

# **The Political Psychology of American Democracy (PPAD)**

## **Study Description**

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*Abstract:* This document provides an overview of the 2024-25 Political Psychology of American Democracy (PPAD) study, concepts and content, and information availability and analyses recommendations.

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## **I. Study Overview**

The 2024-25 PPAD survey project was led by the Goldman School of Public Policy's (GSPP) Democracy Policy Lab (DPL) at UC Berkeley. DPL investigators partnered with the Ipsos company to collect three waves of survey data—in English and Spanish—from the same respondents (i.e., “within subjects” design) in their KnowledgePanel®, the largest online panel in the United States. The target population was non-institutionalized adults (age 18+) residing in the United States. The survey resulted in 2,451 respondents who completed all three waves of data collection, 785 who completed two waves, and 332 who completed only one wave. Specific details for each wave are as follows:

- W1 October 23 – November 1, N=3,141 (61% Completion Rate). A baseline sample of the population. Median interview time = 21 minutes.
- W2 December 4 – 16, N=3,126 (82% Completion Rate). Reinterviewed those from the baseline sample (N=2,699) and interviewed a new sample (N=427) to replace attrition. Median interview time = 24 minutes.
- W3 February 6 - 19, 2025, N= 2,988 (86% Completion Rate). Reinterviewed all respondents from the prior Waves. Median interview time = 21 minutes.

## II. Conceptualization and Content

### A. CONCEPTUALIZATION

Despite the simplicity of American democracy as a concept, the practice is complex. Democracy in general is about shared public responsibility for governing; then emphasis is on service, sacrifice, and commitment to collective engagement in public life. American democracy, in the eyes, hearts, and minds, of the public and elected officials tends to connote the idea of “freedom.” Freedoms— “to” seek prosperity, and “from” tyranny—are certainly attractive desires, yet the quality of freedom as an outcome must be balanced with the quality of sacrifice as an input. Many in America today see democracy as failing, broken, inadequate, antiquated, and abstract, and beyond partisan political analysis, there is a dearth of empirical research to understand why.

Political psychology is an interdisciplinary framework for understanding political behavior within a defined political system—in our case, American democracy. Democracy policies focus explicitly on strengthening, sustaining, or weakening “we” [the people] through policies and programs (products), systems and practices (processes), and values (qualities). Descriptively, democracy policies focus on civic life and connectedness, community commitment, and inclusion through social capital. Specific examples include aspects of participation and civic representation; contents over social group identities and fair treatment, social and civil status; free speech/expression; information ethics and quality; and intra- and inter-government relations.

If “We” [the people] are to govern our democracies at the local, state, and federal levels of society, we need policies that can strengthen the collective public, and therefore we need to understand how people think about democracy, government, and one another to design the right products to intervene. Thus, the hope is that the PPAD survey project will help guide *democracy policy*.

Prior public opinion research on democracy finds that many people and communities lack a common understanding of, and skills for, democracy. They also disagree on the values or actions that make for an effective, fair, and trustworthy self-governing system. These deficits open the door for elites—elected officials and well-funded political organizations—to exploit long-standing and contemporary cleavages among social and civic communities that give the appearance that democracy as a political system is akin to a competitive marketplace of hierarchical winners and losers. The result is an American public that sees democracy through an abstract and distant partisan political lens, with increased distortion about what government does and how it functions, heightened partisan division,

and an erosion of the sense of belonging in America, fracturing “We, the People.” Without data to understand the psychological threats to democracy, policy solutions to address the problems fail.

The PPAD study is unique in several ways:

1. Large national sample (N=~3,000) of repeated interviews pre-election, post-election, and post-US presidential inauguration. This design allows for both national and sub-group analyses within and across waves of data collection.
2. The survey largely steered clear of content about the candidate “horse races” of the 2024 elections, specific candidate mentions, partisanship, and actual voting behavior, and instead focused on psychological measures of attitudes, belief systems, value orientations, justice motives, and other system and status viewpoints that research shows are consequential for civic sentiment and behaviors in a liberal democracy.
3. Seeking to capture where individuals stood with regard to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” the survey tracked—across all three waves—change and continuity in self-reported human flourishing (or “complete well-being”), hope/worry for democracy, political efficacy, institutional trust and respect for public servants, media consumption, and antagonisms toward others.
4. The survey deployed several split-sample experiments that randomized various information cues that might help to explain opinion formation and change. For example, all three waves asked about trust and respect for public workers, but did so under three randomized conditions of federal, state, and local. This allowed us to test the extent to which all levels of government are viewed the same. Other experiments randomized different groups of beneficiaries, incentives for civic participation, and contexts related to political interests.
5. All three waves of the study collected open-ended (qualitative) top-of-mind responses about democracy, government, and the American voters. These data allow researchers to gain additional understanding of the meanings and sentiments people attribute to American democratic elements.

## **B. CONTENT (\* indicates the presence of an experimental design)**

Below is a list of select measures available for analysis across waves of data collection and within a particular study. The full list of measures is available on the study [project site](#).

### *1. Measures across all three studies (W1, W2, and W3)*

Human Flourishing – 7 items (11-point Likert scale)
Future of American Democracy – 1 item (10-point Likert scale)
Respect for Public Servants – 1 item (4-point Likert scale)*
Media/News Consumption – 11 items in W1 and W2, 7 items in W3 (5-point Likert scale)
Trust in Government – 1 item (4-point Likert scale)*
Top of mind response: Democracy (define) – 1 item (Open-ended)
Top of mind response: American Voters (describe) – 1 item (Open-ended)
Top of mind response: American Government (describe) – 1 item (Open-ended)
External political efficacy (“Public officials don’t care”) – 1 item (5-point Likert scale)
Internal political efficacy (“I have all in need to participate”) – 1 item (5-point Likert scale)
Whites’ resentment toward African Americans – 4 items (5-point Likert scale)
African Americans’ resentment toward Whites – 4 items (5-point Likert scale)

## 2. Measures pre- and post-election (W1 and W2)

Intellectual interest in subjects – 11 items (4-point Likert scale)*
Support for water, cyber, and public health policy leadership by sector – 5 items (5-point Likert scale)*
Internal political efficacy – 2 items (5-point Likert scale)
Closer to Views Statement Choice: Patriotism – 1 item (forced choice)
Endorsement of the actions of strong leaders – 1 item (5-point Likert scale)*
Endorsement of political violence to win elections – 1 item (5-point Likert scale)*
Social dominance orientation – 4 items (5-point Likert scale)
Status quo threats – 4 items (5-point Likert scale)
Just-world beliefs – 2 items (5-point Likert scale)
Civic knowledge test items – 6 items (single item choice response)*
Closer to Views Statement Choice: Fairness of economic system – 1 item (forced choice)
Closer to Views Statement Choice: Government performance – 1 item (forced choice)
Closer to Views Statement Choice: Importance of jury duty – 1 item (forced choice)
Closer to Views Statement Choice: America’s success (ability to change or principles) – 1 item (forced choice)
Closer to Views Statement Choice: America’s success (free-market or democracy) – 1 item (forced choice)
Closer to Views Statement Choice: America’s success (freedoms or constraints) – 1 item (forced choice)
Democracy policy dollars allocation instrument – 10 items (multiple response with numeric input amounts)*
Political party identification – 2 items (single item response)
Accuracy identifying areas of public policy – 8-items (6-single item choice responses)
Merit beliefs – 3 items (2 items W1/W2, change in third item), (5-point Likert scale)

## 3. Measures located a single study

Voter agency and confidence (W1) – 6 items (5-point Likert scale)*
Civic agency (W1) – 4 items (4-point Likert scale)
Economic assistance to social groups (W1) – 1 item (5-point Likert scale)*

Self-reported racial prejudice toward African Americans (W1) – 1 item (11-point Likert scale)
Self-reported racial prejudice toward White people (W1) – 1 item (11-point Likert scale)
Description of African Americans’ prejudice against White people in local area (W1) – 1 item (11-point Likert scale)
Description of Whites’ prejudice against African Americans in local area (W1) – 1 item (11-point Likert scale)
Civic incivility behaviors (Frequency of occurrence) (W2) – 5 items (5-point Likert scale)
Civic incivility behaviors (Personal reaction to them) (W2) – 5 items (5-point Likert scale)
Closer to Views Statement Choice: Political efficacy of citizens (W1) – 1 item (forced choice)
Closer to Views Statement Choice: Results of hard work (W1) – 1 item (forced choice)
Closer to Views Statement Choice: Freedoms for safety (W1) – 1 item (forced choice)
Closer to Views Statement Choice: Offense over speech (W1) – 1 item (forced choice)
Positive/negative impact of diversity in society (W2) – 3 items (5-point Likert scale)*
Right-wing Authoritarianism (W2) – 5 items (5-point Likert scale)
Gender resentment (toward women) (W2) – 5 items (5-point Likert scale)
Social anomia (W2) – 5 items (5-point Likert scale)
Racial apathy (W2) – 3 items (5-point Likert scale)
Need for chaos (W2) – 5 items (5-point Likert scale)
Democracy policy dollars allocation follow up (why “self-investment”) (W2) – 1 item (multiple response)
Democracy policy dollars allocation follow up (how would spend “self-investment”) (W2) – 1 item (open-ended response)
Democrats affective partisanship toward Republicans (W2) – 9 items (5-point Likert scale)
Republicans affective partisanship toward Democrats (W2) - 9 items (5-point Likert scale)
America’s best days (“ahead”/”behind”) (W3) – 1 item (single choice)
Interest in government and politics (W3) – 1 item (4-point Likert scale)*
Features of American democracy (“importance”) (W3) – 16 items (5-point Likert scale)
Opinions about civic servants/government employees (W3) – 4 items (5-point Likert scale)*
Value of sources to understand political issues (W3) – 10 items (5-point Likert scale)
Experiences with political conversations (W3) – 4 items (5-point Likert scale)
Ability to dialogue in local community (W3) – 3 items (5-point Likert scale)
Effectiveness of democracy policies (W3) – 20 items (5-point Likert scale)
Citizen Assemblies (“good”/”bad” idea) (W3) – 1 item (5-point Likert scale)*
Prioritizing topics for Citizen Assemblies (W3) – 14 items (5-point Likert scale) and 2 items (open-ended response)
Value of sector expertise at Citizen Assemblies (W3) – 5 items (5-point Likert scale)
Ideal political conversation partner (W3) – 1 item (open-ended response) and 1 item (single choice)*
Likelihood to participate in Citizen Assembly (W3) – 1 item (5-point Likert scale)*
Psychological forbearance (W3) – 5 items (5-point Likert scale)
Presidential election system choice (W3) – 1 item (single choice)
Beliefs about the quality/fairness of election systems (W3) – 5 items (5-point Likert scale)*
Nostalgia about past decade eras (W3) – 6 items (3-point Likert scale)
Judging government/political party approaches to helping (W3) – 1 item (single choice selection)*
Self-reported political ideology (W3) – 1 item (5-point rating)
Liberals affective partisanship toward Conservatives (W3) – 9 items (5-point Likert scale)

### III. Data and Methodological Availability

All data and methods documentation were made available May 30, 2025. Questionnaires and responses (toplines), as well as cross tabs by age, gender, race-ethnicity, and party identification, are available from the project website.<sup>1</sup> The project site also includes the final report which contains the methodological details, and a separate methodological report explaining the survey weighting approach. Requests for the raw data and other specific information should be made via the DPL [contact page](#).

The data files are available in SPSS (\*.sav) and STATA (\*.dta) formats and contain variables from all Waves of data collection and pre-collected KnowledgePanel® demographic variables.

#### A. RELEVANT VARIABLE INFORMATION

1. *Study participation indicator*: The data files contain a variable (*wave*) that indicates how many of the Waves the individual participated in.

2. The data files contain Ipsos purchased vote verification data from the 2016, 2020, 2022, and 2024 presidential and midterm elections. These data are based on official voter file records. Some panel members do not have information because they may not have been registered or potential mismatches in information between the voter files and Ipsos KnowledgePanel® information.

- *VoteGeneral\_2024* - Participation (Voted, Registered, did not vote, or No match in voter file)
- *candidate2024* – Candidate supported (Kamala Harris (Democrat), Donald Trump (Republican), Another candidate)
- *VoteGeneral2022* – Participation (Voted, Registered, did not vote, or No match in voter file)
- *VoterFilePartyID* – Voter record information as of 2022.
- *VoteGeneral2020* – Participation (Voted, Registered, did not vote, or No match in voter file)
- *Candidate2020* – Candidate supported (Joe Biden (Democrat), Donald Trump (Republican), Another candidate)
- *General2018* – Participation (\* Y = voted)
- *VoteGeneral2016* - Participation (Voted, Registered, did not vote, or No match in voter file)

#### B. WEIGHTING INFORMATION

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<sup>1</sup> <https://democracypolicylab.berkeley.edu/research/political-psychology-of-american-democracy/>

Once all survey data were collected and processed, design weights were adjusted to account for any differential nonresponse that may have occurred. Depending on the specific target population for a given study, geodemographic distributions for the corresponding population are obtained from the CPS, the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), or in certain instances from the weighted KnowledgePanel profile data. For this purpose, an iterative proportional fitting (raking) procedure is used to produce the final weights. In the final step, calculated weights are examined to identify and, if necessary, trim outliers at the extreme upper and lower tails of the weight distribution. The resulting weights are then scaled to aggregate to the total sample size of all eligible respondents.

### **C. APPLYING WEIGHTS**

Users should consider the following when conducting analysis:

1. Wave 1 weight variable (*weight\_pid*) – all respondents who completing Wave 1
2. Wave 2 weight variable (*total\_wt*) – all respondents who completed Wave 2
  - Recontacts from Wave 1 only (*recontact\_wt*)
  - New supplementary respondents (*fresh\_wt*)
3. Wave 3 weight variable (*total\_wt\_wv3*) – all respondents who completed Wave 3
  - Recontacts from Wave 1 who completed Wave 3 (*Wave1\_wt*)
  - Recontacts from Wave 2 who completed Wave 3 (*Wave2\_wt*)
4. PPAD panel weight variable (*total\_wt*) – all respondents who completed Wave 1, Wave 2, and Wave 3.