



Growing disconnects between citizens and legislators endanger US democracy

Joseph Chamie

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Disconnects between the majority of Americans and U.S. policies across many issues are becoming increasingly worrisome for the country.

These disconnects reflect troubling shortcomings in the nation's political, legislative and legal systems. They are contributing to growing national dissatisfaction, frustration and anger and foretell serious challenges ahead for the 246-year-old democracy.

On the paramount issue of climate change, one poll shows a majority of Americans, 60 percent, are alarmed or concerned about it, viewing climate change as a major threat to the well-being of America. A 2020 Pew Research poll says approximately two-thirds of Americans say the federal government is doing too little to reduce climate change's effects. A separate poll shows more than 60 percent of Americans disagreed with the recent Supreme Court decision on the Environmental Protection Agency regulating carbon pollution.

The Pew Research poll found a large majority of Americans, nearly 80 percent, said the priority for the country's energy supply should be the development of alternative sources of energy, such as wind and solar. Other measures to address climate change supported by majorities include carbon capture tax credits, tougher restrictions on power plant carbon emissions, taxing corporations based on their carbon emissions and tougher fuel efficiency standards for cars.

Regarding voting, a poll by Data for Progress shows that 70 percent of Americans support voting rights with equal access for all eligible voters. To pass voting rights legislation, slightly more than half of voters, 53 percent, support altering the Senate's 60-vote threshold to a simple majority. The majority of the public wishes to ensure that every American who wants to vote can do so easily, with nearly 80 percent adding that voters should be required to show government-issued photo identification whenever they vote, according to an NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist survey. Also, the Data for Progress poll shows majorities of Americans favor national standards for ballot access, banning partisan congressional gerrymandering and preventing efforts to subvert election results.

However, some government officials have said that expanding voting will hurt their party's election prospects.

Concerning the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol, a Quinnipiac University poll shows nearly two-thirds of Americans, 64 percent, believe the attack was planned rather than spontaneous. Also, 59 percent say former president Trump bears a measure of responsibility for the calamity that ensued.

In an ABC/Ipsos poll, a similar majority, 60 percent, view the investigation by the Jan. 6 House Select Committee as fair and impartial.

However, some in Congress and former president Trump wish to downplay the worst domestic attack on Congress in 200 years, even reinterpreting it as a normal tourist visit and normal political discourse.

Concerning taxes, a 2017 Pew Research poll showed that 56 percent consider the federal tax system to be complex, incomprehensible, and unfair. Also, 60 percent believe that corporations and wealthy people don't pay their fair share of taxes. Most Americans say they are bothered a lot by the inherent unfairness in the tax system that favors the wealthy and large corporations.

An April 2021 Gallup poll shows the majority of Americans, nearly 60 percent, are in favor of gun control. A Pew Research Center Poll from last year shows the majority also supports several gun control proposals, including background checks for all gun purchases, bans on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines, registration of privately owned guns with the police, mental health restrictions on gun purchases and a 30-day waiting period for all gun sales. The bipartisan gun bill recently signed into law expands background checks and devotes funding toward mental health resources, but falls short of the measures that the majority of Americans support.

Regarding immigration, a majority of Americans, 58 percent, are dissatisfied with current immigration levels, with many wishing to see less immigration, according to a Gallup poll. In addition, a poll conducted by the Cato Institute shows a larger majority of Americans, 71 percent, say it is unacceptable for people to illegally immigrate to the U.S.

Various administrations of both parties have stressed that while America is a nation of immigrants, it is also a nation of laws and its border is closed to irregular migration. Nevertheless, the government's de facto policies both internally and at its borders continue to attract unauthorized migrants.

With respect to family issues and equal rights for women, majorities of Americans again feel disconnected from government policies and the recent reproductive rights decision of the Supreme Court.

A 2020 Pew Research poll showed 79 percent of Americans support gender equality, with 57 percent saying it hasn't gone far enough and 78 percent favoring adding the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution.

Nevertheless, some in Congress oppose proposed legislation advancing women's equality.

Large majorities of American voters, 78 percent of Republican voters and 93 percent of Democratic voters, say they want subsidized child care programs for working families. Moreover, majorities support tax credits to help working families pay for childcare.

Yet this year, Congress allowed an expanded child tax credit that lifted more than 3 million children out of poverty to expire.

Concerning reproduction, an estimated 96 percent of voters support the right of Americans to purchase and use contraceptives without government interference. That right, established by the Supreme Court's decisions in the 1960s, overturned statutes that prohibited any person from using any drug, medicinal article or instrument for the purpose of preventing conception.

Recently, however, some states are considering legislation to limit access to birth control methods. Following the recent Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v Wade, some believe that efforts will be advanced to limit access to contraception.

On abortion, a consistent majority of Americans, about 62 percent, support a woman's right to an abortion, per Pew Research. An even larger majority of Americans, 70 percent, did not want the Supreme Court to overturn Roe v Wade.

Noteworthy disconnects also exist between what people in many states want and the antiabortion laws that their legislatures have adopted. Majorities in many of those states with antiabortion laws support a woman's right to an abortion. In addition, 78 percent of Americans oppose making it illegal for a woman to cross state lines to obtain an abortion.

Regarding LGBTQ rights, a June Gallup poll shows a majority of Americans, 71 percent, support same-sex marriage. Recently, however, a Supreme Court justice and some members of Congress have indicated that the Supreme Court's 2015 decision in Obergefell v. Hodges that legalized same-sex marriage was wrong and may be revisited because the right is not rooted in the U.S. Constitution.

In sum, worrisome disconnects on many important issues are evident between the views of America's majorities and the divergent positions of many elected and appointed government officials. Those disconnects portend serious challenges for the future of America's democracy.