued to support those principles, then democratic norms would remain central to our political culture and the republic would continue to operate as such. If political elites fail to safeguard those principles, then the foundation of democratic society can potentially become unstable.

Given this, we sought to replicate Kingzette et al’s research to examine the extent to which Utahns exhibit support for essential democratic norms. In particular, we wanted to assess the

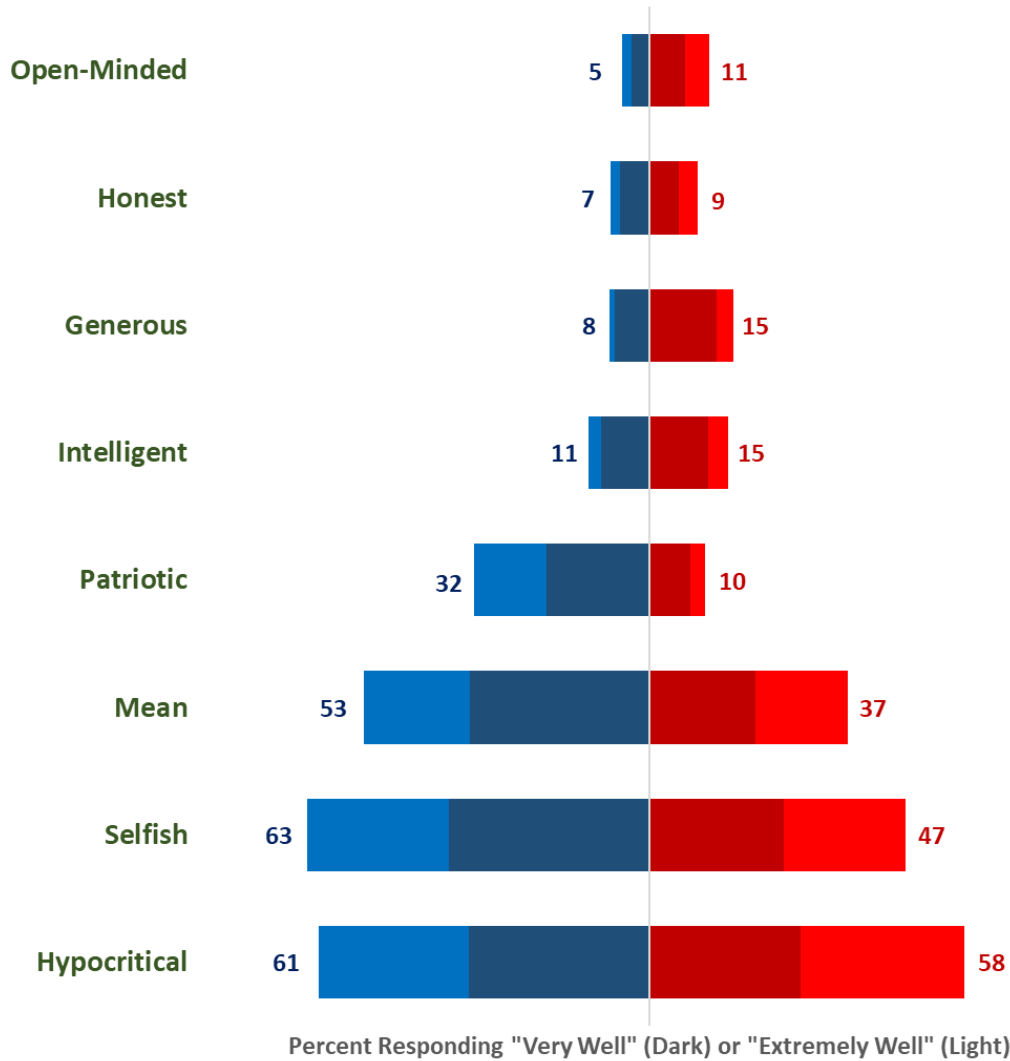
Figure 2

How Utah Partisans Describe Voters of the Opposite Party

How well does this term describe voters of the opposite party?

DEMOCRATS DESCRIBING REPUBLICANS

REPUBLICANS DESCRIBING DEMOCRATS





extent to which Utahns (as well as Americans as a whole) supported basic principles that are essential to the functioning of a democratic society. We attempted to measure support for such principles as:

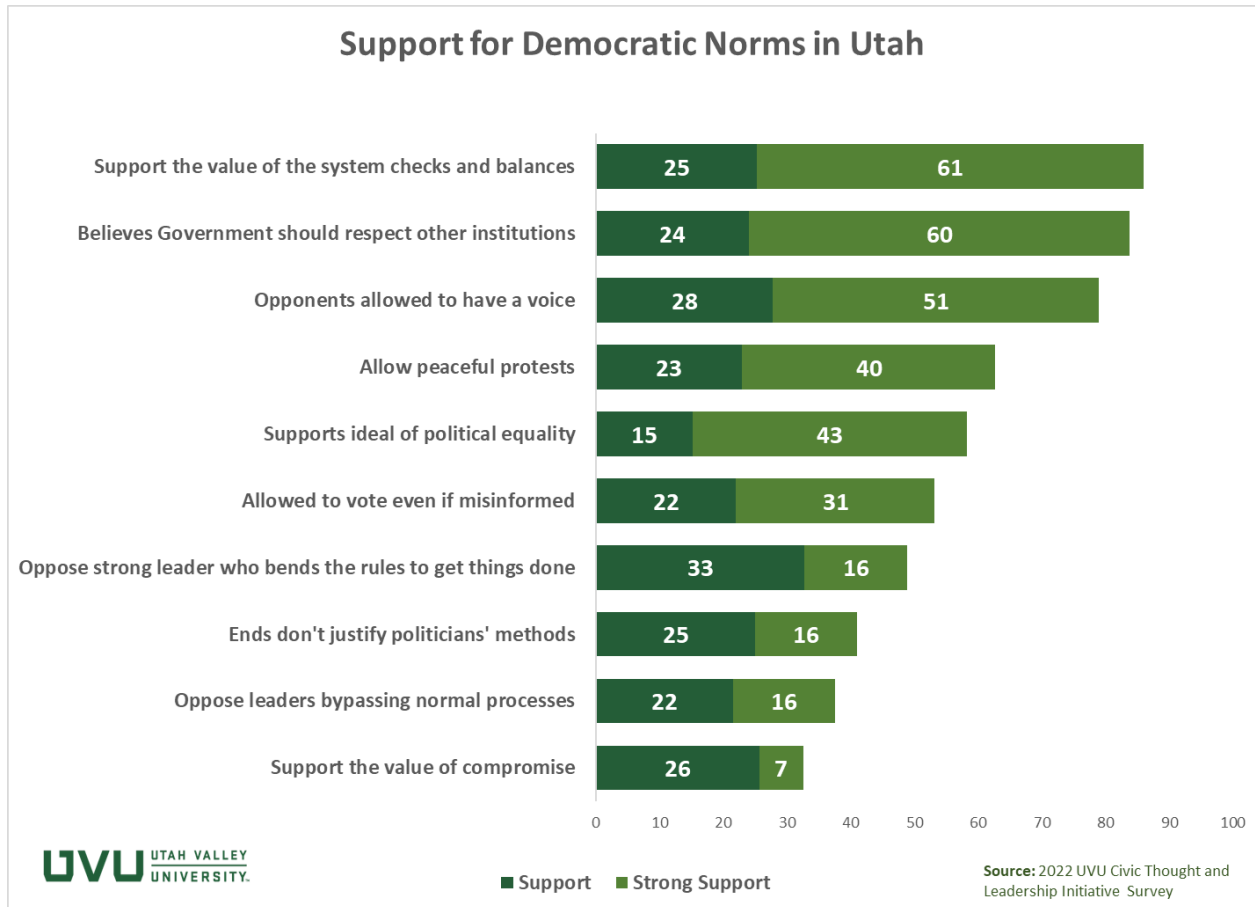
- the notion of political equality,
- support for the rights of others to hold and promote political views that are different from their own,
- the right to peaceful protest,
- the responsibility of the government to treat other institutions in society (i.e. religious communities, the news media, and business and scientific organizations) with respect,
- the rule of law and the limits on the power wielded by those in positions of authority, and
- the value of political compromise.

The results from these survey questions are summarized in Figure 3 below.

As you can see, the evidence of support for democratic norms in Utah is somewhat mixed. While there is substantial support for a number of these basic democratic principles, it drops off significantly as we proceed further down the list. A large majority of those surveyed express support for the idea of checks in balances limiting government authority, at least in the abstract.

When respondents were asked more specifically about whether an elected official should be allowed to “bend the rules” to get things done, or if they cared about a politicians methods, or if leaders bypassed normal governmental processes, support for the rule of law dropped off significantly. The conclusion, it seems, is that respondents were supportive of the idea of constitutional and legal limits on political leaders, unless those limits were preventing those leaders from doing the things they wanted them to do. This is a particularly troubling finding as it presents an opening for a leader to exploit: They can bend the rules as long as it “gets things done,” however that is defined.

Figure 3





There was substantial support for the idea that the government should treat other institutions in society with respect. This question was deliberately worded to avoid any specific partisan bias:

It is important that the government treats other institutions with respect, such as news organizations, religious communities, scientific groups, or business associations.

A sizable majority agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, but that was likely because news and scientific organizations were given equal billing with religious and business organization to provide political balance to the question. It is highly likely that omitting that balance would likely elicit responses that would be influenced by the affective polarization demonstrated earlier. So, again, while there is support for the principle in the abstract, it has likely become politicized to the point that such support would collapse under more specific circumstances.

Majorities do express support for the principles of freedom of speech, the right to peaceful protest, and the protection of the right to vote even for “those who are badly misinformed on basic facts about politics.” Even so, sizable minorities were not supportive of these principles, suggesting that they are on tenuous ground with the public and in need of shoring up.

Finally, least supported of all was the value of compromise. A sizeable majority either agreed or agreed strongly with the statement:

What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.

Given the role that compromise played in the creation of our Constitution and the premium that the Constitution’s framers placed on it in the governmental structure they created, this reinforces the observation above that Utahns’ expressed support for the principle of “checks and balances” in the abstract is precisely just that: abstract. When put into actual practice and compromise becomes essential, support for it drops off dramatically.

Although not shown in the figure above, these distributions are similar to those found in the national sample.



Support for Various Types of Political Systems

Finally, we examined the extent to which Utahs supported various types of political systems. We presented them with four possible variations in the way political authority could be exercised in a governmental structure:

- *Having the citizens directly participate in making the laws for the country* [direct democracy]
- *Having democratically elected leaders make the laws for the country* [republican, or indirect, democracy]
- *Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections* [civilian dictatorship]
- *Having the army rule the country* [military dictatorship]

(The descriptors in brackets above were not shown to respondents)

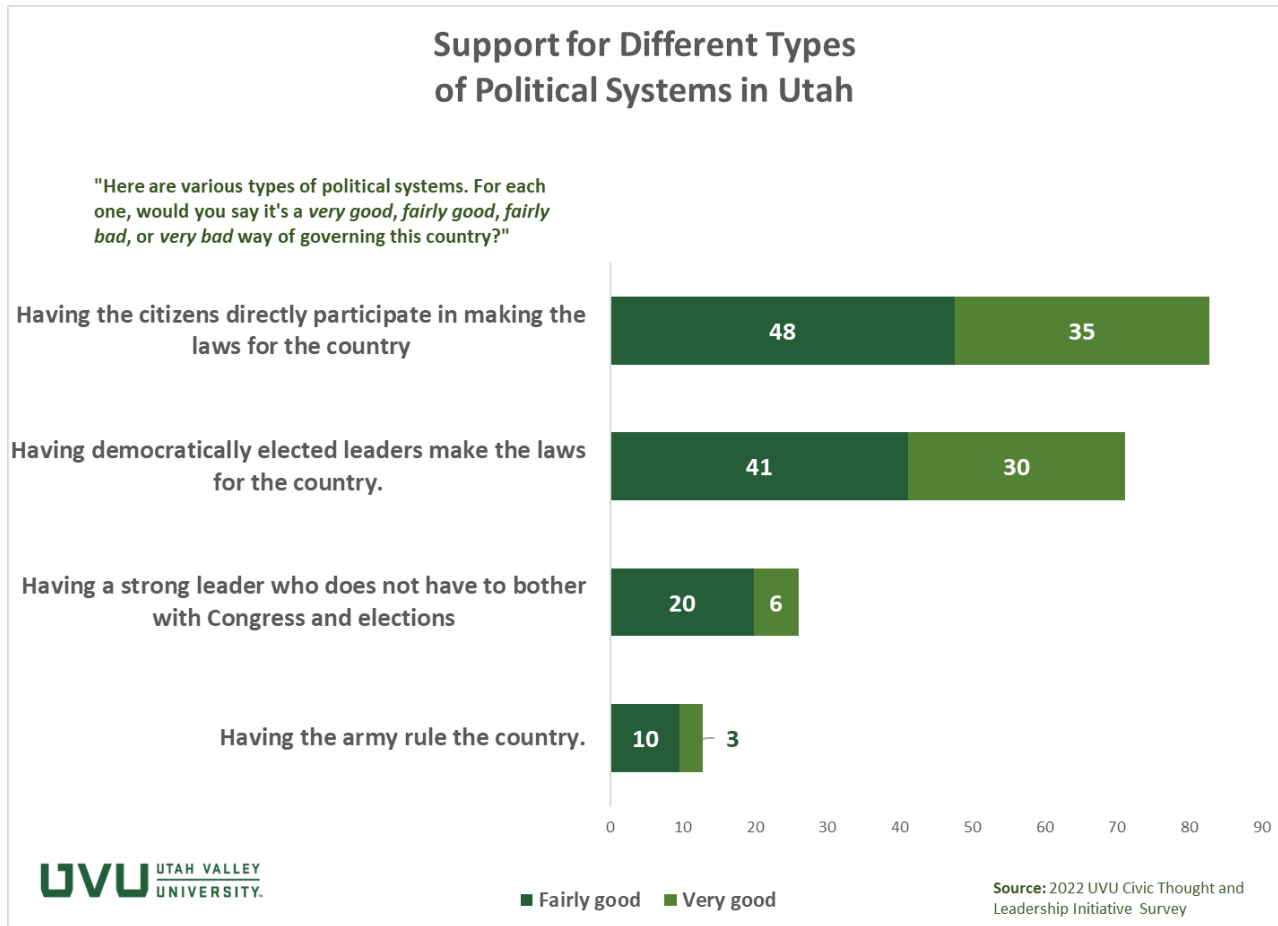
The distribution of responses to these questions are shown in Figure 4 below. Perhaps not surprisingly, substantial majorities expressed that both forms of democracy were *fairly good*, or *very good*, ideas. Respondents viewed direct democracy most favorably (83% overall), followed by republican democracy (71% overall). While substantially fewer respondents expressed support for either form of dictatorship, it is notable that there were dozens of respondents who did. Those who endorsed these ideas as either “fairly good” or “very good” ideas also tended to be those who expressed the least support for the democratic norm of the rule of law.

Conclusions

Republican forms of government rely upon the idea that their citizens are interested, informed, and involved in their operation. They also depend upon those citizens to support and advocate for the basic democratic norms that lie at the center of their operation: the rule of law, the freedoms of speech and peaceful protest, the principle of political equality, and the value of political compromise.

The results of our survey provide mixed evidence that Americans, whether they be citizens of Utah or otherwise, support these ideals. Given a climate of affective partisan polarization where these ideal have become politicized by political elites for partisan gain, that potentially places the republic on a less than firm foundation.

Figure 4



To be sure, the evidence of popular support for democratic norms has been shaky at best ever since researchers first began looking at this question in the mid-20th century. However, this era of heightened affective partisan polarization has brought the concern into sharper focus, and raised the level of concern among those who study American political attitudes and behavior.

It is unclear exactly how unstable the foundation of the American republic is, but it seems prudent to make note of the warning signs and work to counter some of the trends that seem evident in the results of this survey.

First, public officials should be mindful of the impact that their words and actions have upon the electorate. The sharper their rhetoric, and the more they politicize the basic norms of democratic societies, the more it undermines public support for those norms. More open



acknowledgement of the importance of these norms, even (and especially) when they work to their own political disadvantage, could go a long way to shoring up these principles among the citizenry.

Second, these results shed new light on the results of the Civic Thought and Leadership survey we conducted in 2021. In that survey, we showed that Utahns exhibited only a minimal level of understanding about many of the basic facts about the operation of our political system. That, coupled with the findings of the current survey, suggests that a concerted effort to promote civic understanding and engagement among the citizenry continues to be of significant importance.

The proper functioning and longevity of a republican form of government is dependent upon the informed involvement of its citizens, and that those citizens understand and support its most basic principles. That is, and should continue to be, a high priority.

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