

Prothro J W & Grigg C M. Fundamental principles of democracy: bases of agreement and disagreement. *J. Politics* 22:276-94, 1960.
[Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL]

Democratic theory assumes consensus on fundamental principles to be necessary for democracy. An empirical test finds consensus in two American communities on such principles only in their most abstract form. Behavior is often more democratic than professed beliefs. [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI®) indicate that this paper has been cited in over 185 publications since 1960.]

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Before World War II, political scientists took for granted the proposition that agreement on fundamental principles was a prerequisite of democracy. In a graduate seminar at Princeton in 1950, I was struck by the argument of Carl Friedrich that such agreement actually characterized totalitarian rather than democratic systems.¹ Despite Friedrich's eminence, his argument was ignored, perhaps because it (like the accepted theory) was based on logical inferences from system characteristics to individual beliefs, not on actual investigation of the beliefs of individuals.

The only truly creative feature of my article was the decision to design a research project to test the theory. I enlisted a sociologist friend, Charles Grigg, as a collaborator because of his statistical and analytical expertise. The idea of building a theory by collecting data to test significant hypotheses is now, of course, the accepted model for research in political science no less than in other disciplines. Until the "behavioral revolution" of political science in the 1950s, however, political scientists

learned about governments mostly by examining constitutions, statutes, administrative edicts, and court decisions, and they typically searched for evidence in support of their theses rather than for data to test hypotheses. Such "field work" as was conducted dealt with relatively minor questions.

Because the act of conducting a public-opinion survey as a technique for testing basic theoretical propositions was then regarded as unconventional at best and inappropriate at worst, I made an effort in writing the article not to offend traditional scholars in the discipline. To that end, it only summarily stated the accepted theory as a background to the research report, without quoting the assumptions of leading authorities that the article invalidated. Today that caution seems strange, but the contentiousness that divided traditionalists and "behavioralists" at that time was so extreme as to approach holy war. My effort to refine extant theory without appearing to denigrate its principal interpreters was thus designed to keep the article outside the current conflict over scientific method. The effort failed: the reviewer for the *American Political Science Review* recommended rejection on the grounds that the article merely demonstrated the obvious and that accepted theory did not propound the propositions the article attempted to refine. Convinced that the reviewer was himself one of the traditional theorists whose work I had avoided explicitly attacking, I happily added a critical examination of the literature as background to my findings and submitted the piece to the *Journal of Politics*, where it was published.

The article has been frequently cited, I think, for three reasons: (1) it was the first test of a basic proposition of the discipline with empirical data collected specifically for that test; (2) it modified accepted theory; and (3) it raised new research questions. A vast literature has developed that goes far beyond the essentially simple questions raised in this first article. The most imaginative recent extension of this work² raises still more significant questions; I am pleased that its senior author was one of my graduate students.

1. Friedrich C I. *The new belief in the common man*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1942. 345 p.
(Cited 5 times since 1955.)
2. Sullivan J L, Pierson J & Marcus G E. *Political tolerance and American democracy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 278 p.