

carefully theorized, and tested how such discourse was reflected in public understandings of democracy. We suspect, as Hill observes, that public understandings shift in accordance with elite cues, similar to the process outlined by John Zaller (1992) in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Indeed, we would take this criticism a step further. Elite understandings of democracy shift as elites perceive strategic advantages in advancing procedural or substantive understandings of democracy, and public understandings of democracy follow suit.

Public understandings of democracy, we argue, are not set in stone either in terms of the specific understandings that emerge from a given set of data or the level of public support for any given definition. The democratic ground shifts beneath the public's feet. Were we able to accurately reflect democracy's meanings over time, we expect shifts in meaning would be dynamic and thermostatic (Christopher Claesen, "In the Mood for Democracy? Democratic Support at Thermostatic Opinion," *American Political Science Review*, 114, 2020). These shifts would not constitute backsliding, at least as the term is generally used, but would instead reflect ongoing conflict over democracy's meanings.

For many Americans, our democratic political system is running a deficit when it comes to providing procedural and substantive goods. Some of these Americans believe that our democracy has gone too far in its efforts to assure economic and political equality, thus violating their more limited procedural definition of democracy. Others believe that democracy has not gone far enough and that the political system has failed to live up to its promise of economic prosperity. There is no single set of substantive or procedural outcomes that would leave subscribers to these very different definitions of democracy equally satisfied.


One of our contributions is that we show that one's understanding of democracy does not neatly align with partisan or ideological identification. Yes, there is sorting, but there are a nontrivial number of self-identified conservatives and Republicans who believe democracy has overpromised and underdelivered when it comes to material goods. In this respect, our findings fit well with recent research by Andrew Little and Annie Meng ("Subjective and Objective Measures of Democratic Backsliding," 2023) who find that democratic backsliding mostly reflects subjective evaluations rather than objective indicators. We take this a step further: democratic backsliding reflects the inherent tension between procedural and substantive understandings and the thermostatic swings between a more limited procedural democracy and a more expansive substantive democracy.

If there is one place where Hill misreads our work, it is here: we do not accept the evidence of democratic backsliding but instead forcefully argue against it. Democratic backsliding assumes a single elite definition of democracy that the public does not share. Dissatisfaction with democracy, what others have characterized as democratic

backsliding, is rooted in a belief that the American political system is not democratic enough and has not lived up to the promise of economic prosperity, the protection of political and procedural rights, or majority rule.

Frustrated Majorities: How Issue Intensity Enables Smaller Groups of Voters to Get What They Want.

Seth J. Hill. Cambridge University Press, 2022. 236p. \$34.99 paper.
doi:10.1017/S1537592723001214

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In contemporary politics, there is no shortage of pundits and scholars identifying frustrated majorities (and governing minorities) as the root cause of our most recent "crisis of democracy." In *Democracy in America* (2020), Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, for example, make the case that the solution to America's latest democratic crisis is to empower majorities so that public policy better reflects the public will. Seth Hill thinks differently. Frustrated majorities arise because political candidates are attempting to win popular elections by securing the most votes. They are not ignoring voters or are constrained by institutional design; they are simply responding to voter intensity in ways that increase the probability that they will be elected.

In his ambitious new book *Frustrated Majorities*, Hill sets out to explain why majorities in the American political system frequently lose to more committed minorities. At first glance, this is a story we know well. On issues like gun control and abortion, popular majorities lose to minority factions. These are issues where intensity of opinion, and not just direction of opinion, matters. No reader will be surprised by this observation. "Frustrated majorities" is perhaps *the* defining descriptor of the American political system. James Madison intentionally designed the US Constitution to frustrate majority factions driven largely by passion, rather than reason and, as a result, easily duped by demagogues and "pretended patriots."

What is missing from popular and scholarly laments, according to Hill, is an explanation for *why* politicians appeal to committed minorities, rather than less committed majorities, as a viable (and perhaps even optimal) electoral strategy. Using game theory, Hill develops a model, based on what he coins "intensity theory," for how this works. Candidates want to win the most votes, they know the preferences of voters on issues, but remain uncertain about the intensity of public attitudes. Within this context, intensity is revealed by the costs voters are willing to pay to achieve their policy goals. Intensity matters because candidates need to know which potential voters will vote

according to their policy preferences, rather than partisan heuristics, candidate image, or some other consideration.

Candidates gauge intensity from the signals voters send through costly actions (e.g., emails, personal contacts, and campaign contributions). According to the model, voters intentionally and strategically signal their intensity through their actions. Candidates, in turn, signal their alignment with voters' policy preferences via their policy statements, positioning, and platforms. Across issues, candidates assess the weighted intensity of voter preferences on any given set of policies to decide whether to support an intense minority or a less committed majority. The key here is that majorities can be frustrated in the absence of Madisonian institutional constraints or by interest group or money-based distortions of the popular will. Neither is necessary for majority frustration; you need only a plurality-based election system. There is one more piece to the puzzle: the conditional responsiveness to intensity, Hill shows, leaves all voters better off in a utilitarian sense when candidates are responsive to intense minorities rather than apathetic majorities.

The model here strikes us as well constructed in terms of its internal logic but questionable in terms of its applicability. With apologies to Jerry Lee Lewis, "there is a whole lotta signaling going on." First, the model assumes candidates know where voters stand on the issues but not the intensity of their preferences. Candidate knowledge of voter preferences is, at best, knowledge that is laden with uncertainty and, at worst, misinformed. Candidates often mistake voter preferences, systematically overestimating certain types of preferences and underestimating others. This may be because candidates infer policy preferences from the same costly signals that they use to estimate intensity where voters "preach to the choir" (David Broockman and Timothy Ryan, "Preaching to the Choir: Americans Prefer Communicating to Copartisan Elected Officials," *American Journal of Political Science*, 114, 2016). This has consequences for the types of policies that emerge from the political system and how closely those policies align with voter preferences (David Broockman and Christopher Skovron, "Bias in Perceptions of Public Opinion among Political Elites," *American Political Science Review*, 112 2018). Hill is aware of this literature and cites it but largely discounts it.

Perhaps more problematic are issues where there is no majority opinion or no meaningful opinion at all, where constituents are uncertain or cross-pressured, and where opinions shift over the course of a campaign and elected officials must estimate what opinion informed by political messaging might look like after a political campaign (R. Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action*, 1990).

Second, despite the signaling noted earlier, the same candidates who know how voters align on the issues are assumed to be less knowledgeable about voter intensity. It is not clear why this would be the case. One might fairly

argue that candidates would be better judges of intensity of opinion, given the information readily available to them via costly actions, and less certain of majority preferences. This would not hurt the model—we would still have an explanation for frustrated majorities based solely on electoral considerations—but it would fundamentally undermine the substantive conclusions that frustrated majorities pose little or no problem for democracy (and may even be a good thing).

In any event, to the extent that candidates rely on polling and not just personal observation, they should have access to information about the direction *and* intensity of voter preferences. Hill is, of course, correct that polling is laden with uncertainty. Pollsters are well aware of this uncertainty and attempt to gauge how changes in question wording, question order, and context alter survey response (John Zaller and Stanley Feldman, "A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions versus Revealing Preferences," *American Journal of Political Science*, 36, 1992). Message testing, used to inform campaigns about how opinions are likely to shift over the course of a campaign, further illustrate pollsters' understanding of opinion fluidity. Despite the challenges, pollsters also attempt to gauge the salience and intensity of political issues. These efforts are imperfect but often revealing. Hill seems to recognize this, using intensity measures (strongly agree—strongly disagree) in the first of his empirical chapters demonstrating the applicability of the model within the context of embryonic stem cell research. In other chapters, he uses measures of "costly actions," a measure of intensity easily (and often) gauged via survey research, or "most important problem" items to gauge salience.

If we are interested in empirical generalization, there are even more perplexing measurement challenges. Can we measure intensity in a way that allows us to predict when majorities will be frustrated by committed minorities, rather than provide post-hoc explanations? If we measure intensity via costly actions, do actions ever become too costly, crossing the line from conventional to unconventional participation and undermining their own cause? What happens when we move from unconventional protests to political violence? Do costly political actions ever become counterproductive (Omar Wasow, "Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protests Moved Elites, Public Opinion and Voting," *American Political Science Review*, 114, 2020)? Even if we remain within the realm of conventional participation, how do we measure the cost of an action? Is the cost of a political contribution equal to the cost of an email? And what should we conclude about those voters (and nonvoters) who cannot pay the cost?

There are other issues. One reason why intensity matters more in American politics is that the aggregation of opinion is imperfect across congressional districts. In a system with proportional representation, majorities would still be frustrated, but the frustration would presumably occur less

often. Related, frustrated majorities can occur even when a majority of elected representatives share the policy preferences of a political majority. According to Jake Grumbach's (2022) new book *Laboratories against Democracy*, interest groups strategically search for states and localities where they can more easily and intentionally frustrate majorities. Overall, institutions still matter, and much of the frustration in American politics is baked into the institutional cake.

Finally, a minor but we think important point: Hill blurs the distinction between opinion intensity and opinion salience. In the public opinion literature, these are closely related but conceptually distinct. Voters can feel strongly about an issue (abortion), but it may be less important than other issues they might consider (the economy) when casting a ballot.

Overall, this ambitious book is well worth reading. The model is carefully constructed and tightly argued, and the subsequent empirical chapters provide supportive evidence. Hill does an excellent job assuring the book is accessible for less technically inclined readers, moving his proofs to the appendix and leaving the text for conceptual description of his model. The book is well written, informed, and appropriately provocative. Most students of American politics know well that intensity matters, so the central argument is not new, but Hill pushes the observation into new and challenging territory. Strategically, candidates might rationally appeal to committed minorities not to undermine democracy but because they want to win the most votes. Paired with *Democracy in America*, *Laboratories against Democracy*, or some similar text, lamenting the decline of majority rule or policy responsiveness would make for an interesting set of readings in advanced undergraduate or graduate-level courses. Our guess is that most readers will not buy entirely into Hill's conclusions, but those conclusions will spur a lot of thought about whether frustrated majorities are a feature or a bug in a democratic political system. Challenging our preconceptions is what a good book does, and on this count Seth Hill's *Frustrated Majorities* unquestionably succeeds.

Response to Kirby Goidel, Nicholas T. Davis, and Keith Gaddie's Review of *Frustrated Majorities: How Issue Intensity Enables Smaller Groups of Voters to Get What They Want*

doi:10.1017/S1537592723001329

— Seth J. Hill 

The argument in *Frustrated Majorities* is simple: even with majority elections, politicians will sometimes cater to intense minority views in their single-minded pursuit of winning votes. As Professors Davis, Gaddie, and Goidel note in their thoughtful review, although the idea that issue intensity influences politicians is widely considered, my book aims to fill out the theoretical story with a

mathematical model and complementary empirical evidence. Importantly, the model helps us understand that politicians sometimes choose to side with an apathetic majority over an intense minority when the minority is either too small or insufficiently intense. Only under specific conditions of size and intensity do politicians choose to frustrate majorities.

I am grateful for the important questions and opportunities for future research Davis, Gaddie, and Goidel identified in their careful read of the book. Two stand out. First is the assumption that candidates know with certainty the policy position of voters. This assumption was useful in the book to show that candidates will sometimes choose to frustrate majorities even when they know with certainty that the majority holds a policy preference contrary to the candidate's proposal. The book does not, however, explore a setting where candidates are uncertain about what voters want or, as suggested is possible by Davis, Gaddie, and Goidel, where voter intensity is *easier* to observe than policy position or where politicians infer position from intensity.

These settings each deserve careful treatment. The book's result that politicians choose to frustrate majorities, however, does not depend on asymmetric information; even with full knowledge of both the intensity and issue position of the electorate, candidates sometimes side with a sufficiently intense minority. This suggests that asymmetric information about issue position rather than intensity would not alone change the electoral incentives that generate frustrated majorities. It might change the dynamics of costly signaling and political participation, however, especially if candidates believed intensity and position correlated in the population. How politicians think about the correlation between intensity and issue position strikes me as an important empirical question.

A second issue unaddressed in the book is what to think about welfare if costly signals have unmodeled negative externalities; for example, political protests turning violent. Although I do not necessarily think that frustrated majorities are a good thing, my book does present a utilitarian welfare analysis suggesting that, in some situations, costly signaling and frustrated majorities can maximize social welfare. Negative externalities of costly individual actions, however, would decrease the net benefit of candidates learning what voters care about in this welfare analysis. To remain efficient, the benefits of policy for the intense minority would need to be relatively larger than without the negative externalities.

I am grateful for the thoughtful review by Davis, Gaddie, and Goidel. I am also grateful for the questions the book prompted, many of which connect to the meaning of democracy and thus our evaluation of the functioning of the American system. *Democracy's Meanings* and *Frustrated Majorities* each add to the discussion of what democracy is and how to evaluate its operation.