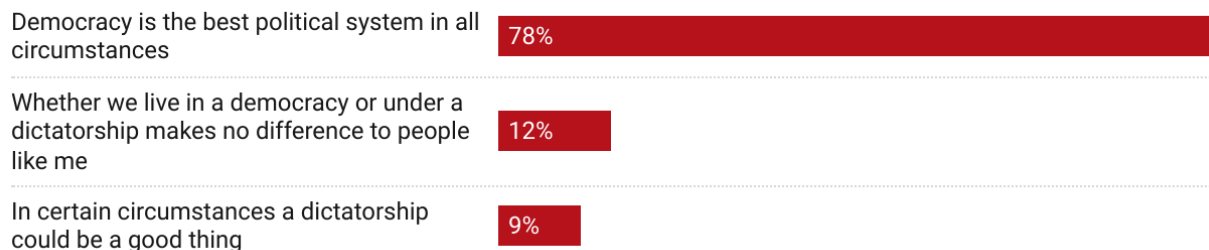


# Mood of the Nation: Americans' belief in democracy

January 18, 2023

## Four in five Americans favor democracy over dictatorship

"Here are three opinions about political systems. Which one comes closest to your own way of thinking?"



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is  $\pm 3.6$  percentage points.

# Summary and key findings

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy's latest Mood of the Nation Poll, conducted with 1,000 American adults November 14 through 18, 2022, included questions aimed at better understanding what Americans think about democracy.

## Is democracy the best form of government?

- Three-quarters of Americans “agree strongly” (48%) or “agree somewhat” (24%) that democracy is the best form of governance.
- Eighteen percent neither agreed nor disagreed as to whether democracy is the best form of government.
- Less than one in ten “disagree somewhat” (5%) or “disagree strongly” (4%) with the statement that democracy is the best form of governance.

## Which groups agreed most strongly that democracy is the best form of government?

The belief that democracy is the best system of government increases with age.

- Thirty-seven percent of Millennials (ages 26-41) and 47% of Generation X (ages 42-57) and “strongly agree” that democracy is the best system of government, compared with 62% of Baby Boomers (ages 58-64), and 75% of the Silent Generation (ages 77 years and older).

A somewhat larger proportion of white Americans than other racial or ethnic groups represented in this survey strongly agreed that democracy is the best system of government.

- Fifty-three percent of Whites felt strongly that democracy was the best form of government.
- Between thirty-eight and forty-two percent of respondents within other racial or ethnic groups also felt strongly about democracy being the best form of government.

About half of both Republicans and Democrats strongly agree that democracy is the best form of government, but a more sizeable proportion of Republicans (14%) disagree.

## What aspects of Democracy do Americans value the most?

- Thirty percent of Americans said democracy's ability to “[reflect] the voice of the people” was the most important element of democracy.
- One-quarter of respondents said the “protection of rights and liberties” captures the essence of democracy.
- A substantial generation gap emerged in the answers, with older generations most often associating democracy with ideas of liberty and freedom, while younger generations view democracy in terms of how it gives voice and power to ordinary citizens.

### **Is democracy the best in all circumstances or just sometimes?**

In response to a separate question asking whether democracy is preferred in all circumstances or whether dictatorship might sometimes be acceptable, a strong majority endorsed democracy. As was the case in the earlier question, a particularly high proportions of older generation-Americans endorsed democracy.

- Ninety-eight percent of the Silent Generation (ages 77 years and older) said "democracy is the best political system in all circumstances."
- Only 53% of Generation Z (18-25 years old) said the same.

Younger generations displayed more disaffection or skepticism of democracy than older Americans.

- Nineteen percent of Generation Z and 18% of Millennials (26-41 years old) said a dictatorship could be a good thing under certain circumstances, compared to only about 3% of older generations, Generation X, Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation.

A similarly high proportion of Democrats and Republicans favor democracy in all circumstances (over 80%).

# Introduction

Penn State's nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative Mood of the Nation Poll to gauge how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.<sup>1</sup>

To assess Americans' belief in democracy, survey respondents were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government.
  - a. Agree strongly
  - b. Agree somewhat
  - c. Neither agree or disagree
  - d. Disagree somewhat
  - e. Disagree strongly
2. (Open ended; asked of 1/2 sample): Of all the things you like about democracy, which ones do you value the most?
3. (Open ended; asked of 1/2 sample): In a few words, what does democracy mean to you?
4. Please read the following seven statements carefully, and then select the statement about democracy that best represents what you had in mind when you gave your answer?
  - a. The most important aspects of democracy concern the protection of rights and liberties.
  - b. The most important aspects of democracy concern the voice of the people in influencing government.
  - c. The most important aspects of democracy concern checks and balances, separation of powers, and other "rules of the game."
  - d. Democracy is great in theory, but the way it is working does not give me much to value.
  - e. We are a republic, and people are mistaken when they say the US is supposed to be a democracy.
  - f. We might be better off if the US was less democratic.
  - g. None of these come close to describing what I had in mind when I provided my answer.

5. Here are three opinions about political systems. Which one comes closest to your own way of thinking?
  - a. Democracy is the best political system in all circumstances
  - b. Whether we live in a democracy or under a dictatorship makes no difference to people like me
  - c. In certain circumstances a dictatorship could be a good thing

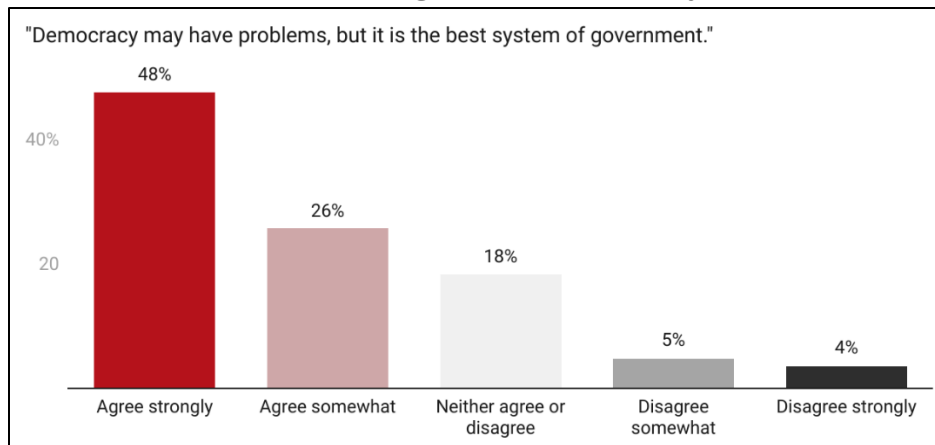
Note that the McCourtney Institute will be coding the answers to questions two and three for more systematic analysis, but they are presented here to provide context for the other questions. Also note that the order in which the options were presented after questions four and five was rotated to avoid possible question order effects.

To see whether Americans' opinions on these topics vary according to demographic, social and economic characteristics, we analyzed the results of each question by gender (women, men), generation (Silent or Boomer; X; Millennial; Z), race and ethnicity (four groups are available in this survey: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; Other), educational attainment and political affiliation (self-identified Republican, Independent, Democrat, as derived from self-placement on a seven-category scale ranging from "Strong Democrat" to "Strong Republican"). The number of respondents in each group is detailed in the methodology report that accompanies this brief.

# Most Americans agree that democracy is the best system of government

Today, three-quarters of Americans “agree strongly” (48%) or “agree somewhat” (26%) that democracy is the best form of governance. Almost one in five neither agree nor disagree (18%) as to whether democracy is the best form of government. Less than one in ten “disagree somewhat” (5%) or “disagree strongly” (4%) with the statement that democracy is the best form of governance.

## Three-fourths of Americans agree that democracy is the best form of government



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is  $\pm 3.6$  percentage points.

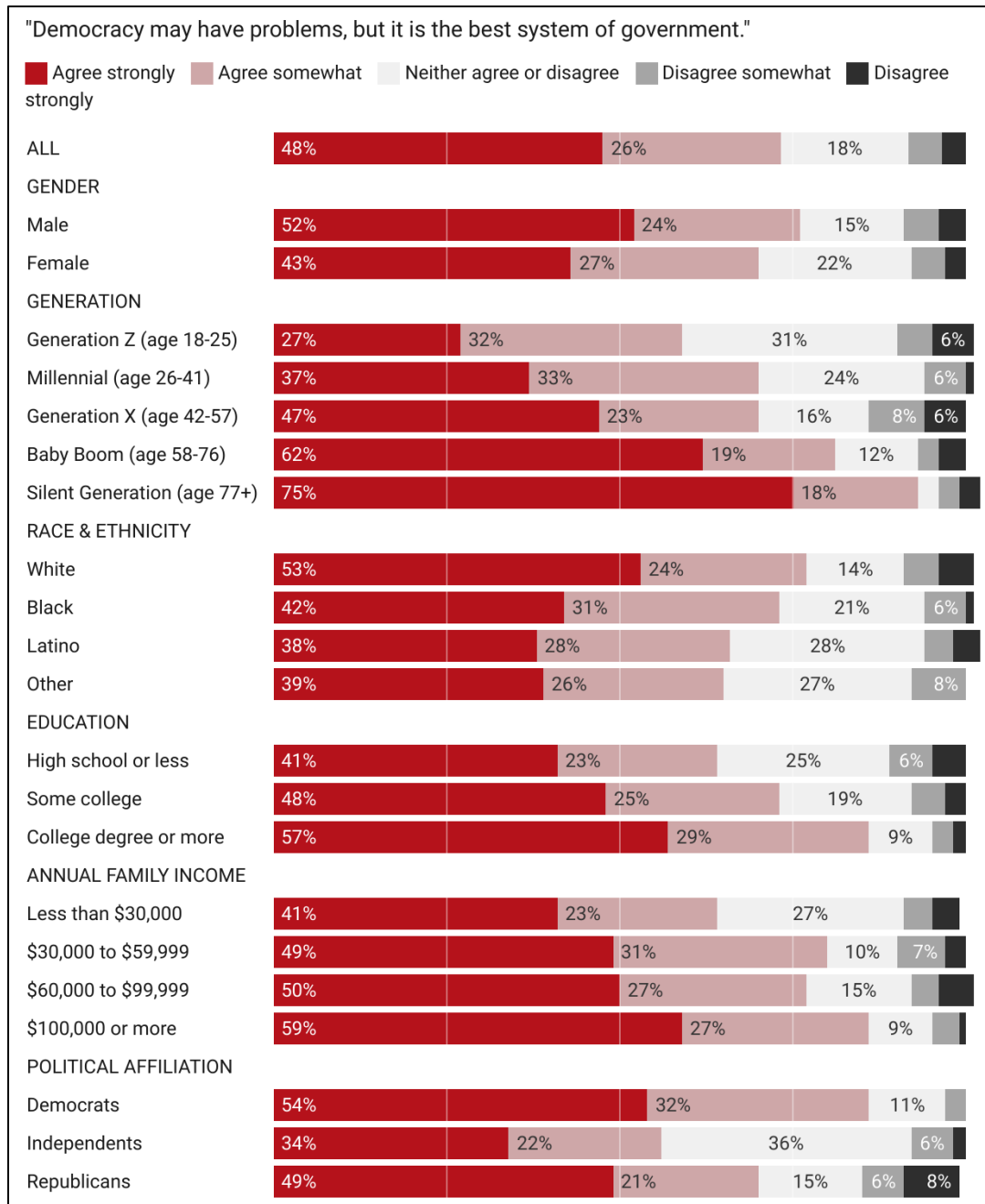
The perception that democracy is the best form of governance varies significantly by generation. Among those in the Silent Generation, over nine in 10 believe democracy is the best form of governance (93%). They are also the generation with the largest proportion, 75%, “strongly agreeing” that democracy is the best form of government. In comparison, 62% of Baby Boomers, 47% of Generation X, 37% of Millennials and only 27% of Generation Z strongly believe that democracy is the best form of government.

There is a moderate difference of opinion across the racial and ethnic groups represented in this survey. Fifty-three percent of white Americans, compared to about 40% of BIPOC Americans “strongly agree” that democracy is the best form of government.

A larger difference exists according to educational attainment, with nearly three in five of those with a college degree or more education strongly agreeing that democracy is the best form of government, compared with only two in five of those with a high school education or less. Those with a high school degree or less education are also more likely to indicate that they “neither agree nor disagree” whether democracy is the best form of government.

About half of those who identify or lean toward each of the two major political parties strongly agree that democracy is the best system of government. However, a notable minority of Republicans disagree with the notion, 14%, including eight percent who strongly disagree. In comparison, only four percent of Democrats disagree with the statement that democracy is the best form of government.

### Agreement that democracy is the best system of government by group



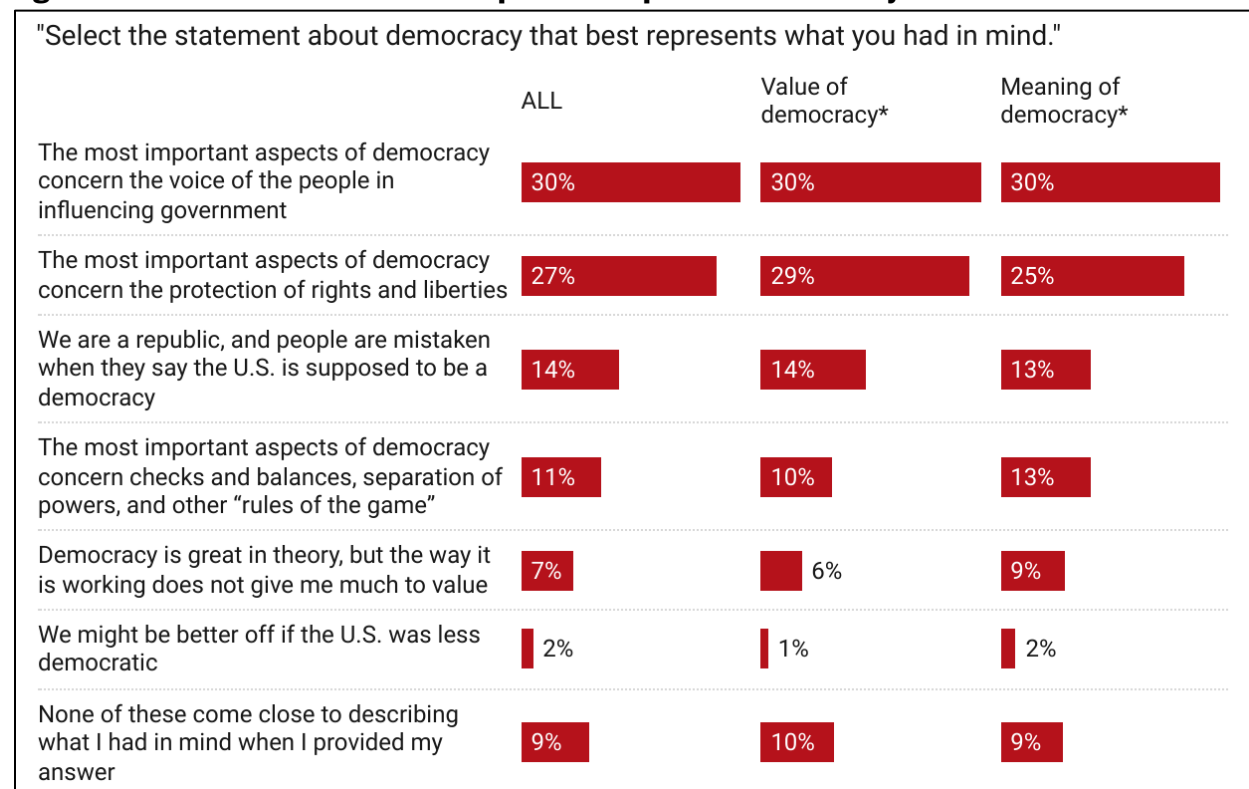
Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points, larger for subgroups.

# The most important aspects of democracy

Survey respondents were also asked one of two open-ended questions: either which things they *value most about democracy* or *what democracy means* to them. The McCourtney Institute will be coding these answers for more systematic analysis.

Regardless of whether they were asked what they most value or what democracy means, all respondents were asked to give their reasoning by selecting one of seven possible statements about democracy. As noted in the graph below, the responses were very similar regardless of the wording of the preceding question.

## Over half of Americans indicate that either “the voice of the people” or “protection of rights and liberties” is the most important aspect of democracy



\*This was a follow-up question. Half of respondents were first asked what they value about democracy, while the other half were asked what democracy means to them.

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points, larger for subgroups.



As noted in the graph above, 30% of Americans said that “the voice of the people in influencing government” is the most important aspect of democracy. Over one-quarter said that the “protection of rights and liberties” is most important. As noted in the graph below, these statements were favored by twice as many of those who agreed in a preceding question that democracy is the best system of government as compared to those who did not agree that democracy is best.

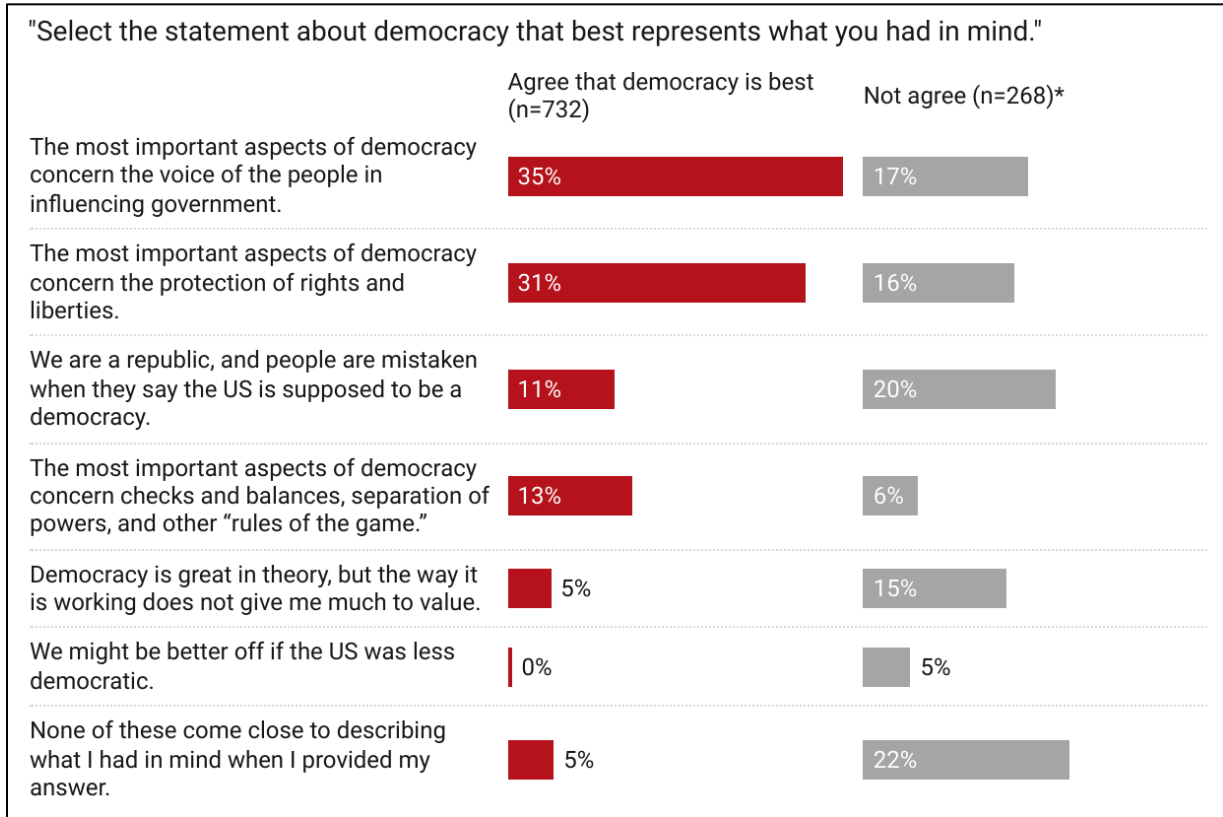
About one in seven indicated that what was most forefront in their mind was that the U.S. is better characterized as a republic than a democracy, including 20% of those who had not agreed with a preceding question stating that “democracy is the best system of government.”

As noted in the graph above, a similar overall proportion indicated that “the checks and balances, separation of powers and other ‘rules of the game’” are the most important aspect of democracy. And, as noted on the graph below, that was only seen as the most important aspect of democracy by 6% of those who do not agree that democracy is best.

Overall, fewer than one in ten indicated that democracy is great in theory, but not as valuable in practice. This position was held by a higher proportion of those who disagree that democracy is the best form of government. Very few indicated that “we might be better off if the U.S. was less democratic,” even among those who disagree that democracy is the best form of government.

As noted in the above graph, one in ten indicated that none of the statements resonated with them. As shown below, that option was chosen by 22% of those who do not agree that democracy is the best form of government.

**A higher proportion of those who agree that democracy is the best governance system indicate the importance of "voice of the people" and "protection of rights and liberties"**



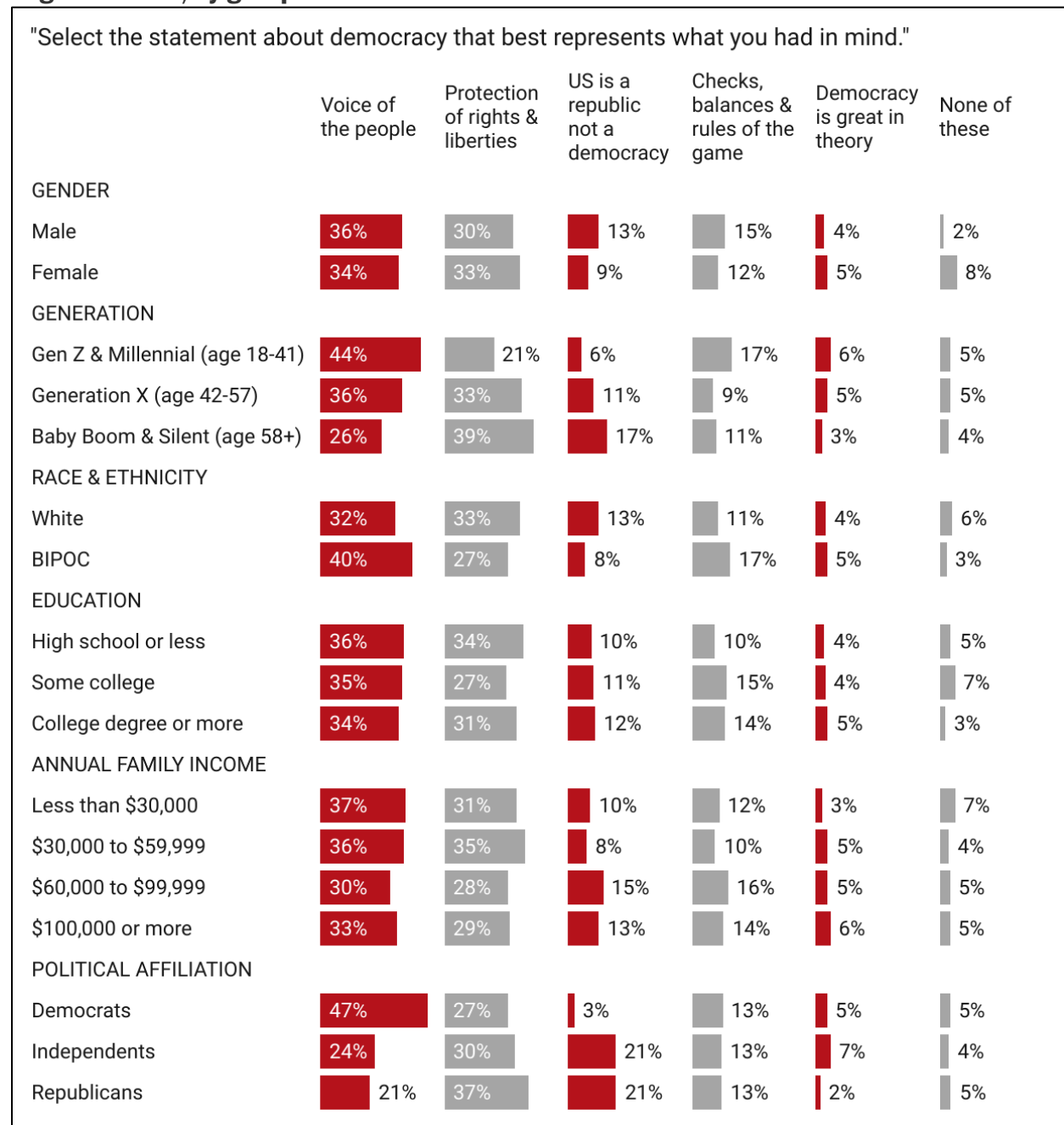
\* Includes those who disagreed as well as those who "neither agree or disagree" that democracy is the best system of government.

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points, larger for subgroups.

Even when looking only at those who agree that democracy is the best system of government, there are some interesting group-to-group differences. For example, a higher proportion of those in younger generations point to "voice of the people" as the most important aspect of democracy, while notably higher proportions of those in the older generations point to either the importance of the protection of rights and liberties, or that the U.S. is a republic and not a democracy.

A similar dynamic plays out by political affiliation, with a much higher proportion of Democrats indicating that the ability of a democracy to represent the voice of the people is democracy's most important aspect, whereas higher proportions of political independents and Republicans either indicate that protection of rights and liberties is most important or point out that the U.S. is a republic and not a democracy.

## Most important aspects of democracy, among those who agree that it is the best system of government, by group



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 733 U.S. adults who indicated that they agreed with the statement that democracy is the the best system of government (out of 1,000 total surveyed); the overall margin of error is  $\pm 3.6$  percentage points, larger for subgroups.

# Most Americans believe democracy is the best system of government under all circumstances

In the final survey question related to democracy, which was separated from the earlier questions by several questions related to other topics, individuals were asked to select which statement comes closest to their view:

- Democracy is the best political system in all circumstances,
- Whether we live in a democracy or under a dictatorship makes no difference to people like me, or
- In certain circumstances a dictatorship could be a good thing

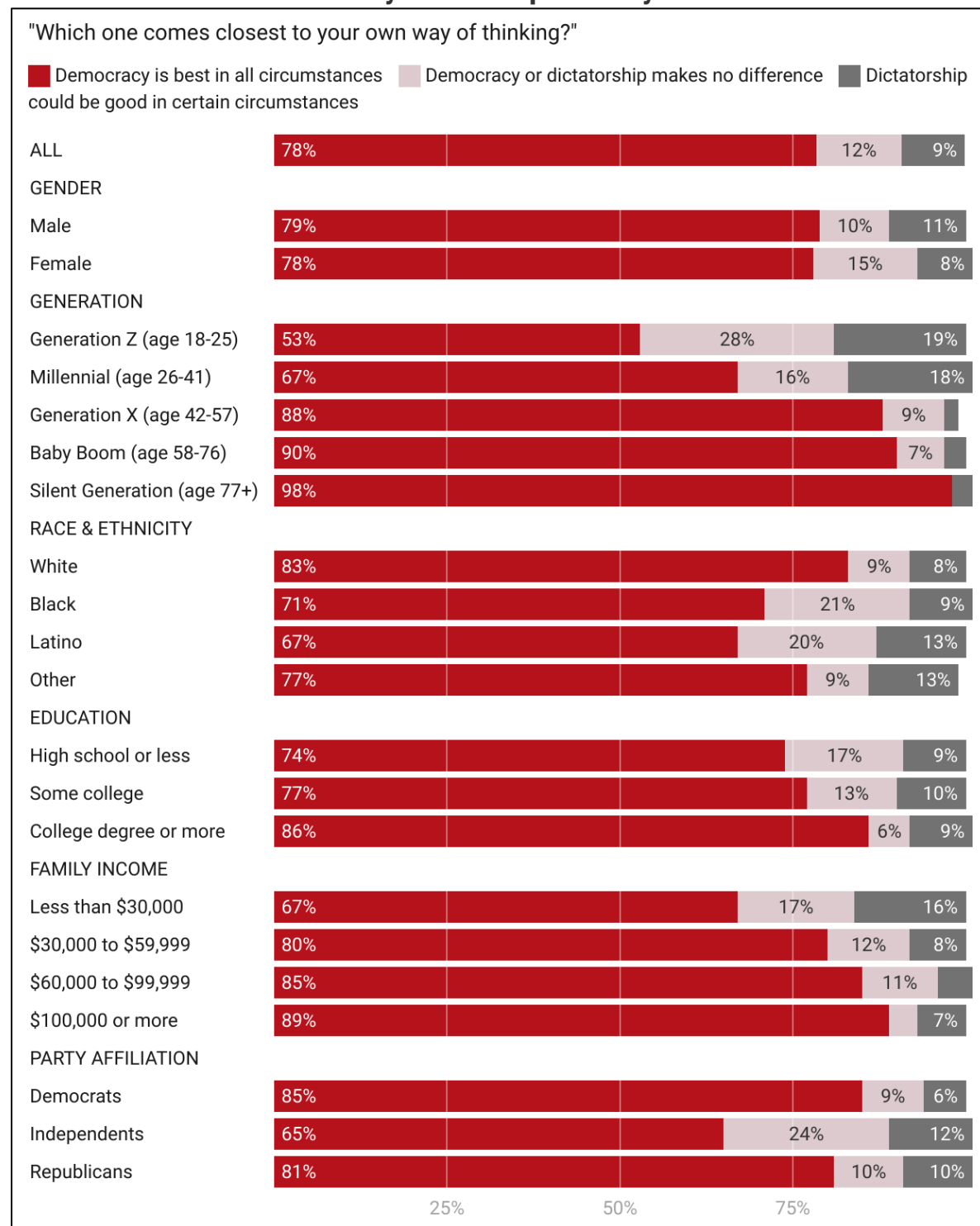
An overwhelming majority (78%) stated democracy is the best political system under all circumstances. Twelve percent said that it didn't make a difference in their life whether they were living in a dictatorship or democracy. Nine percent said a dictatorship could be a good thing under certain circumstances.

An overwhelming majority of each group that we assessed through this survey followed the general pattern of favoring democracy over dictatorship, but there are some interesting group-to-group differences. Perhaps most notably, one in five of those in Generation Z and the Millennial generation indicate that a dictatorship could be good if the situation were right. Only about three percent of those in the older generations favored that option.

The only other differences that come close to the generational difference on this question is that those in the lowest income group are somewhat more open to dictatorship (16%) than are those with annual family incomes of \$30,000 or more (between 4 and 8%).

Similar proportions of Democrats and Republicans favor democracy over dictatorship, while a notably higher proportion of political independents, 24%, indicate that living under a democracy or dictatorship “makes no difference to people like me.”

## Most Americans think democracy is the best political system in all circumstances



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points, larger for sub-groups.

## About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a department within the American Public Media Group that informs the public about challenges and opportunities facing families, communities and organizations throughout the nation. Our mission is to foster an engaged democracy by inspiring curiosity, inquiry and discussion through fact-driven, credible research and analysis. Our Values: Independent, Useful, Informative, Non-partisan. Our tagline is *bringing facts into focus*.

The Lab is a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative and abides by its standards. See <https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Transparency-Initiative/>.

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## About the McCourtney Institute for Democracy

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State promotes scholarship and practical innovations that defend and advance democracy in the United States and abroad. Through teaching, research and public outreach, the Institute leverages the resources of Penn State and partners around the world to foster a model of deliberation, policymaking and responsiveness that is passionate, informed and civil.

The Mood of the Nation Poll offers a unique approach to public opinion polling. It allows Americans to speak in their own words through open-ended questions that focus on emotions like anger and hope, as well as commitment to constitutional principles.

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## About the survey

Data collection for this Mood of the Nation Poll was conducted online by YouGov (<https://today.yougov.com/>). The YouGov panel includes over 1.8 million individuals who agree to complete occasional surveys. The 1,000 individuals who completed the May 2022 Mood of the Nation Poll were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, the Roper Center and CNN, please see:

<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

# Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Terrence Fraser and Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab. The survey questions were designed by the McCourtney Institute, particularly Mood of the Nation Poll Director Eric Plutzer who also provided input on the reporting.

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