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Recommended Citation

Djupe, Paul A., "Race, Party and Nationalist Sentiment at Denison" (2021). *Faculty Publications*. 1811.
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Race, Party and Nationalist Sentiment at Denison

Paul A. Djupe

September 7, 2021

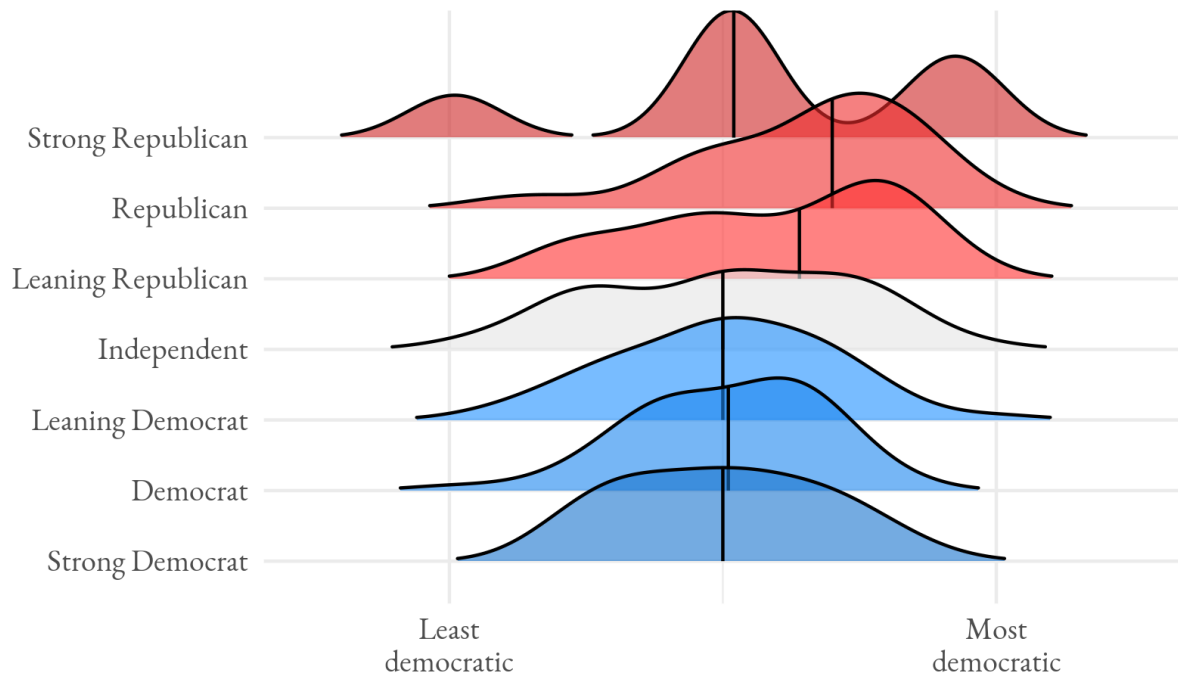
By Paul A. Djupe, [Data for Political Research](#)

The other day, I posed a survey question to one of my classes, asking if they agreed or disagreed with the statement “The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like the United States.” All I got were groans. I think it’s safe to say they would disagree. Once thought to be a beacon of democracy for the world, American democracy has taken many hits (no, not that kind) since World War II. It seems like there are few nationalists left who sing the praises of the US without qualification. Instead, the kind of nationalists in the news are those white nationalists and Christian nationalists who wish to make the nation work in the specific interests of their group. What does national sentiment look like at Denison?

The March 2021 survey of just under 500 students first asked how democratic the US is on a 0-100 scale. Their responses show that they’re not even convinced that the US *is* a democracy – the average score is 52 and there’s widespread agreement on that figure. The only groups who rate American democracy higher are Republicans, which is perhaps ironic given the Republican challenges to the 2020 presidential vote and the January 6th Insurrection at the Capitol. While the score is low, it is not entirely out of sync with how professional observers rate the US, which was [recently downgraded](#) from a ‘full’ to a ‘flawed’ democracy. The report from Freedom House suggested that, “The US’s new ranking places it on par with countries like Panama, Romania and Croatia and behind countries such as Argentina and Mongolia. It lagged far behind countries like the United Kingdom, Chile, Costa Rica and Slovakia.”

Few Are Convinced that the US is democratic

How would you rate the political system of the US as of today?

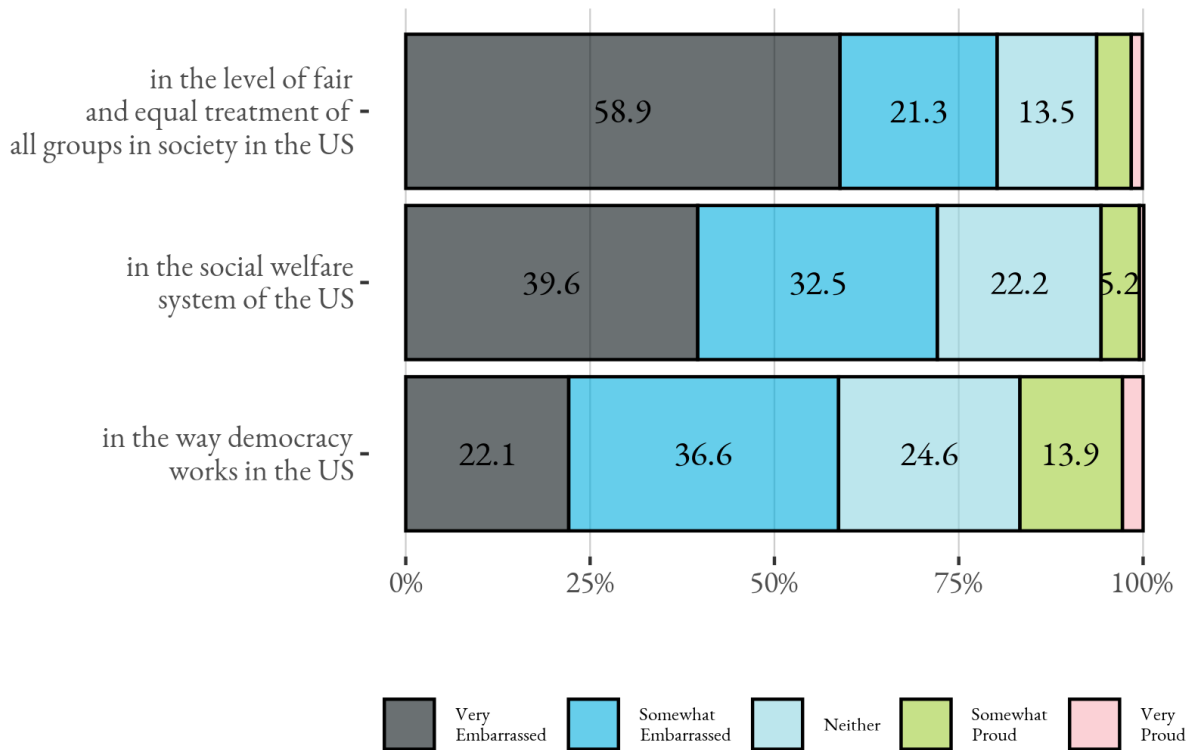


Source: March 2021 Survey.

Just because the country is not fully democratic does not mean that it is dysfunctional and some elements may be working well for Americans. The survey asked several questions to gauge whether students were proud or embarrassed by the US in terms of equal treatment of all people, social welfare support, and “in the way democracy works in the US.” In all three dimensions, a majority of students are embarrassed and vastly so in terms of equal treatment. The level of pride in the US is extremely low – just six percent on equal treatment and the social welfare system. More are proud of American democracy, though they only amount to 17 percent of the sample.

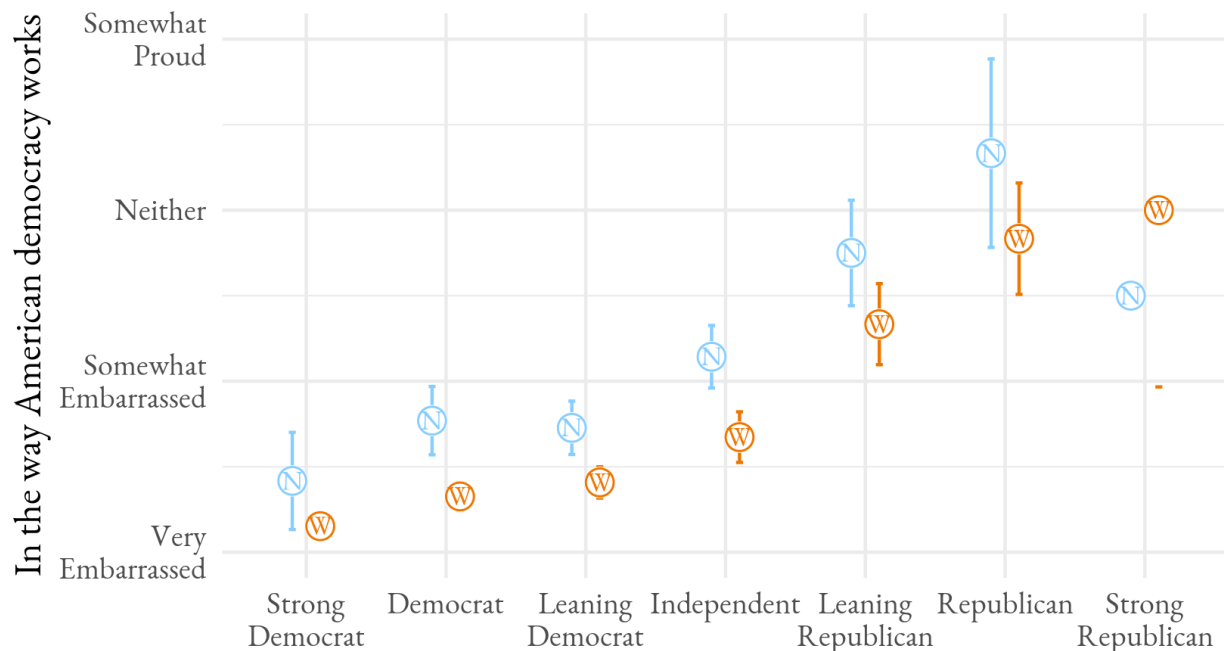
Denison Students Are Embarrassed by the US

How proud or embarrassed are you of the US in the following ways?



Most of the reason for the downgrade of American democracy that I described up top was the unequal treatment of minorities. So, it's particularly interesting to see who is most embarrassed with the way American democracy works. Almost no matter the partisan identity, it is **white students** who say they are more embarrassed (the gap is not always statistically significant, but the pattern is clear). The exception is among strong Republicans. It would be curious that Democrats have less pride in American democracy until we remember that Republican legislatures across the country have passed hundreds of bills trying to limit the ability of people to vote. Were that not true, perhaps the pattern would be reversed, which is what typically happens to trust in government when administrations change parties. It's notable that Republicans are conflicted — averaging "neither" proud nor embarrassed.

White students are more embarrassed with American democracy than are non-white students



Source: March 2021 Survey
 Note: N=nonwhite, W=white

Here's what I am modestly worried about. Political science research has found that declining trust in government has a pernicious effect of turning everyone off of government solutions. It does not hit just conservatives, who, at varying degrees, are against government intervention that would shake up the social order. It also hits liberals (and progressives) who lose faith in one of the greatest tools to remake society in a more just image that has ever been invented. That is, low trust makes it difficult for any political leader to succeed. That said, Denison students are still interested in politics (nearly a majority are 'very' or 'extremely' interested), voted at very high rates in the last presidential election (according to Jacob Rains, who kept track), and continued to be interested in public service during the Trump Administration. For now, Denisonians appear to continue to have faith that they can invest themselves and make a "more perfect union," but how long can this last?

Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who runs the Data for Political Research minor. He started onetwentysseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action. He's on Twitter and you should be too, along with your president.

Want to write with us? Email me at [djupe at denison dot edu](mailto:djupe@denison.edu).