How Democratic Meanings Shape Political Compromise

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Deliberative political exchange involving compromise is a cornerstone of democracy. Yet it is unclear whether individuals who possess different expectations regarding democracy approach the idea of compromise in different ways. In this paper, we construct a typology of democratic meanings and then explore how individuals belonging to these groups think about compromise. These results imply that how individuals think about democracy has an important effect on how they think about and value compromise – independent of conventional political identities.

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For the fact is that the highly interested are the most partisan and the least changeable. If everyone in the community were highly and continuously interested, the possibilities of compromise and of gradual solution of political problems might well be lessened to the point of danger.

Bernard Berelson, 1952

One of the most important assumptions of pluralist democracy is that groups will compete and negotiate over policy, and that the resulting outputs will reflect the public interest because they balance the demands of competing interests (Berelson 1952, Dahl 2006). Political compromise, which is often defined as the willingness to sacrifice on policy demands, is critical to this process (Gutmann and Thompson 2010, 2013).

Contemporary politics falls far short of this ideal.[1] In an era of divided government, policymaking has ground to a halt. Further, when pressed, even abstract commitments to compromise are softer than we might imagine. This manuscript explores an underdeveloped source of these attitudes: American's beliefs about democracy. Using latent classification models, we construct a typology of orientations toward democracy and then connect membership in the resulting groups to preferences about compromise. Our results show that these orientations predict compromise preferences independent of conventional political identities, which implies that beliefs about the functions and meaning of democracy factor into how individuals think about compromise.

Compromise, partisanship, and polarization

Polarized political parties and a political system crafted to protect the rights of political minorities make compromise nearly impossible to achieve (Mann and Ornstein 2016). At the elite level, an increase in partisan divides on congressional votes is evidence of polarization (McCarty, et al. 2013, Lewis, et al. 2018). At the individual level, many voters have sorted themselves neatly into ideologically- congruent identities (Davis 2018). The effect has been to increase   affective polarization, manifest in a strong dislike and distrust of the other side (Iyengar, et al. 2012, Lelkes 2016, Iyengar, et al. 2018), and a subsequent aversion to political compromise (MacKuen, et al. 2010, Davis 2018). Both the structural contours of American politics designed to frustrate political majorities and empower political minorities, and contemporary political influences work against meaningful compromises designed to address long-standing policy issues and problems (Abramowitz 2010, Gutmann and Thompson 2010, 2013).[2]

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[1] Arguably the ideal was never realized as it assumes fair—rather than lopsided—competition between groups. In practice, pluralism is biased in favor of the organized. Hence, E.E. Schattschneider's famous quote "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (Schattschneider 1960).

[2] For example, the partial government shutdown that began December 22, 2018 over funding for a border wall is only the most recent case-in-point.

Given this backdrop, it is perhaps surprising to learn that the American public is more supportive of compromise than ideological rigidity. In a Gallup Poll conducted in September 2017, 54 percent of Americans said it was more important for political leaders to compromise than to stick to their beliefs. Only 18 percent of Americans said sticking to their beliefs was more important.[3] Similarly, according to a McClatchy/Marist Poll conducted in December 2016, 65 percent of Americans said that it was more important for "government officials in Washington to compromise to find solutions." Twenty-eight percent said it was more important to "stand on principle even if it means gridlock."[4] While attitudes toward compromise are sensitive to question wording and context, they are mostly stable over time (holding question wording constant) and reveal general support for political compromise *as an abstract principle*.

As in the literature on political tolerance, however, abstract support for compromise does not neatly translate into the support within a specific context (Sullivan, et al. 1993). Opinions shift when respondents are asked if a given political party should compromise, if political leaders or political parties are compromising "too much," or if they support compromise on a specific issue. These differences are exacerbated by affective polarization, which renders voters skeptical of entering compromises with disliked political opponents while more generalized political distrust makes voters skeptical of any compromises that might emerge (Gutmann and Thompson 2010, Hetherington and Rudolph 2015).

The distinction between campaigning and governing also plays a role. If governing is unthinkable in the absence of compromise, campaigning requires no similar commitment. Indeed, campaigns may suffer from promises to work with the other side or for having reached across the aisle (Abramowitz 2010, Gutmann and Thompson 2013). The term RINO, for example, was used by the Tea Party against "Republicans in Name Only" who did not show sufficient commitment to core conservative principles and, subsequently, were often challenged in Republican primaries (Skocpol and Williamson 2016). Contemporary politics have notably been described as a "permanent campaign," meaning that the distinctions between governing and campaigning are increasing thin or nonexistent (Blumenthal 1982, Gutmann and Thompson 2014).

As the Tea Party example suggests, Republicans, and especially educated Republicans, may be more inclined to reject compromise both in principle and in practice (Davis 2018, Glaser and Berry 2018, Glaser, et al. 2018). First, Republicans tend think of their party as an ideological commitment rather than as an aggregation of political interests (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). Second, because their policy positions are closely monitored by right wing media outlets, they may also have more reason to fear the political backlash that could occur if a compromise is effectively portrayed as selling out conservative principles (Glaser and Berry 2018). Third, tying perceptions

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[3] The specific question wording was as follows: *Next, we have a question about the best approach for political leaders to follow in Washington. Where would you rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means it is more important for political leaders to compromise in order to get things done, and 5 means it is more important for political leaders to stick to their beliefs even if little gets done? You may use any number from 1 to 5. Conducted by Gallup Organization September 6-September 10, 2017, and based on telephone interviews with a national adult sample of 1,022.*

[4] Specific question wording: *In general, is it more important for government officials in Washington to compromise to find solutions, or stand on principle even if it means gridlock?* Conducted by Marist College Institute for Public Opinion December 1-December 9, 2016, and based on telephone interviews with a national adult sample of 1,005.

of compromise to prospect theory, Glaser and Berry (2018) find that Republicans are often defending the status quo against change and are, subsequently, more likely to perceive compromise as a loss rather than gain. For entrepreneurial politicians interested in thwarting a negotiated compromise, they argue, it may be sufficient to advance a narrative that their side is losing the negotiation and giving up too much. More generally, public opinion, especially among partisans, is generally responsive to elite cues. As a result, accepting or rejecting a specific compromise depends on how the compromise is portrayed by partisan elites and the news media (McLaughlin, et al. 2017).

Linking democratic beliefs to compromise preferences

If previous research has emphasized the link between partisan preferences and compromise, it has not explored how one's understanding of democracy influences support for political compromise. Nor has it incorporated support for compromise into measures of democracy's "essential" characteristics as gauged by the World Values Survey, the European Social Survey, or other large scale comparative surveys. The implicit assumption is that while compromise may be critical to the functioning of democratic governance, it is not "essential" to its definition which includes free and elections, protections of political rights and provisions for political equality, as well as economic equality. This raises the central question of our work: How are conceptualizations of democracy based on these existing measures related to attitudes toward political compromise?

Before we attempt to address that question, we need to address why previous work focusing on ideology or partisan affiliation is insufficient to answer this question. After all, both partisan affiliation and ideology reflect underlying assumptions about how democracy ought to function. Yet, we also know from previous literature that these orientations reflect social identity as much as (or more than) either broader philosophical orientations toward government or set of correlated issue positons (Converse 1964, Greene 1999, Iyengar, et al. 2012, Mason 2015, 2018). Or perhaps stated differently, these social identities do not neatly map to individual understandings of democracy. Many self-identified conservatives, for example, believe that it is essential that "government reduces gaps in income and wealth" or that "everyone has basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter" (Davis, et al. 2018). Similarly, much of the anger that emanated from the Tea Party was rooted not in a preference for small government and free markets but in frustration that government was doing nothing to help people like them (Skocpol and Williamson 2016).

Overall, partisan affiliation and ideology appear insufficient to the task of fully capturing individual expectations for how democracy ought to work and how these expectations might, in turn, be related to political compromise. This leaves open the question, however, of how best to capture individual understandings of democracy. For the purposes of this paper, we adopt a set of five understandings of democracy as identified through Latent Class Analysis (LCA) (Davis, et al. 2018). Their typology of democratic orientations was initially developed using the 15 characteristics of democracy presented in Table 1 and included in a module of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). It was validated using 6 of these items (presented in **_italicized bold_** in Table 1) that were included in the 2017 CCES. For reasons of comparability across years, we use the 6-item classifications in the analysis that follows (see Figure A1 in the Appendix for a comparison across class solutions). We would note that the findings for 2016 are robust. Both

the 5-class solution and the findings presented in the remainder of the paper hold when using the larger number of items.

Table 1. Essential characteristics of democracy

1. Elections are competitive with a choice of at least two political parties.
2. Government provides stability and order.
3. People of all faiths, even those considered extreme, can practice their religion freely.
4. ***Everyone is treated equally by the government***
5. People can openly say what they think and criticize the government even during a national crisis.
6. The media can report the news without government censorship.
7. Women have the same rights as men.
8. People choose their leaders in free and fair elections.
9. ***Every citizen has the right and opportunity to participate in democratic processes***
10. ***Government reduces gaps in income and wealth.***
11. ***Everyone has basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter.***
12. Government taxes the rich and subsidizes the poor.
13. ***The majority gets what it wants, even if the rights of some minorities are restricted***
14. Government policies promote economic prosperity and growth
15. ***People can say things in public that might be offensive to racial or religious groups***

Source: 2016 CCES Module. Italicized items convey instruments used in LCA.

LCA is a suitable technique for sorting persons into discrete groups. By generating a series of latent classes in which the input items are treated as conditionally independent, LCA calculates a vector of estimated class membership probabilities that correspond to each individual (McCutcheon 1987,Collins and Lanza 2010). As a result, the prevalence of the various latent classes comprises the average of respondent-specific posterior probabilities of class membership (Hagenaars and McCutcheon 2002, Muthén and Muthén 2008). Specifically, Vermunt and Magidson (2002, p. 94) describe the mathematical model as

$$f(y_i \mid \theta) = \sum_{k=1}^{K} \pi_k \prod_{j=1}^{J} f_k(y_{ij} \mid \theta_{jk})$$

where the observed data, y, is a function of a series of estimated parameters, θ, and where the probability of belonging to a latent class *k* is derived from the distribution of *J* items (Vermunt and Magidson 2002). Each unit (individual) is then assigned to the class with the highest associated posterior probability (i.e. modal assignment; Collins and Lanza, 2010).

We begin by specifying an LCA model using Penn State University's Stata plug-in (Collins and Lanza 2010). Although mixture models allow for analysis of continuous observed variables, we trichotimzed our input items so that values 1 through 4 convey that a concept is "not essential" to democracy, value 5 conveys "neither not essential or essential," and values 6 through 10 convey

"essential." We do this for two reasons. First, LCA does not deal well with sparseness in response categories, which can reduce the likelihood the model will converge. Second, substantively, this approach makes it easier to interpret the results.[5]

Because LCA is naïve to the "correct" number of classes that describe a given set of data, ascertaining the distribution of classes involves a series of tests where a k-class model is compared to a k-1 model (Muthén 2002). If a k-class model represents an improvement in fit over a k-1 model, then the researcher should expand the number of classes retained to k+1 classes and then compare a series of goodness of fit statistics to the k-class model. Although there is some debate regarding the appropriate criteria for a terminal model (Tein, et al. 2013), the LCA is considered fully saturated when the k+1 solution no longer improves model fit. Results indicate that a five-class solution is preferable. The five classes produced by this analysis are illustrated below. **Social democrats** value procedural democracy, individual rights, and substantive democracy (n=1,118). **Libertarians** value individual rights and freedoms but not economic equality (n=360). **Neoliberals** who fall between social democrats and libertarians (n=314). **Indifferent** persons see most of the characteristics of democracy as neither essential nor unessential (n=78). Those grouped in the **critical** category generally possess negative views toward the essential characteristics of democracy (n=130).

Conceptually, these understandings have the advantage of being data driven, meaning we are not imposing an elite definition of democracy on respondents; mutually exclusive, and multi-dimensional. In addition, while class membership is related to ideological and partisan self-identification, the relationships are not particularly strong, indicating that these democratic understandings are, at best, only partially captured by existing measures of ideology and partisanship.[6] In terms of hypotheses, we expect social democrats, who have most expansive understanding of democracy, will be most supportive of political compromise either as an abstraction or within a specific context. Classification that have more limited views of democracy (critical and indifferent) should be less supportive.

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[5] For example, collapsing responses into a dichotomous, essential / unessential scheme reduces important variance that allows for discrimination between classes.

[6] The strongest correlations for partisan affiliation or ideology are social democratic and libertarian classes. The correlations range for this classes from -.21 to .29.
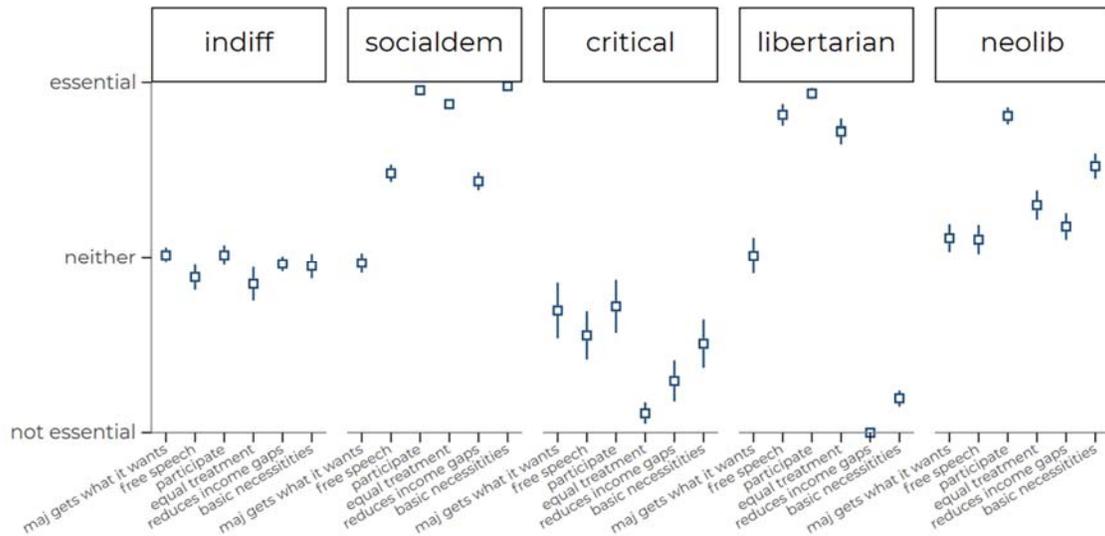
Data and method

To test these hypotheses, we use data from modules from 2016 and 2017 CCES. The data presented here make use of questions from a module asking respondents to identify the essential characteristics of democracy and attitudes toward political compromise as well as items from the CCES core gauging partisan affiliation, ideology, political interest, and demographics (age, education, race, and gender).[7] In addition, we include a control (where appropriate) for whether the data were from the 2016 or 2017 CCES.

   Support for Political Compromise: To measure attitudes toward compromise, we utilize two items asking respondents their level of agreement (or disagreement) with the following statements:

- *What people call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.*
- *Openness to other people's views and willingness to compromise are important for politics in a country like ours.*

Responses were initially coded from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5) but were recoded so that larger values represent greater support for compromise. In Figure 1, we display the percentage of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with each statement by year as well as for the pooled sample. The second statement was only included in the 2017 module. Theoretically, these statements were selected because they reflect a practical dimension to compromise (compromise as selling out) and an abstract consideration (compromise as important for the political system) and because they are part of existing scales gauging attitudes toward democracy. The first statement

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[7] Partisan affiliation is measured on a 7-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Ideology is measures on 5-point scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. We measure age in years, education on 6-point scale ranging from less than high school to a post graduate degree, race as dichotomous variables with 1 indicating white/Caucasian respondents, and sex as dichotomous variable with 1 indicating female respondents.

comes from the work on *stealth democracy* (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002) while the second statement is from *sunshine democracy* (Neblo, et al. 2010).

As Figure 1 reveals, responses to these questions reflect the ambivalence individuals often feel toward compromise. When framed as a tradeoff of principles against "selling out," more respondents than not (38 percent to 28 percent in the pooled sample) agreed that compromise is "really just selling out one's principles." We find only small statistically insignificant differences across years. When asked if "willingness to compromise is important in a country like ours," however, respondents were overwhelming supportive (80 percent agreed or strongly agreed). Responses on this particular item more fairly capture an individual's abstract commitment to compromise and its importance to a democratic political system. While these two items are correlated, the correlation is not particularly strong (r=.26). A significant proportion of respondents (29 percent) believe, for example, that compromise is both "selling out on one's principles" and "important for politics in a country like ours."

Figure 1: Attitudes Toward Compromise
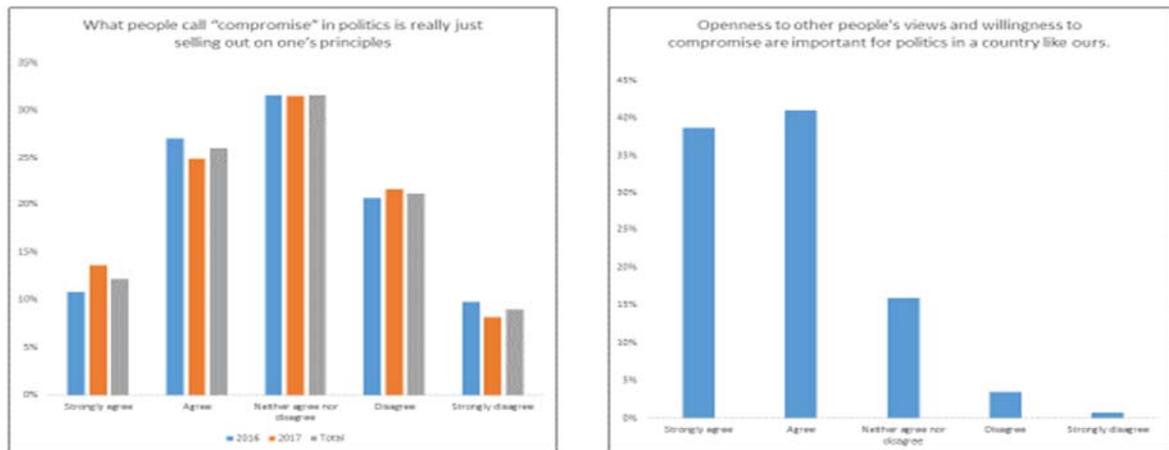
Results

Before we test our central hypothesis, we begin by examining the mean differences in support for political compromise by partisan affiliation, ideology, and our measure of democratic meanings (see Figures 2, 3, & 4).[8] As Figure 2 reveals, partisan affiliation and support for compromise are related but the relationship is not particularly strong. While Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe compromise is "selling out" and are less likely to believe compromise is important for politics in a country like ours, the differences are not particular large. Partisan differences are particularly small when we ask about compromise in the abstract.

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[8] The correlations between party and our compromise variables are -.19 and -.22. The correlations between ideology and our compromise variables are -.31 and -.27.

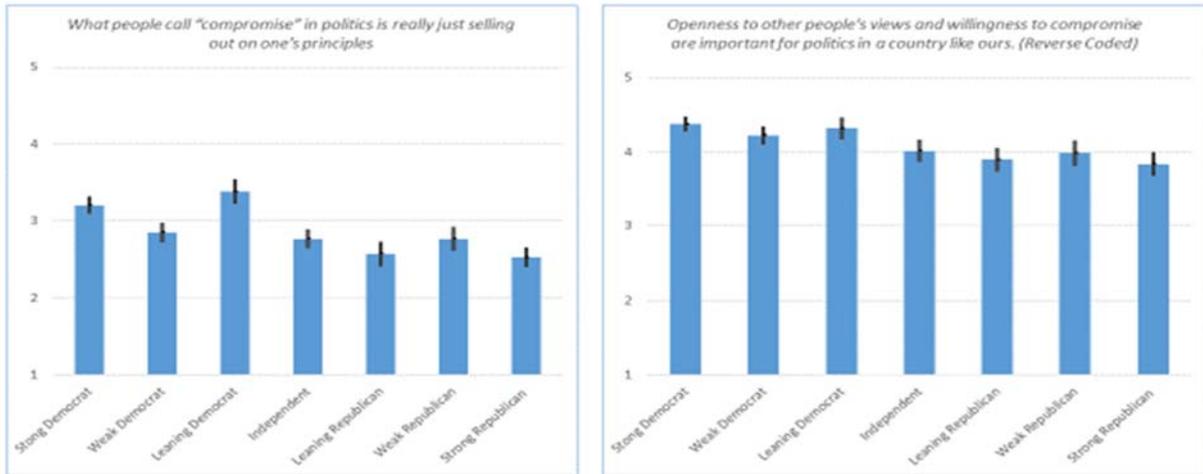## Figure 2: Support for Compromise by Partisan Affiliation

Figure 3 reveals a similar (though stronger) pattern for political ideology. Conservatives are more likely than liberals to believe that compromise is selling out and are less likely to believe compromise is important for our political system. Notice as well that the relationship between ideology and support for compromise is stronger when it is framed as a "selling out on one's principles" than when framed as important for our political system. In the abstract, ideological and partisan differences are fairly small, they become larger when they also capture elements of political distrust.
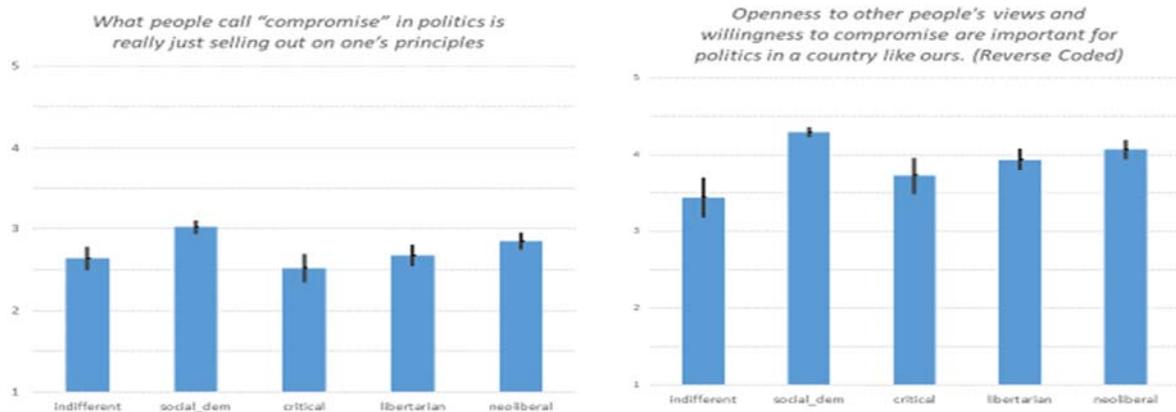
Figure 3: Support for Compromise by Ideology
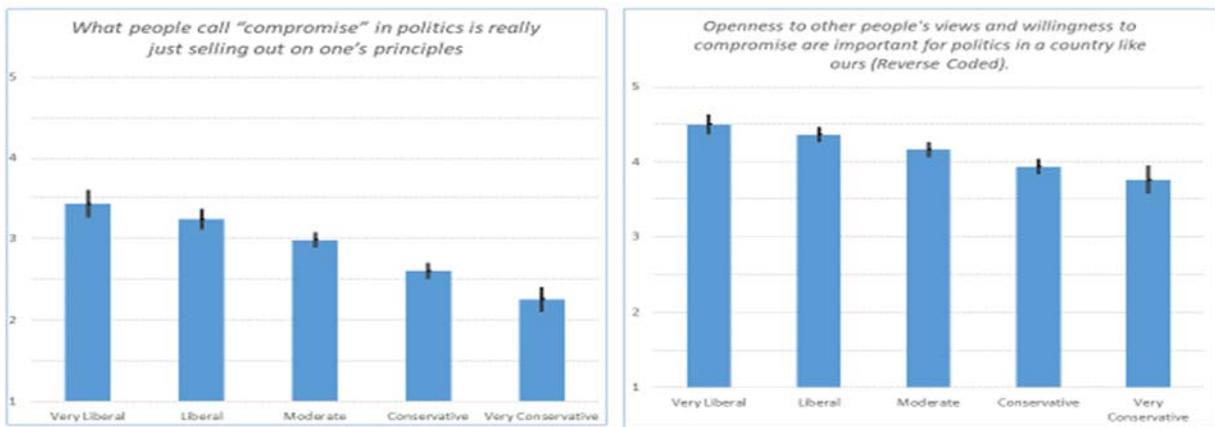
As a final piece of this preliminary analysis, we examine support for compromise across understandings of democracy. As can be seen in Figure 4, social democrats express the strongest support for political compromise followed by neoliberals and libertarians. Respondents with the most critical views of democracy also have the most negative view of compromise when expressed as tradeoff between principle and selling out, though the indifferent show the least

support when compromise is expressed as an abstract principle. This provides tentative support for our initial hypothesis that (1) understandings of democracy are correlated with support for political compromise and (2) that social democrats, who have the most expansive understanding of democracy, also show the greatest support for political compromise. In general, the more expansive one's view of democracy, the greater support for political compromise.

Figure 4: Support for Compromise by Democratic Orientation

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

Openness to other people's views and willingness to compromise are important for politics in a country like ours. (Reverse Coded)

The question remains, however, as to whether this result holds in a more fully specified model controlling partisanship and ideology. In Figure 5, we present the results from ordinal regressions of support for compromise on democratic understandings controlling for partisan affiliation, ideology, political interest, age, gender, education, and race. In these models, democratic understandings are dichotomous variables with 1 indicating membership in a specific class of understanding. Libertarians serve as our base category so the coefficients in Figures 5 indicate a significant different between libertarians and each of these other classes. The full results are presented in the appendix.

Across models, political interest, partisan affiliation, and ideology are predictive of support for political compromise. Specifically, liberals, Democrats, and politically interested respondents are more likely to reject the idea that compromise is selling out and are more likely to embrace the idea that compromise is important for the political system. Interestingly, education is also related to support for compromise but only in our first set of models. More educated respondents are more likely to reject the idea that compromise is selling out but are no more (or less) likely to say that compromise is important in a country like ours. Race is also associated with White/Caucasian respondents are more supportive of compromise than nonwhite respondents. These effects are notably stronger when compromise is framed as selling out.

Finally, support from compromise is related to individual understandings of democracy. As expected, social democrats are more supportive for compromise than are libertarians (our base category). Social democrats are more likely to reject the idea that compromise is selling out and more likely to embrace the idea that compromise is critical for the political system. Neoliberals are also more supportive of compromise but only when it is framed as tradeoff against selling out.

Respondents who we classified as indifferent are less supportive of compromise but only as an abstract principle and only in the model that includes ideology.
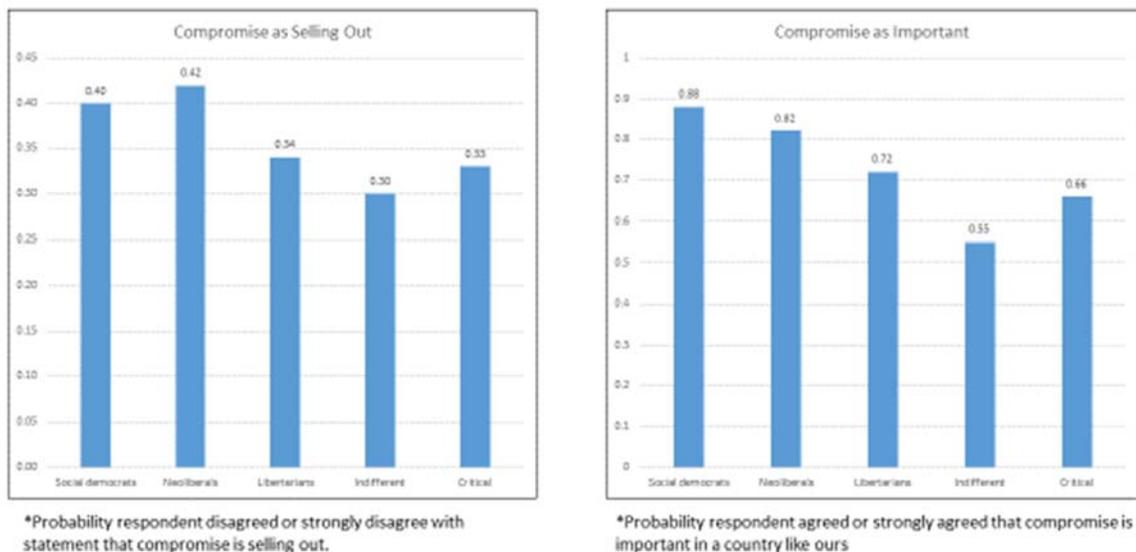
Figure 5: Ordinal Regressions of Support for Compromise on Democratic Understandings
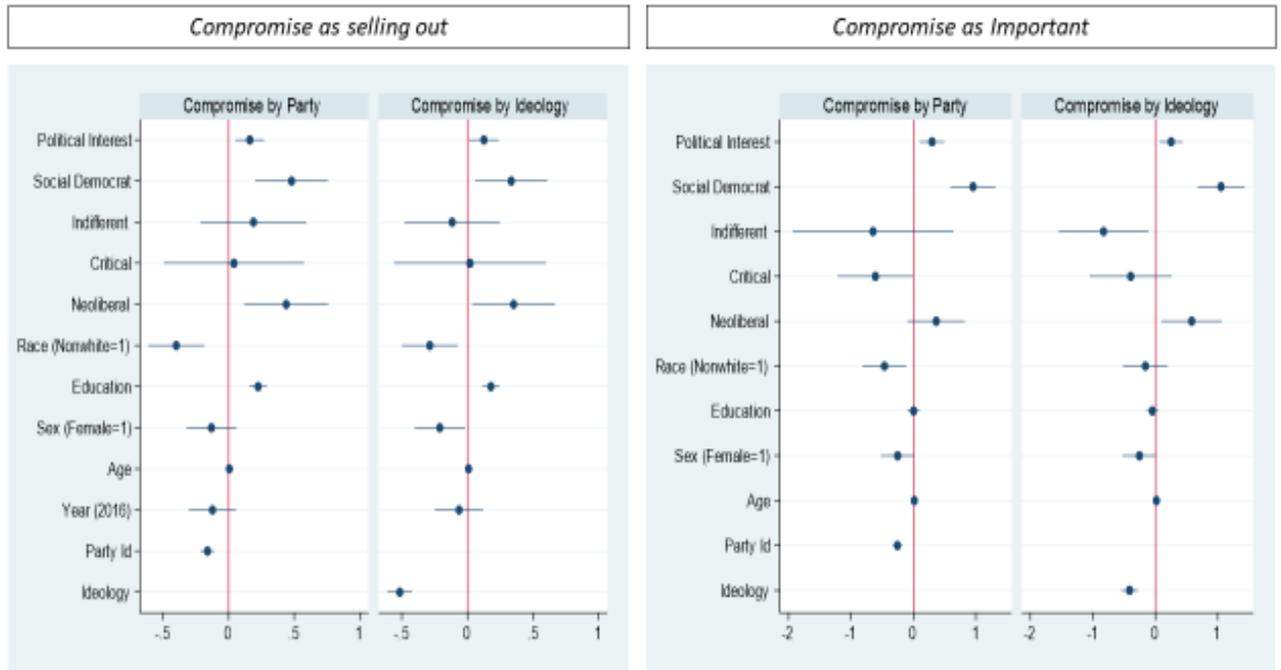
To better illustrate these relationships, we present the probabilities of individual support for compromise by democratic understanding in Figure 6.[9] For the purposes of illustration, we use the results from our models controlling for political ideology. The effects, while not particularly large, show differences across categories of democratic understanding. Social democrats and neoliberals are consistently more supportive of compromise while libertarians, indifferent, and critical classifications are less supportive. Importantly, these effects hold even after controlling for partisan affiliation and political ideology, so the findings here are not spurious. An individual's understanding of democracy has an independent and unique effect on support for political compromise.

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[9] We use Clarify (Tomz, et al. 2003) to compute the probabilities used in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Probability of Support for Compromise by Democratic Understanding

*Probability respondent disagreed or strongly disagree with statement that compromise is selling out.

*Probability respondent agreed or strongly agreed that compromise is important in a country like ours

Conclusions

Scholars have long noted that compromise is essential to democratic governance (Berelson 1952). More recently, scholars have worried that political polarization has made compromise nearly impossible to achieve (Gutmann and Thompson 2010, 2013, Gutmann and Thompson 2014, Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). At the elite level, political leaders and parties—especially Republicans—see little or no incentive for reaching across the aisle and working with the other side. At the level of the citizen, compromise becomes more problematic because of increases in affective polarization and growing distrust in political institutions and actors (Iyengar, et al. 2018). We neither trust the people we might compromise with or the institutions that produce these compromises. In this paper, we add yet another consideration to this literature. One's understanding of democratic governance also conditions support for political compromise. Specifically, individuals who adopt more expansive understandings of democracy also perceive compromise as essential to democratic governance while individuals with less expansive understandings are less supportive.

As we have demonstrated in previous work, individual understandings of democracy do not neatly map to partisan affiliation or ideology (Davis, et al. 2018). As a result, this effect is not rooted in tribalism but in how individuals think about (and understand) the democratic process. A potential path for improving the prospects for political compromise may involve something other than reducing partisan dislike of the other side. Expanding citizens understanding of democracy may also enhance the possibilities for meaningful compromise.

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Appendix:

Figure A1. Comparing variable means across classes using 6 and 15 item input schemes
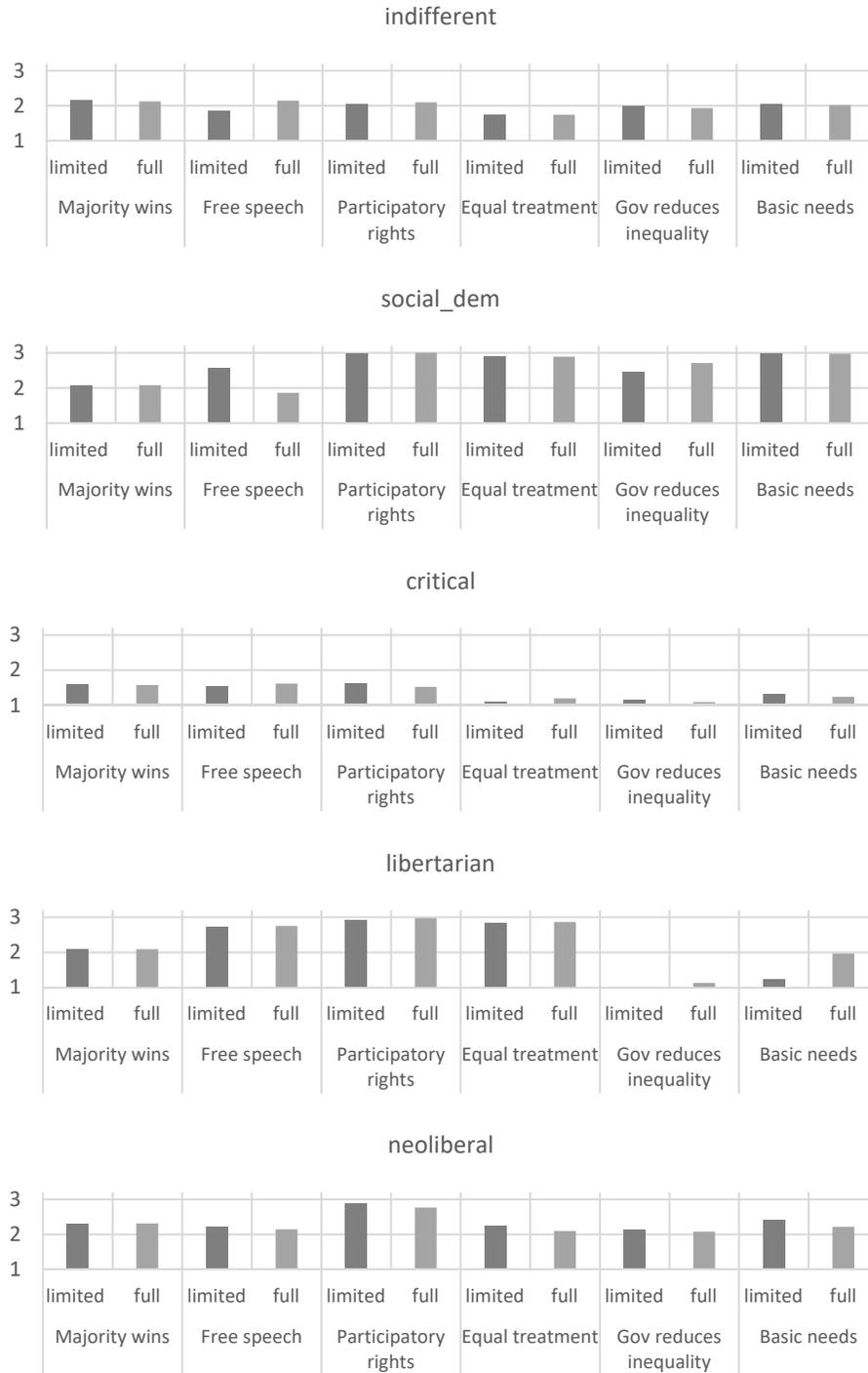
Notes: Panels illustrate mean values of respective item using different variable inputs. Bars corresponding to "limited" convey the mean score on respective item for six-item LCA used here; lighter grey bars reflect mean value of input item for LCA solution using all 15 variables.

Table A1. Ordinal Regression Models (Full Results)

	Compromise as Selling Out		Compromise as Important	
	By Partisan Affiliation	By Ideology	By Partisan Affiliation	By Ideology
Political Interest	0.162	0.126	0.298	0.252
	(2.46)*	(1.87)	(2.54)*	(2.30)*
Social Democrat	0.480	0.334	0.955	1.051
	(2.87)**	(2.02)*	(4.41)**	(4.62)**
Indifferent	0.189	-0.117	-0.647	-0.830
	(0.77)	(0.53)	(0.83)	(1.91)
Critical	0.040	0.020	-0.608	-0.395
	(0.13)	(0.06)	(1.66)	(1.00)
Neoliberal	0.439	0.352	0.365	0.582
	(2.27)*	(1.85)	(1.32)	(2.00)*
Race (Nonwhite)	-0.400	-0.287	-0.464	-0.161
	(3.13)**	(2.23)*	(2.20)*	(0.75)
Education	0.225	0.179	0.004	-0.047
	(5.71)**	(4.64)**	(0.07)	(0.82)
Gender (Female)	-0.131	-0.211	-0.252	-0.255
	(1.15)	(1.83)	(1.56)	(1.57)
Age (Years)	0.005	0.009	0.015	0.016
	(1.45)	(2.55)*	(2.92)**	(3.14)**
Year (2016)	-0.123	-0.064		
	(1.13)	(0.58)		
Partisan Affiliation	-0.161		-0.256	
	(5.49)**		(5.97)**	
Ideology		-0.516		-0.413
		(9.17)**		(5.26)**
Threshold 1	-1.118	-2.372	-4.559	-4.953
	(2.99)**	(5.69)**	(6.89)**	(6.88)**
Threshold 2	0.506	-0.732	-2.349	-2.823
	(1.34)	(1.78)	(4.06)**	(4.37)**
Threshold 3	1.908	0.728	-0.574	-1.064
	(5.07)**	(1.79)	(1.01)	(1.64)
Threshold 4	3.595	2.439	1.687	1.227
	(9.77)**	(6.17)**	(2.95)**	(1.90)
	1,877	1,821	952	933

* *p*<0.05; ** *p*<0.01; t-values in parentheses.