Fundamental Principles of Democracy: Bases of Agreement and Disagreement

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FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY: BASES OF AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT

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THE IDEA THAT CONSENSUS on fundamental principles is essential to democracy is a recurrent proposition in political theory. Perhaps, because of its general acceptance, the proposition has never been formulated in very precise terms. When authoritative sources state, for example, that "a successful democracy requires the existence of a large measure of consensus in society," exactly what is meant? We assume that the term "successful democracy," although far from precise, carries a widely shared meaning among political scientists. But we are not told in this typical assertion on what *issues* or *problems* consensus must exist. Presumably they are the basic issues about how political power should be won. Nor are we told what degree of agreement democracy requires. Since the word "consensus" is used to refer to "general agreement or concord," however, a "large measure of consensus" presumably falls somewhere close to 100 per cent.[1] For the purpose of examining the proposition as it is generally formulated, then, we interpret it as asserting: a necessary condition for the existence of a democratic government is widespread agreement (approaching 100 per cent) among the adult members of society on at least the basic questions

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[1] The consensus of Quaker meetings seems to mean unanimity; although no formal vote is recorded, discussion continues until a position emerges on which no dissent is expressed. Similarly, the literature on the family refers to "family consensus" in a way that suggests unanimity; in a family of three or four people, even one dissenter would make it impossible to speak of consensus. At a different extreme, some students of collective behavior employ a functional definition of consensus, taking it to mean that amount of agreement in a group which is necessary for the group to act. Political scientists clearly do not have such limited agreement in mind when they speak of consensus as necessary to democracy. Majorities as large as three-fourths are required by the Constitution (in ratifying amendments), but such a large majority is no more thought of as consensus than a majority of 50 per cent plus one. Our purpose here is not to develop a general definition of consensus. We interpret the vague usage of the term to suggest agreement approaching unanimity. And, since our study actually found agreement as great as 98 per cent on some questions, we regard any degree of agreement that falls significantly below this figure to be less than consensus.

about how political power is won. Specifically, we propose to submit this proposition to empirical examination in an effort to give it more precise meaning and to discover bases of agreement and/or disagreement on fundamental principles.

A recent symposium by three leading political theorists illustrates both the widespread assumption that consensus is necessary and the lack of precision with which the concept of consensus is discussed. In considering the cultural prerequisites of democracy, they all assume the necessity of agreement on basic values, differing only as to the underlying sources of "the attitudes we regard as cultural prerequisites."[2] Ernest S. Griffith supplies an initial list of "the necessary attitudes to sustain democratic institutions," but he is not clear on whether an actual consensus is necessary: ". . . I believe that they must be sufficiently widespread to be accepted as *norms* of desirable conduct, so that deviations therefrom are subject to questioning and usually social disapproval."[3]

John Plamenatz emphasizes individualism as "the sentiment which must be widespread and strong if democracy is to endure," and adds that individualism "has a less general, a less abstract side to it" than the vague "right of every man to order his life as he pleases provided he admits the same right in others." Here the requisite attitudes must be *strong* as well as *widespread,* but when Plamenatz shifts to the specific side he refers to "the faith of the *true* democrat," a somewhat less inclusive reference.[4]

J. Roland Pennock says, "We are in agreement that certain attitudes are essential to democracy," and his initial quantitative requirements are similar to the "widespread" and "strong" criteria: "Unless *the bulk of the society* is committed to a high valuation of these ideals [liberty and equality] it can hardly be expected that institutions predicated upon them will work successfully or long endure."[5] But when he turns to the idea of consensus as such, he withdraws all precision from the phrase "the bulk of the society": "Of course democracy, like other forms of government but

²Ernest S. Griffith, John Plamenatz and J. Roland Pennock, "Cultural Prerequisites to a Successfully Functioning Democracy: A Symposium," *The American Political Science Review,* L (March, 1956), 101.

³*Ibid.,* pp. 103-104. Italics are his.

⁴*Ibid.,* p. 118. Italics are added.

⁵*Ibid.,* pp. 129-131. Italics are added.

to a greater extent, must rest upon a measure of consensus . . . .
But can we say with any precision what must be the nature or ex-
tent of this consensus, what matters are so fundamental that they
must be the subject of general agreement? I doubt it."[6] Here con-
sensus appears necessary as a matter "of course," but we cannot
say on what matters it must exist (Pennock cites two opposing
views—the necessity of agreement on the substance of policy versus
the necessity of agreement on procedures for determining policy);
nor need consensus have a great "extent," which presumably means
that it can vary from the "great bulk" to even greater portions of
society.[7]

Other theorists take similar positions. William Ebenstein, for
example, submits that "the *common agreement on fundamentals* is
a . . . condition indispensable to . . . political democracy."[8] Bernard
R. Berelson asserts, "For political democracy to survive . . . a basic
consensus must bind together the contending parties."[9] The same
assumption is implicit in Harry V. Jaffa's more specific formula-
tion of the content of consensus: "To be dedicated to this proposi-
tion [that 'all men are created equal'], whether by the preservation
of equal rights already achieved, or by the preservation of the hope
of an equality yet to be achieved, was the 'value' which was the *ab-
solutely necessary condition* of the democratic process."[10]

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 132.
[7]If the term consensus has any meaning, it is in a great extent of agree-
ment; Pennock's reference to the varying "extent" of consensus must ac-
cordingly mean variations from large to even larger majorities.
[8]*Today's Isms* (Englewood Cliffs, 1954), p. 99. Italics are his.
[9]Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee, *Voting:
A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Election* (Chicago, 1954),
p. 313. Although not a political theorist, Berelson was speaking here on the
"theoretical" aspects of "Democratic Practice and Democratic Theory."
[10]"'Value Consensus' in Democracy: The Issue in the Lincoln-Douglas
Debates," *The American Political Science Review*, LII (September, 1958), 753.
Italics are added. Among the other theorists who have offered similar conclu-
sions is Norman L. Stamps: "Democracy is a delicate form of government
which rests upon conditions which are rather precarious . . . . It is impossible
to overestimate the extent to which the success of parliamentary government is
dependent upon a considerable measure of agreement on fundamentals." *Why
Democracies Fail: A Critical Evaluation of the Causes of Modern Dictator-
ship* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1957), pp. 41-42. Walter Lippmann, in explaining
"the decline of the West," cites "the disappearance of the public philosophy—
and of a consensus on the first and last things. . . ." *Essays in the Public
Philosophy* (Boston, 1955), p. 100. Joseph A. Schumpeter submits: ". . . demo-
cratic government will work to full advantage only if all the interests that
matter are practically unanimous not only in their allegiance to the country
but also in their allegiance to the structural principles of the existing society."
Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (3rd ed., New York, 1950), p. 296.

All of these theorists thus assume the necessity of consensus on some principles but without giving the term any precise meaning.[11] In specifying the principles on which agreement must exist, some differences appear. Although, as Pennock notes, some have gone so far as to argue the need for agreement on the substance of policy, the general position is that consensus is required only on the procedures for winning political power. At the broadest level Ebenstein says that "the most important agreement . . . is the common desire to operate a democratic system,"[12] and Pennock begins his list with "a widespread desire to be self-governing."[13] In addition to this highly general commitment, most theorists speak of consensus on the general values of liberty, equality, individualism, compromise, and acceptance of procedures necessary to majority rule and minority rights. For most of these general principles, the existence (and therefore perhaps the necessity) of consensus is supported by "common sense" observation, by logic, and by opinion survey results. Consensus certainly seems to exist among the American people on the desirability of operating "a democratic system" and on such abstract principles as the idea that "all men are created equal."[14]

But for some of the principles on which agreement is said (without empirical support) to be necessary, the certainty of consensus cannot so easily be taken for granted. Ernest S. Griffith, in maintaining that the essential attitudes of democracy stem from the Christian and Hebrew religions, submits: "Moreover, it would appear that it is these faiths, and especially the Christian faith, that perhaps alone can *cloak such attitudes with the character of 'absolutes'*—a character which is not only *desirable,* but perhaps even *necessary* to democratic survival."[15] Rather than taking absolutist

[11]In Pennock's case, the lack of precision is deliberate, reflecting a well-defined position that the necessary amount of consensus on fundamentals varies according to the strength of two other prerequisites of democracy—"willingness to compromise" and "respect for rules and set procedures." *Op. cit.,* p. 132.

[12]*Op. cit.,* p. 99.

[13]*Op. cit.,* p. 129.

[14]For findings of overwhelming endorsement of the general idea of democracy, see Herbert H. Hyman and Paul B. Sheatsley, "The Current Status of American Public Opinion," in Daniel Katz *et al.* (eds.), *Public Opinion and Propaganda* (New York, 1954), pp. 33-48, reprinted from the *National Council for Social Studies Yearbook,* 1950, Vol. XXI, pp. 11-34.

[15]*Op. cit.,* p. 103. Italics are added.

attitudes as desirable or necessary for democracy, Ebenstein as-
serts that an opposite consensus is necessary: "The dogmatic,
totalitarian viewpoint holds that there is only one Truth. The demo-
cratic viewpoint holds that different men perceive different aspects
of truth . . . and that there will be at least two sides to any
major question."[16] At least one of these positions must be in-
correct. Does democracy in fact require rejection or acceptance of
the "one Truth" idea? In the survey reported in this paper, neither
position appears correct: both Midwestern and Southern Americans
were found to be closer to a complete absence of consensus than to
common agreement in either accepting or rejecting the "one Truth"
idea.[17]

Not only do political theorists speak of consensus on abstract
principles where none exists, but they also suggest the need for con-
sensus on more specific principles without empirical support. Grif-
fith, for example, insists that the individualistic "view of the nature
of individual personality leads straight to true equality of oppor-
tunity and treatment as well as to liberty."[18] And this "true equal-
ity" must include dedication not only to the old inalienable rights
such as freedom of speech, but also to "the right of each one to be
treated with dignity as befits a free person—without regard to sex
or creed or race or class."[19] As we shall see, the findings below
do not support the assumption of general agreement on "true equal-
ity" even in such spheres as freedom of speech. And the same is
true of the specific proposition that Pennock uses to illustrate the
values on which "the bulk of the society" must be agreed—"The
proposition that each vote should count for one and none for more
than one is doubtless sufficiently implied by the word 'equality'."[20]
"True believers" in democracy may be able to make an unimpeach-
able case for this proposition, but it is not accepted by the bulk of
the society.

[16]*Op. cit.*, p. 101.

[17]This item is not included in the results below because we report only
on those propositions that relate directly to the question of how political
power is gained. The recognition of "different aspects of truth" logically un-
derlies the ideas of majority rule and minority rights, but it is not as directly
connected with them as the propositions on which we report.

[18]*Op. cit.*, p. 105.

[19]*Ibid.*

[20]*Op. cit.*, 131.

The discovery that consensus on democratic principles is restricted to a few general and vague formulations might come as a surprise to a person whose only acquaintance with democracy was through the literature of political theory; it will hardly surprise those who have lived in a democracy. Every village cynic knows that the local church-goer who sings the creed with greatest fervor often abandons the same ideas when they are put in less lyrical form. Political scientists are certainly not so naive as to expect much greater consistency in the secular sphere. The theorists who argue the necessity of consensus on such matters as the existence or absence of multi-faceted truth, true equality in the right of free speech, and dedication to an equal vote for every citizen are no doubt as aware of these human frailties as the village cynic.[21] But we tend to regard that which seems a *logically necessary* belief in the light of democratic processes as being *empirically necessary* to the existence of those processes. We assume, in a two-step translation, that what people *should* (logically) believe is what they *must* believe (this being a democracy), and that what they *must* believe is what they *do* believe.

In undertaking to discover what kind of consensus actually exists, we assumed that we would find the anticipated agreement on the basic principles of democracy when they were put in a highly abstract form, but that consensus would not be found on more concrete questions involving the application of these principles. We further assumed that regional and class-related variations would be found on the specific formulation of democratic principles. In pinning down these assumptions, we are no doubt demonstrating the obvious—but such a demonstration appears necessary if the obvious is to be incorporated into the logic of political theory. With empirical support for these two assumptions, we can put the proposition about consensus in more precise form and test the following hypothesis: *consensus in a meaningful sense (at both the abstract and specific levels) exists among some segment(s) of the population (which can be called the "carriers of the creed").* Should our findings support this hypothesis, we could reformulate the proposition about democratic consensus with reference to a smaller group than the total population, whereupon it could be tested more fully, both

[21]That the awareness is so consistently forgotten attests to the need of uniting research in political theory with research in public opinion.

in the United States and in other democracies, for further refine-
ment.

PROCEDURE

Our research design was based upon the major assumption that
the United States is a democracy. Taking this point for granted,
we prepared an interviewing schedule around the presumably basic
principles of democracy and interviewed samples of voters in two
American cities to elicit their attitudes toward these principles.

While the general research design was thus quite simple, the
preparation of a questionnaire including the basic points on which
agreement is thought to be necessary was a difficult and critical
step. From the literature on consensus cited above and from general
literature on democracy, however, we conclude that the principles
regarded as most essential to democracy are majority rule and
minority rights (or freedom to dissent). At the abstract level, then,
our interviewers asked for expressions of agreement or disagreement
on the following statements:

PRINCIPLE OF DEMOCRACY ITSELF
    Democracy is the best form of government.

PRINCIPLE OF MAJORITY RULE
    Public officials should be chosen by majority vote.
    Every citizen should have an equal chance to influence government
      policy.

PRINCIPLE OF MINORITY RIGHTS
    The minority should be free to criticize majority decisions.
    People in the minority should be free to try to win majority support
      for their opinions.

From these general statements, specific embodiments of the principles of
democracy were derived.

PRINCIPLE OF MAJORITY RULE IN SPECIFIC TERMS
1. In a city referendum, only people who are well informed about the
   problem being voted on should be allowed to vote.
2. In a city referendum deciding on tax-supported undertakings, only tax-
   payers should be allowed to vote.
3. If a Negro were legally elected mayor of this city, the wnite people
   should not allow him to take office.
4. If a Communist were legally elected mayor of this city, the people
   should not allow him to take office.
5. A professional organization like the AMA (the American Medical As-
   sociation) has a right to try to increase the influence of doctors by
   getting them to vote as a bloc in elections.

PRINCIPLE OF MINORITY RIGHTS IN SPECIFIC TERMS
  6. If a person wanted to make a speech in this city against churches
     and religion, he should be allowed to speak.
  7. If a person wanted to make a speech in this city favoring govern-
     ment ownership of all the railroads and big industries, he should be
     allowed to speak.
  8. If an admitted Communist wanted to make a speech in this city
     favoring Communism, he should be allowed to speak.
  9. A Negro should not be allowed to run for mayor of this city.
  10. A Communist should not be allowed to run for mayor of this city.

These specific propositions are designed to embody the principles
of majority rule and minority rights in such a clear fashion that a
"correct" or "democratic" response can be deduced from endorse-
ment of the general principles. The democratic responses to state-
ments 1 and 2 are negative, for example, since a restriction of the
franchise to the well-informed or to tax-payers would violate the
principle that "Every citizen should have an equal chance to in-
fluence government policy."[22] The same general principle requires
an affirmative answer to the fifth statement, which applies the right
of people to "influence government policy" to the election efforts
of a specific professional group. The correct responses to statements
3 and 4 are negative because denial of an office to any person
"legally elected" would violate the principle that "public officials
should be chosen by majority vote."

Of the five statements derived from the broad principle of
minority rights, 6, 7, and 8 put the right of "the minority . . . to
criticize majority decisions" and "to try to win majority support
for their opinions" in terms of specific minority spokesmen; agree-
ment is therefore the correct or democratic answer. Disagreement
is the correct response to statements 9 and 10, since denial of the
right to seek office to members of minority ethnic or ideological
groups directly violates their right "to try to win majority support
for their opinions."

Since the proposition being tested asserts the existence of con-
sensus, the interviewing sample could logically have been drawn
from any group of Americans. Because we assume regional and

[22]We are not arguing, of course, that these propositions are incorrect in
any absolute sense. Good arguments can no doubt be advanced in support
of each of the positions we label as "incorrect." Our point is simply that
they are incorrect *in the sense* of being undemocratic, *i.e.,* inconsistent with
general principles of democracy.

class differences, however, we could not rely on the most available respondents, our own college students. The registered voters of two academic communities, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Tallahassee, Florida, were selected as the sampling population, primarily because they fitted the needs of the hypothesis, and partly because of their accessibility. Although a nation-wide survey was ruled out simply on the ground of costs, these atypical communities offer certain advantages for our problem. First, they do permit at least a limited regional comparison of attitudes on democratic fundamentals. Second, they skew the sample by over-representing the more highly educated, thus permitting detailed comparison of the highly educated with the poorly educated, a comparison that could hardly be made with samples from more typical communities.

The over-representation of the highly educated also served to "stack the cards" in favor of the proposition on consensus. Since our hypothesis holds that consensus is limited, we further stacked the cards against the hypothesis by choosing the sample from registered voters rather than from all residents of the two communities. Although the necessity of consensus is stated in terms of the society as a whole, a line of regression is available in the argument that it need exist only among those who take part in politics. Hence our restriction of the sample to a population of registered voters.

In each city the sample was drawn by the system of random numbers from the official lists of registered voters. The sample represents one per cent of the registered voters from the current registration list in each of the two communities. In a few cases the addresses given were incorrect, but if the person selected could be located in the community, he was included in the sample. A few questions on a limited number of individuals were not recorded in usable form, which accounts for a slight variation in the totals in the tables presented in the paper.

FINDINGS: THE CONSENSUS PROBLEM

In the two communities from which our samples were drawn, consensus can be said to exist among the voters on the basic principles of democracy when they are put in abstract terms. The degree of agreement on these principles ranges from 94.7 to 98.0 per cent, which appears to represent consensus in a truly meaning-

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGE OF "DEMOCRATIC" RESPONSES TO BASIC PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY
AMONG SELECTED POPULATION GROUPS

	TOTAL N=244	EDUCATION† High N=137	EDUCATION† Low N=106	ANN ARBOR N=144	TALLA-HASSEE N=100	INCOME‡ High N=136	INCOME‡ Low N=99
MAJORITY RULE							
1. Only informed vote*	49.0	61.7	34.7	56.3	38.4	56.6	40.8
2. Only tax-payers vote*	21.0	22.7	18.6	20.8	21.2	20.7	21.0
3. Bar Negro from office*	80.6	89.7	68.6	88.5	66.7	83.2	77.8
4. Bar Communist from office*	46.3	56.1	34.0	46.9	45.5	48.9	43.0
5. AMA right to bloc voting**	45.0	49.6	39.2	44.8	45.5	45.5	44.4
MINORITY RIGHTS							
6. Allow anti-religious speech**	63.0	77.4	46.5	67.4	56.6	72.8	52.1
7. Allow socialist speech**	79.4	90.2	65.7	81.3	76.8	83.8	73.7
8. Allow Communist speech**	44.0	62.9	23.5	51.4	33.3	52.2	36.7
9. Bar Negro from candidacy*	75.5	86.5	60.2	85.6	58.0	78.6	71.1
10. Bar Communist from candidacy*	41.7	48.1	30.3	44.1	38.2	44.8	34.4

* For these statements, disagreement is recorded as the "democratic" response.
** For these statements, agreement is recorded as the "democratic" response.
† "High education" means more than 12 years of schooling; "low education," 12 years or less.
‡ "High income" means an annual family income of $6,000 or more; "low income," less than $6,000.

ful sense and to support the first of our preliminary assumptions. On the generalized principles, then, we need not look for "bases of disagreement"—the agreement transcends community, educational, economic, age, sex, party, and other common bases of differences in opinion.[23] We may stop with the conclusion that opinions on these abstract principles have a cultural base.

When these broad principles are translated into more specific propositions, however, consensus breaks down completely. As Table 1 indicates, agreement does not reach 90 per cent on any of the ten propositions, either from the two samples combined or from the communities considered separately. Indeed, respondents in both communities are closer to perfect discord than to perfect consensus on over half the statements. If we keep in mind that a 50-50 division represents a total absence of consensus, then degrees of agreement ranging from 25 to 75 per cent can be understood as closer to the total absence of consensus (50 per cent agreement) than to its perfect realization (100 per cent agreement). Responses from voters in both communities fall in this "discord" range on six of the statements (1, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10); voters in the Southern community approach maximum discord on two additional statements (3 and 9), both of which put democratic principles in terms of Negro participation in public office. These findings strongly support the second of our preliminary assumptions, that consensus does not exist on more concrete questions involving the application of democratic principles.

Three of the statements that evoke more discord than consensus deal with the extension of democratic principles to Communists, a highly unpopular group in the United States. But it should be noted that these statements are put in terms of generally approved behaviors (speaking and seeking public office), not conspiratorial or other reprehensible activities. And the other statements on which discord exceeds consensus refer to groups (as well as activities) that are not in opposition to the American form of government: the right of all citizens to vote, the right of a professional group to maximize its voting strength, and the right to criticize churches and religion.

The extent to which consensus breaks down on the specific

[23]See Angus Campbell and Homer C. Cooper, *Group Differences in Attitudes and Votes* (Ann Arbor, 1956).

formulation of democratic principles is even greater than suggested by our discussion of the range of discord. To this point we have ignored the content of the opinions on these principles, which would permit an overwhelming *rejection* of a democratic principle to be accepted as consensus. Specifically, responses to statement 2 were not counted as falling in the "discord" category, but the approach to consensus in this case lies in rejection of the democratic principle of the "majority vote" with an "equal chance" for "every citizen." But the proposition about consensus holds, of course, that the consensus is in favor of democratic principles. On four statements (2, 4, 5, and 10) a majority of the voters in Ann Arbor express "undemocratic" opinions; and on six statements (1, 2, 4, 5, 8, and 10) a majority of the voters in Tallahassee express "undemocratic" opinions.

However the reactions to our specific statements are approached, they run counter to the idea of extended consensus. On none of them is there the real consensus that we found on the abstract form of the principles; responses to over half of the statements are closer to perfect discord than perfect consensus; and the responses to about half of the statements express the "wrong" answers. Unlike the general statements, then, the specific propositions call for an appraisal of bases of agreement and disagreement.

FINDINGS: BASES OF AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT

The report of findings on the consensus problem has already suggested that regional subcultures are one basis of differences in opinions on democratic principles. Table 1 also shows differences along educational and income lines. Not included are other possible bases of disagreement that were found to have only a negligible effect, *e.g.*, age, sex and party.

Community, education and income all have an effect on opinions about democratic principles. More "correct" responses came from the Midwestern than from the Southern community, from those with high education than from those with less education, and from those with high income than from those with low income. The systematic nature of these differences supports the assumption that regional and class-related factors affect attitudes toward democratic principles when they are put in specific terms.

Which of these variables has the greatest effect on attitudes toward basic principles of democracy? Table 1 suggests that education is most important on two counts: (1) for every statement, the greatest difference in opinions is found in the high education-low education dichotomy; (2) for every statement, the grouping with the most "correct" or "democratic" responses is the high education category. Before education can be accepted as the independent variable in relation to democratic attitudes, however, the relationship must be examined for true independence. Since more Ann Arbor than Tallahassee respondents fall in the high education category, and since more high income than low income respondents have high education, the education variable might prove to be spurious—with the concealed community and income factors accounting for its apparent effect. Tables 2 and 3 show that when we control for community and income, differences between the high and low education respondents remain. When we control for education, on the other hand, the smaller differences reported in Table 1 by community and income tend to disappear.[24]

Since educational differences hold up consistently when other factors are "partialled out," education may be accepted as the most consequential basis of opinions on basic democratic principles.[25] Regardless of their other group identifications, people with high education accept democratic principles more than any other grouping. While the highly educated thus come closest to qualifying as the carriers of the democratic creed, the data do not support our hypothesis; consensus in a meaningful sense (on both the abstract and the specific principles) is not found even among those with high education. On only three of the ten specific statements (3, 7, and 9) does agreement among those with high education reach 90 per cent in Ann Arbor, and in Tallahassee it fails to reach 90 per cent on any of the statements. On the proposition that the vote should be restricted to tax-payers in referenda deciding on tax-supported undertakings, 75.8 per cent of the highly educated in Ann Arbor and 81.5 per cent in Tallahassee reject the democratic

[24]Those statements with particular salience for one of the regional sub-cultures (Southern anti-Negro sentiment) constitute an exception.

[25]For a discussion of this approach to controlling qualitative data, see Herbert Hyman, *Survey Design and Analysis* (Glencoe, 1955), Ch. 7.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF "DEMOCRATIC" RESPONSES TO BASIC PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY BY EDUCATION, WITH INCOME CONTROLLED

STATEMENT	HIGH − LOW EDUCATION DIFFERENCES N=134 N=101	LOW INCOME			HIGH INCOME		
		High Education N=42	Low Education N=58	Difference	High Education N=92	Low Education N=43	Difference
1	27.0	67.5	22.4	45.1	59.1	51.2	7.9
2	4.1	20.0	22.0	-2.0	23.9	14.0	9.9
3	21.1	94.4	64.4	30.0	87.8	73.2	14.6
4	22.1	55.0	35.0	20.0	56.5	32.6	23.9
5	10.4	52.5	39.0	13.5	48.4	39.5	8.9
6	30.9	67.5	41.1	26.4	81.7	53.5	28.2
7	24.5	87.5	64.4	23.1	91.4	67.4	24.0
8	39.4	59.0	22.0	37.0	64.5	25.6	38.9
9	26.3	86.1	59.6	26.5	86.7	61.0	25.7
10	17.8	41.0	39.8	1.2	51.1	31.0	20.1

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGE OF "DEMOCRATIC" RESPONSES TO BASIC PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY BY EDUCATION, WITH COMMUNITY CONTROLLED

STATEMENT	HIGH—LOW EDUCATION DIFFERENCES N=137 N=106	ANN ARBOR			TALLAHASSEE		
		High Education N=92	Low Education N=52	Difference	High Education N=45	Low Education N=54	Difference
1	27.0	63.7	42.3	21.4	57.1	26.5	30.6
2	4.1	24.2	15.4	8.8	19.5	22.0	-2.5
3	21.1	94.4	77.6	16.8	78.4	56.8	21.6
4	22.1	56.7	28.8	27.9	54.8	39.2	15.6
5	10.4	48.4	38.5	9.9	53.3	38.9	14.4
6	30.9	80.2	47.1	33.1	71.4	45.8	25.6
7	24.5	92.3	61.5	30.8	85.7	70.0	15.7
8	39.4	67.0	23.1	43.9	53.7	24.5	29.2
9	26.3	96.6	65.3	31.3	62.2	53.8	8.4
10	17.8	48.9	34.6	14.3	46.4	25.5	20.9

principle of an equal vote for every citizen. And on five statements (1, 4, 5, 8, and 10) the highly educated in both communities are closer to perfect discord than to perfect harmony. Even when the necessity of consensus is reformulated in terms of the group most in accord with democratic principles, then, consensus cannot be said to exist.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The attitudes of voters in selected Midwestern and Southern communities offer no support for the hypothesis that democracy requires a large measure of consensus among the carriers of the creed, *i.e.*, those most consistently in accord with democratic principles. As expected, general consensus was found on the idea of democracy itself and on the broad principles of majority rule and minority rights, but it disappeared when these principles were put in more specific form. Indeed, the voters in both communities were closer to complete discord than to complete consensus; they did not reach consensus on any of the ten specific statements incorporating the principles of majority rule and minority rights; and majorities expressed the "undemocratic" attitude on about half of the statements.

In trying to identify the carriers of the creed, the expected regional and class-related variations were found in attitudes toward democratic principles in specific form, with education having the most marked effect. While attitudes on democratic fundamentals were not found to vary appreciably according to age, sex or party affiliation, they did vary according to education, community, and income. The greatest difference on every statement was between the high-education group and the low-education group, and the high-education group gave the most democratic response to every question, whether compared with other educational, community or income groupings. Education, but not community or income, held up consistently as a basis of disagreement when other factors were controlled. We accordingly conclude that endorsement of democratic principles is not a function of class as such (of which income is also a criterion), but of greater acquaintance with the logical implications of the broad democratic principles. Note, for example, that the highly educated renounce in much greater degree than any other

group the restriction of the vote to the well-informed, a restriction
that would presumably affect them least of all.

Although high education was the primary basis of agreement
on democratic principles, actual consensus was not found even
among this segment of the voting population. The approach to con-
sensus is closer among the highly educated in Ann Arbor, where
greater agreement exists on the extension of democratic rights to
Negroes, but in both communities the highly educated are closer to
discord than consensus on half of the statements. On the basis of
these findings, our hypothesis appears to be invalid.

Our failure to find a more extended consensus may, of course,
be attributed to the possibility that the statements we formulated
do not incorporate the particular "fundamentals" that are actually
necessary to democracy.[26] When the approach to consensus is in
the "undemocratic" direction—as in the question about restricting
the vote to tax-payers—two possible objections to our interviewing
schedule are suggested. First, perhaps the question is not a logical
derivation from the basic principles with which we began. Second,
perhaps the respondents are not interpreting the questions in any
uniform way.

On the first point, the logical connection of the specific proposi-
tion with the general proposition is virtually self-evident. In syllogis-
tic terms, we have: major premise—every citizen should have an
equal chance to influence government policy; minor premise—non-
tax-payers are citizens; conclusion—non-tax-payers should be allowed
to vote in a city referendum deciding on tax-supported undertakings.
Since decisions on tax-supported undertakings are clearly matters
of government policy, rejection of the conclusion is inconsistent
with acceptance of the major premise. As a matter of policy, per-
haps the vote should be restricted—as it often is—under the circum-
stances indicated. We simply note that such a position is inconsistent
with the unqualified major premise.

As to the second apparent difficulty, varying interpretations of
the questions undoubtedly influenced the results. As our pre-test of
the questionnaire indicated, the wordings finally chosen conveyed
common meanings but tapped different attitudes embedded in differ-

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[26]The lack of extended consensus cannot, however, be attributed to the pos-
sibility that the responses classified as "correct" are actually "incorrect," for we
found consensus neither in acceptance nor in rejection of the statements.

ent frames of reference. In surveys, as in real political situations, citizens are confronted with the need for making decisions about questions to which they attribute varying implications. We can infer, for example, that the respondents who repudiate free speech for Communists are responding in terms of anti-Communist rather than anti-free speech sentiments, especially since they endorse the idea of free speech in general. Conversely, those who endorse free speech for Communists are presumably reflecting a more consistent dedication to free speech rather than pro-Communist sentiments. But our concern in this study is with the opinions themselves rather than with the varying functions that a given opinion may perform for different individuals.[27] The significant fact is that the opinions (and presumably the frames of reference that produce them) vary systematically from group to group, not randomly or on a meaninglessly idiosyncratic basis.

Assuming that the United States is a democracy, we cannot say without qualification that consensus on fundamental principles is a necessary condition for the existence of democracy. Nor does it appear valid to say that, although consensus need not pervade the entire voting population, it must exist at least among the highly educated, who are the carriers of the creed. Our data are not inconsistent, of course, with the qualified proposition that consensus on fundamental principles in a highly abstract form is a necessary condition for the existence of democracy. But the implication of political theory that consensus includes more specific principles is empirically invalid. Our findings accordingly suggest that the intuitive insights and logical inferences of political theorists need to be subjected more consistently to empirical validation.

Discussions of consensus tend to overlook the functional nature of apathy for the democratic system. No one is surprised to hear that what people *say* they *believe* and what they *actually do* are not necessarily the same. We usually assume that verbal positions represent a higher level—a more "democratic" stance—than non-verbal behavior. But something close to the opposite may also be true: many people express undemocratic principles in response to questioning but are too apathetic to act on their undemocratic opinions in

[27] The latter approach is, of course, a fruitful type of investigation, but it is not called for by our problem. For a functional analysis of opinions, see M. Brewster Smith, Jerome S. Bruner and Robert W. White, *Opinions and Personality* (New York, 1956).

concrete situations. And in most cases, fortunately for the democratic system, those with the most undemocratic principles are also those who are least likely to act. A sizeable number (42.0 per cent) of our Southern respondents said, for example, that "a Negro should not be allowed to run for mayor of this city," but a few months before the survey a Negro actually did conduct an active campaign for that office without any efforts being made by the "white" people to obstruct his candidacy.

In this case, the behavior was more democratic than the verbal expressions. If the leadership elements—the carriers of the creed— had encouraged undemocratic action, it might have materialized (as it did in Little Rock in the school desegregation crisis). But, in fact, people with basically undemocratic opinions either abstained from acting or acted in a perfectly democratic fashion. "The successful working of the system is not deliberately aimed at by those who work it," John Plamenatz says, "but is the result of their behaving as they do."[28] As J. Roland Pennock puts it, democracy can tolerate less conscious agreement on principles if people are willing to compromise and to follow set rules and procedures.[29] Loose talk of consensus as a self-evident requirement of democracy should have no place beside such insightful observations as these. Carl J. Friedrich appears to have been correct in asserting, eighteen years ago, that democracy depends on habitual patterns of behavior rather than on conscious agreement on democratic "principles."[30] His argument has been largely ignored because, like the position from which he dissented, it was advanced without the support of directly relevant research findings. Our results are offered as a step toward settling the question on empirical grounds.

[28]*Op. cit.*, p. 123.
[29]*Op. cit.*, p. 132.
[30]*The New Belief in the Common Man* (Boston, 1942).