

12 Citizens and the Democratic Process

Politics today is like the opening line in a Dickens novel: We seem to live in the best of times . . . and the worst of times for the democratic process. In the last decade of the twentieth century, a wave of democratization swept across the globe. The citizens of Eastern Europe, South Africa, and several East Asian nations rose up against their autocratic governments. The Soviet Empire collapsed, and millions of people enjoyed new democratic freedoms. These events led a noted political analyst, Francis Fukuyama (1992), to claim that we were witnessing “the end of history.” Humankind’s evolution was supposedly converging on a single form of government—democracy—as the culmination of human development. Even some experts who had previously ruminated about the limits to democracy’s expansion now trumpeted this third wave of democratization.¹

The 1990s also brought unprecedented affluence and economic well-being to the United States, as Americans experienced their longest period of sustained economic growth in peacetime. Crime rates dropped, and progress was made on many policy fronts. To a lesser degree, Western Europe also enjoyed a peace dividend of economic stability and a new era of international security. This was, it seemed, a positive time for Western democracy. The Cold War was over, and we had won. In addition, the citizens in the former autocratic states of the Soviet Empire had won.

Despite these advances, public opinion surveys have found that people are now more critical of politicians, political parties, and political institutions than they were a generation ago (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011). This is not a recent development resulting from the 2008 recession. The malaise first appeared in the United States in the 1960s, and trust in government has remained low since the late 1970s. These trends have stimulated a chorus of voices claiming that American democracy is at risk (Macedo et al. 2005; Wolfe 2006). Political dissatisfaction is also common in other advanced industrial democracies. For example, if one is fortunate enough to browse through Paris bookshops, one sees titles such as *France in Freefall*, *Bankrupt*

Internet Resource

The Pew Research Center has an online survey on satisfaction with government that allows you to compare your views to a representative sample of Americans:

<http://pewresearch.org/satisfaction>

France, and *France's Misfortune*. Even while enjoying the fruits of economic and political development, people have become more critical of their governments and other institutions of democracy.

Admittedly, anxiety about the health of democracy is a regular feature of political science and political punditry. An important discussion about America's postwar goals took place during the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and President John F. Kennedy asked Americans to renew their commitment to state and nation (see Mueller 1999, ch. 7). A prominent academic study of the 1970s nearly forecasted democracy's demise (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975). "Declinism" is an enduring school of thought among French and German intellectuals. These earlier pessimistic accounts of democracy's future fortunately proved to be overstatements.

It does seem, however, that attitudes toward government are changing in basic ways, and citizens in most established democracies are no longer deferential and supportive of political elites. This development leads us to ask whether such changes in the political culture put democracy at risk and how they are affecting the democratic process.

This chapter looks at how people judge the democratic process today. How is it that as democracy celebrates its success at the beginning of a new millennium, its citizens are apparently expressing deep doubts about their political system? In addition, we consider how the new style of citizen politics may contribute to these misgivings and what the implications are for the democracy's future.

The Types of Political Support

Political support is a term with many possible meanings. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963) referred to attitudes toward politics and the political system as the "political culture" of a nation. Political culture encompasses beliefs about the legitimacy of the system, the appropriateness of structures for political input, and the role of the individual in the political process. The most important of these attitudes is a generalized feeling toward the political system, or *system affect*. Such feelings are presumably socialized early in life, representing a positive attitude toward the political system that is relatively independent of the actions of the current government. Almond and Verba believed that affective feelings toward the political system assure the legitimacy of democratic governments and limit expressions of political discontent.

David Easton (1965, 1975) developed an influential theoretical framework describing the various objects of political support: political authorities, the regime, and the political community.

- *Political authorities support* includes opinions toward the incumbents of political office or, in a broader sense, the pool of political elites from which government leaders are drawn.
- *Regime support* refers to attitudes toward the institutions of government rather than the present officeholders—such as respect for the presidency rather than opinions about a specific president. This also involves attitudes toward the procedures of government, such as the principles of pluralist democracy and support for parliamentary government.
- *Political community support* implies a basic attachment to the nation and political system beyond the present institutions of government. A sense of being "English" or "Scottish" is an example of these attachments.

The differences among these levels of support are very significant. Discontent with the political authorities normally has limited systemic implications. People often become dissatisfied with political officeholders and act on these feelings by voting the rascals out and selecting new officials (rascals) at the next election. Dissatisfaction with authorities, within a democratic system, is not usually a signal for basic political change. Negative attitudes toward political officials can and do exist with little loss in support for the office itself or the institutional structure of government.

When the object of dissatisfaction becomes more general—shifting to the regime or the political community—the political implications increase. A decline in regime support might provoke a basic challenge to political institutions or calls for reform in government procedures. For example, when Americans became dissatisfied with government in the mid-1990s they enacted term limits on legislators and other reforms. Weakening ties to the political community might foretell eventual revolution, civil war, or the loss of legitimacy. Therefore, Easton said, "Not all expressions of unfavorable orientations have the same degree of gravity for a political system. Some may be consistent with its maintenance; others may lead to fundamental change" (1975, 437).

In addition to the objects of political support, Easton identified two kinds of support: diffuse and specific. According to Easton, *diffuse support* is a state of mind—a deep-seated set of political attitudes that are deeply engrained in belief systems. For example, the sentiment "America, right or wrong" reflects a commitment to the nation that is distinct from the actual behavior of the government. In contrast, *specific support* is more closely related to the actions and performance of the government or political elites. Specific support is object specific in two senses. First, it normally applies to

evaluations of political authorities; it's less relevant to support for the political community. Second, specific support is typically based on the actual policies and governing style of political authorities or political institutions.

The distinction between diffuse and specific support is important in understanding the significance of different aspects of political support. A democratic political system must keep the support of its citizens if the system is to remain viable because it rules by the consent of the governed. However, because all governments occasionally fail to meet public expectations, short-term political failures must not directly erode diffuse support for the regime or political community. If one politician or government fails, this shouldn't be an indictment of the entire political system. In other words, a democratic political system requires a reservoir of diffuse support independent of immediate policy outputs (specific support) if it's to weather periods of public disaffection and dissatisfaction (Almond and Verba 1963).

German history in the twentieth century highlights the importance of diffuse support. The Weimar Republic (1918–33) was built on an unstable foundation. Many Germans felt that the creation of this government at the end of World War I had contributed to Germany's wartime defeat; from the outset, the regime was stigmatized as a traitor to the nation. Important sectors of the political elite—the military, the civil service, and the judiciary—and many citizens questioned the legitimacy of the new regime and favored a return to the former German Empire. The fledgling democratic state then faced a series of major crises: postwar economic hardships, attempted right-wing and left-wing coups, explosive inflation in the early 1920s, and the French occupation of the Ruhr. Because the political system was never able to build up a pool of diffuse support for the republic, the dissatisfaction created by the Great Depression in the 1930s easily eroded support for political authorities *and the democratic regime*. Communists and Nazis argued that the democratic political system was at fault, and the Weimar Republic succumbed to those attacks.²

The democratic transition in the German Democratic Republic in 1989–90 also illustrates the importance of cultural and institutional congruence. Surveys of East German youth found a marked decrease in support for the communist principles of the German Democratic Republic during the 1980s (Friedrich and Griesse 1990). These youths led the populist revolt in the East that weakened the regime in the fall of 1989. Revelations in early 1990 about the Communist Party's abuses of power further eroded the regime's popular base and spurred the race toward unification with the West.

Early cross-national opinion studies argued that political support was a requisite of stable democracy. Almond and Verba (1963) found that system affect in the late 1950s was most widespread in the long-established democracies of the United States and Great Britain. For example, 85 percent of Americans and 46 percent of Britons spontaneously mentioned their political system as a source of national pride. In contrast, system support was more limited in West Germany and Italy: only 7 percent of West Germans and 3 percent of Italians mentioned their political system as a source of

national pride. Low levels of support raised fears that democracy was still fragile in these two formerly fascist states.

A cross-national study by Hadley Cantril (1965) found a similar pattern in public opinion: positive national self-images were more common in the stable, well-run democracies than in fledgling democracies. A more recent set of comparative studies has similarly demonstrated that a democratic political culture is strongly correlated with the stability of a democratic system (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Although one can never be certain whether stable government produces political support, or whether political support produces stable government, these two are interrelated. The support of its citizens is necessary if a democracy is to survive over the long term.

Declining Confidence in Authorities

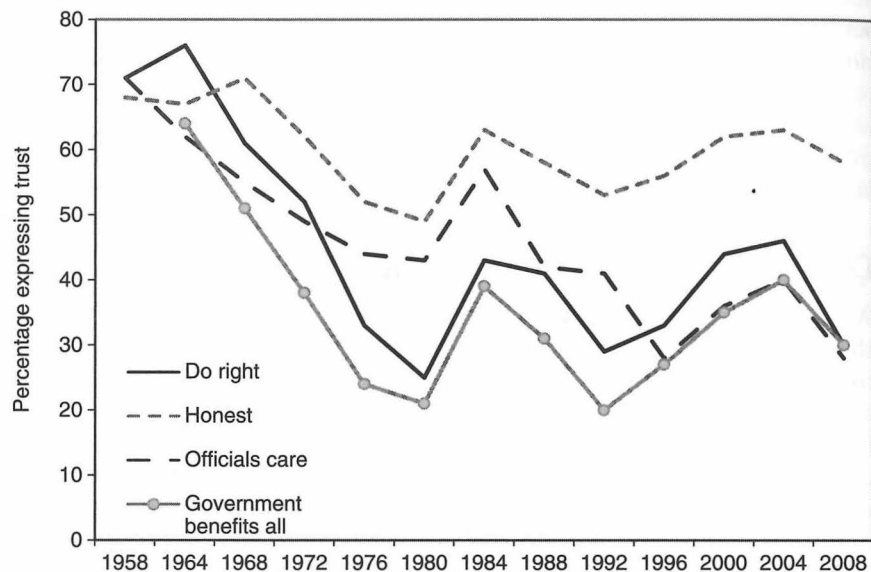
A few years ago I was visiting Germany during its national elections. On the weekend before the vote I went to the town square with a friend to talk to the parties' representatives about the election. At one booth I was given a nice pen with a picture of the local candidate down the side. My friend leaned over and whispered: Hurry up and use the pen now, because after the election it will stop working—just like the politician. Such public skepticism of elected officials and other political authorities has become a common part of politics in most advanced industrial democracies.

Rather than focus on individual officeholders, we examine citizen images of political leaders in general. A variety of evidence points to Americans' growing skepticism about political officials and the government over time (figure 12.1). The early readings depicted a largely supportive public. In 1958 most Americans believed that officials care what people think (71 percent), that people in government are honest (68 percent), and that one can trust the government to do what is right (71 percent). These positive feelings remained relatively unchanged until the mid-1960s and then declined precipitously.

Beginning at about the time of the crises and political scandals of the 1960s and 1970s—Vietnam, urban unrest, and Watergate—Americans' trust in their politicians sank steadily lower. In 1979 President Jimmy Carter warned that declining public confidence “was a fundamental threat to American democracy.” The upbeat presidency of Ronald Reagan temporarily improved Americans' image of politics. By the end of the Reagan-Bush era, however, trust in government was as low as it had been in 1980. These indicators had hit historic lows in 1994 during the Clinton administration, but they had partially improved by 2000. Yet even with the unprecedented economic growth of the 1990s and the consolidation of democracy around the globe, Americans' trust in government rebounded only to the levels of Reagan's first administration. Support for incumbents and the government briefly spiked upward after the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States but soon faded. By the 2008 elections, trust had decreased to the levels of the early 1990s. Media polls suggest that trust in government had declined to a new low point in 2010–11.

Figure 12.1 Trust in Government

Americans' trust in government dropped in the 1960s–70s and has remained low since then.



Source: American National Election Studies, 1958–2008.

Virtually all long-term public opinion series show similar downward trends. For example, since 1966 the Harris poll asked, “The people running the country don’t really care what happens to you.” In 1966, only 29 percent shared this opinion; in 2011 a full 73 percent thought politicians didn’t care. The Pew Center for People and the Press (2010) studied attitudes toward government in 2010 and concluded, “By almost every conceivable measure Americans are less positive and more critical of government these days.”

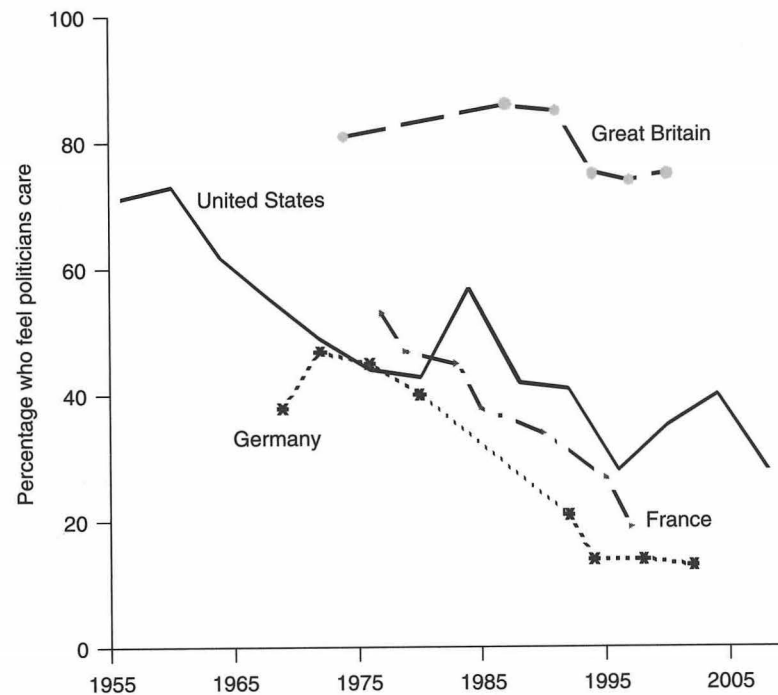
Looking back at this span of U.S. history, it’s easy to cite possible reasons for the public’s growing doubts about their leaders (Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997). During any four-year electoral cycle, one can find multiple events that may have diminished the reputations of Congress and the executive branch: Watergate, the House banking scandal, Iran-contra, the Abramoff lobbying scandal, Bill and Monica, the invisible WMD in Iraq, and so on. In policy terms, candidates promise one thing at election time, but they regularly fail to deliver and may even violate their promises once in office (for example, George H. W. Bush’s promise, “Read my lips, no new taxes”). In addition, some of the most distinguished members of Congress have resigned from office, offering stinging indictments of the institution. As one former representative said upon leaving the U.S. House: “May your mother never find out where you work.”

Such explanations of decreasing trust focus on the peculiar history of the United States, or specific institutional features of American politics, but we are not alone. The same trends are occurring in Great Britain, France, Germany, and most other established democracies. Figure 12.2 tracks the decline in the belief that politicians care what people think in our set of four nations.³ For example, 47 percent of the German public believed politicians cared what they thought in 1972; by 2002, only 13 percent shared this opinion. Similarly, in 1986 only 11 percent of the British public said they never trusted the government—by 2010 this group had tripled in size (Curtrice 2013). Other trends from these four nations generally display the same pattern of decreasing trust in elected officials (Norris 2011; Mayer 2000).

Even more significant, public skepticism about politicians and government officials is spreading to virtually all the advanced industrial democracies. A cross-national inventory of questions measured support for politicians and

Figure 12.2 Do Politicians Care?

Belief that politicians care what people think has generally declined over time.



Sources: United States, American National Election Studies, 1956–2008; Great Britain, 1974 Political Action Survey and British Social Attitudes Surveys, 1987–2000; Germany, German Election Studies, 1969–2002; France, SOFRES Polls, 1977–97.

government from national surveys in sixteen Western democracies (Dalton 2004; also see Norris 1999a, 2011a). Typically beginning in the late 1960s or early 1970s, these trends show a downward slide in political support *in nearly all the countries for which systematic long-term data are available*. Decreasing trust in government and elected officials is now commonplace in contemporary democracies.

It would be understandable if people had become frustrated with government only after the 2008 recession and its consequences. However, the puzzle is that this trend toward negativity occurred at a time when the political systems of most advanced industrial societies were making real advances in addressing the needs of their nations (for example, Bok 1996). In addition, these trends have paralleled an apparent decrease in political corruption and an increase in citizen access to politics. It was the best of times and the worst of times. And now, when economic times are bad, dissatisfaction has deepened.

Views of Political Institutions

Why do employees in the White House use the term “Mr. President” when they talk to Barack Obama (I think Michelle can say “Barack”)? In part, it’s a matter of respect and etiquette. But this usage has a long tradition. The logic is that people should think of the president as making decisions for the nation rather than a person making individual decisions. Thus, people should respect the office of the president even if they don’t like the person or disagree with the policies.⁴

So our next question asks whether skepticism about political elites has been generalized to more basic attitudes toward the institutions and structure of government. This question was first taken up by Arthur Miller (1974a, 1974b) and Jack Citrin (1974). Miller argued that Americans were generalizing their dissatisfaction with the repeated policy failures and political scandals of government officials into broader criticism of the political process. He spelled out the potentially grave consequences the loss of regime support could have for the American political process.

Citrin felt that Miller was overstating the problem. He interpreted the declines in political support as a sign of disenchantment with politicians in general, not distrust in the system of American government. Citrin (1974, 1987) claimed that “political systems, like baseball teams, have slumps and winning seasons. Having recently endured a succession of losing seasons, Americans boo the home team when it takes the field.” He maintained that these catcalls do not show deeper opposition to the game of government, but only to the players in the lineup and their recent performance on the field. Given a few new stars or a winning streak, the decline in public confidence would reverse.

Citrin’s cautiousness seemed warranted in 1974, but now, about four decades later, public disenchantment continues. In addition, distrust has

spread to the institutions of democratic government. One set of survey questions taps public confidence in the people running major social, economic, and political organizations: confidence in the leadership of virtually every U.S. institution has tumbled downward. In the 1960s many Americans expressed a fair amount of confidence in the executive branch (41 percent) and Congress (42 percent), but these positive evaluations dropped substantially over time (table 12.1). In 2012 only 15 percent of Americans had confidence in the executive branch, and Congress fared even worse (7 percent). Confidence in business, labor, higher education, organized religion, the press, and the medical profession have suffered similar declines over the past four decades. Separate trends from the Harris Poll show confidence in Congress dropping to 6 percent in 2012 and confidence in the executive at 22 percent.

Table 12.1 Institutional Confidence

Confidence in the leadership of most American institutions has decreased since the 1960s.

	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010	2012	DIFFERENCE
Medicine	72	54	50	45	41	42	39	-33
Higher education	61	38	32	16	24	20	26	-35
Banks and finance	—	37	26	20	27	10	11	-26
Military	62	37	33	41	49	54	55	-7
Organized religion	41	35	30	26	24	20	22	-19
Supreme Court	50	35	32	33	34	31	29	-21
Major corporations	55	26	27	25	20	13	17	-38
Press	29	25	18	11	10	11	9	-20
Executive branch	41	19	18	14	15	17	15	-26
Congress	42	17	14	10	13	10	7	-35
Organized labor	22	14	12	11	10	13	12	-10
Average	48	31	27	22	24	22	23	-25

Sources: 1966 from Harris Poll; 1973–2012, General Social Surveys.

Note: Table entries are the percentages expressing a “great deal” of confidence in the people running each institution.

Furthermore, the drop in confidence in democratic institutions is not unique to the United States. Opinion trends in other advanced industrial democracies show that trust in the national legislature has fallen in most democracies—including all four of our core nations (Dalton 2004, 37–39). In Germany, for example, the ALLBUS surveys find that those trusting the Bundestag decreased from 50 percent in 1984 to only 26 percent in 2008. Similar evidence is available for Britain and France.

The 2005–08 World Values Survey (WVS) compared confidence in institutions across our four nations (see table 12.2).⁵ The question wording and set of institutions differ from those in table 12.1, so the results are not directly comparable. Still, the results present a familiar pattern: people have little confidence in the institutions of representative democracy. Roughly a third in each nation expresses “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the national government or the national legislature. Perceptions of political parties are even more critical. Based on the original six European Union (EU) member states, the 2008 European Values Survey (EVS) found that only 16 percent had confidence in political parties—far below the average for the other social and political institutions it examined. In addition, despite the downward trend in political support in all four nations, Americans remain more trustful of political institutions.

People express more confidence in nonpolitical institutions of government, such as the judicial system or the civil service, than in the institutions of representative democracy. This finding is ironic. The members of the U.S. Supreme Court are not subject to election, and the justices serve for life; but people are more positive about the Court than about elected government

Table 12.2 Confidence in Institutions across Nations

Confidence in political institutions is low in all four nations, with Americans more positive than Europeans.

	UNITED STATES	GREAT BRITAIN	FRANCE	GERMANY
National government	41	34	29	27
National legislature	36	36	35	26
Courts	66	60	40	60
Civil service	61	46	54	34
Political parties	22	18	16	15
Press	26	14	39	34
Major companies	32	37	40	26
Labor unions	36	30	39	34
Environmental groups	59	70	65	60

Source: 2005–08 World Values Survey.

Note: Table entries are the percentages expressing “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in each institution. Missing data were excluded from the calculation of percentages.

officials. These numbers suggest a growing public dissatisfaction with the style of representative government and the actions of elected politicians.

Support for a Democratic Regime

If we return to Citrin’s baseball analogy, the loss of trust in government and political institutions can have even more fundamental implications. It’s not just that the home team has had a losing season (or two, or three). Rather, it’s that people see most politicians and governments in most nations as suffering a long-term losing streak. Presidents, prime ministers, and chancellors alike have been replaced during this losing streak, but the skepticism continues.

At some point, we must worry that dissatisfaction about the team (the government or the political institutions) generalizes to dissatisfaction with the game itself (democracy and its values). Indeed, these doubts are growing. In 1973, the MORI poll showed that about half of the British public thought the political system could be improved quite a lot; in 2010 this had increased by two-thirds. Similarly, in 1988 the ALLBUS survey found that only 16 percent of Germans described the political system as needing much reform or as already broken; by 1994 almost three times as many people (44 percent) shared these sentiments. If politics were a baseball game, this implies that people want to see changes in the nature of the game and not just the players or managers in the dugout.

In earlier historical periods, dissatisfaction with politicians or political institutions often led to (or arose from) disenchantment with the democratic process itself. This was the case with the antidemocratic challenges that faced the United States and many European democracies in the 1920s and 1930s. Even during the years immediately following World War II, dissatisfaction with democracy in Europe was often concentrated among antidemocratic extremists on the Left or Right. If people lose faith in the norms and principles of the democratic process, they may reject government authority or question whether democracy is sustainable or desirable. Such sentiments would place democracy at risk.

But the news is not all bad. The available evidence suggests that the current situation is different from these historical examples. Support for democratic norms and procedures have grown over the past generation—even while trust in government has decreased. For example, long-term trends indicate that people have become more politically tolerant during the post-war period. Americans’ tolerance of five potentially contentious social and political groups has trended upward during the past four decades, and expressed support for civil liberties is more common (Dalton 2009a, ch. 5; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996).⁶ The extension of democratic rights to women, racial and ethnic minorities, and homosexuals has profoundly altered the politics of advanced industrial democracies within the span of a generation (also see chapter 6). Other evidence points to the breadth of democratic values among contemporary publics, especially among the young (Thomassen 2007; Dalton 2009a). Ronald Inglehart’s (1990, 1997) research on postmaterial value change also highlights the growing emphasis on political and social participation as core value priorities. At least in

principle, there is widespread public endorsement of the political values and norms that underlie the democratic process.

To tap support for the principle of democracy and a democratic form of government, opinion surveys typically ask whether democracy is the best form of government compared to all the rest. Although we lack long-term time series for this question, the current high degree of support suggests no major erosion in these sentiments (table 12.3).⁷ On average, about 90 percent of the public in advanced industrial democracies agree that democracy is better than other forms of government (also see Inglehart 2003; Dalton 2004, ch. 2). Another question in the WVS/EVS asked about support for the

Table 12.3 Support for Democracy

The democratic ideal is almost universally supported in these nations.

NATION	DEMOCRACY IS BETTER THAN OTHER GOVERNMENTS	DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IS GOOD
Australia	87	89
Austria	96	92
Belgium	90	92
Canada	87	91
Denmark	99	99
Finland	96	92
France	93	91
Germany	94	90
Great Britain	89	87
Greece	97	97
Iceland	96	96
Ireland	85	83
Italy	96	97
Japan	92	88
Netherlands	93	92
New Zealand	87	94
Norway	95	95
Portugal	93	93
Spain	96	96
Sweden	95	94
Switzerland	96	97
United States	88	86

Sources: 2008 European Values Survey; 1999–2002 and 2005–08 World Values Survey for the United States, Australia, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand.

Note: Table entries are the percentages agreeing with each statement. Missing data were excluded from the calculation of percentages.

idea of democracy. Assent to the statement “The democratic system is good” shows that support is nearly universal in Western democracies. Moreover, in comparison to a Eurobarometer survey of the late 1980s, support for democratic government has strengthened in most Western European nations.

In summary, this evidence suggests that current expressions of political distrust or disaffection are not a critique of democracy per se, as it was in the past, but exist among citizens who remain committed to the democratic ideal.

Community Support

A final aspect of political support concerns orientations toward the political community and society. Community support involves the system affect described by Almond and Verba (1963). A strong emotional attachment to the nation presumably provides a reservoir of diffuse support that can maintain a political system through temporary periods of political stress. Most Western democracies endured at the start of the Great Depression because people had faith that democracy would address the problems, and such a reservoir of popular identification helps a political system endure during periods of crisis. One would expect national attachments to also help societies manage the dislocations caused by the 2008 recession.

One measure of such feelings is pride in one’s nation. Figure 12.3 displays the percentages of citizens who feel very proud of their nation within the advanced industrial democracies in the early 1980s and again in the 2005–08.⁸ Overall, feelings of national pride are relatively high, but with significant national differences (Smith 2009).

National pride is exceptionally high in the United States: 76 percent of the public in 1981 and 65 percent in 2005 felt “very proud” to be an American (nearly all the rest felt “proud”). Those chants of *USA! USA! USA!* are not limited to Olympic competition; they signify a persistent feeling among Americans.

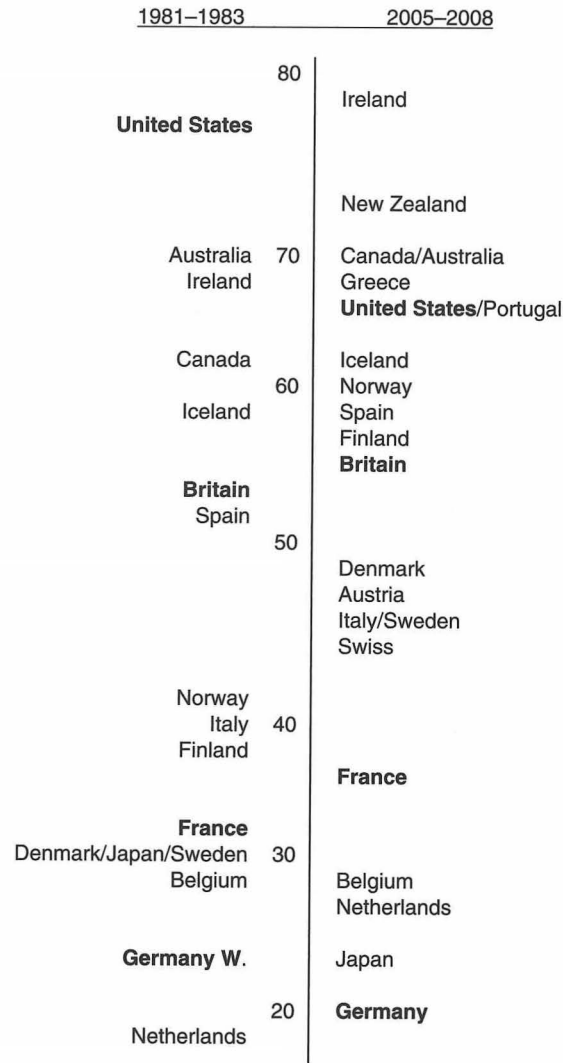
Most Europeans voice their national pride in more moderate tones; the relative raking of nations also has changed only marginally over time. Germans, for example, were hesitant in their expressions of national pride in the 1980s and are still today; the trauma of the Third Reich burned a deep scar in the German psyche in both West and East. Young Germans especially feel that the nationalist excesses of the past must never be repeated. The Federal Republic therefore has avoided many of the emotional national symbols that are common in other industrial nations. Germany celebrates few political holidays or memorials; the national anthem is seldom played; and even the anniversary of the founding of the Federal Republic attracts little public attention. Although most people are proud to be German, they refrain from any unquestioning emotional attachment to state and nation.

Beyond these cross-national variations, it’s clear that national pride hasn’t eroded over the past few decades. These surveys suggest that national pride is generally growing, which is surprising given the high baseline of opinions in the first survey in the early 1980s. When longer time series are available for specific nations, they too show a pattern of relative stability or growth in national pride over time (for example, Smith 2009). As one should expect

from affective feelings of toward the nation, these sentiments have been relatively impervious to the erosion in other aspects of political support.

Figure 12.3 National Pride

Feelings of national pride vary widely across democracies.



Sources: 1981-83 World Values Survey; 2005-08 World Values Survey; 2008 European Values Survey.

Note: Figure entries are the percentages feeling "very proud" of their nation. Missing data were excluded from the calculation of percentages.

Dissatisfied Democrats

As previously noted, by some measures this time may be considered the golden age of democracy. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, more nations in the world have become or strive to be democracies than at any other point in human history. Most of the other political ideologies that once stood as major rivals to democracy, such as fascism and communism, have lost their legitimacy. Democracy has brought peace, freedom, and prosperity to billions of people in the world.

At the same time, people have grown more critical of political elites, more negative toward political parties, and less confident of political institutions—and their attitudes represent a basic change in the political norms of democratic publics. The deference to authority and political allegiance that once was common in many of these nations has been partially replaced by skepticism about elites. In most democracies, people are more cynical about the key institutions of democratic governance. At the same time, however, people are simultaneously expressing strong support for the democratic creed.

These mixed sentiments produce a new pattern of "dissatisfied democrats"—people who are dissatisfied with political institutions but supportive of democratic principles (Klingemann 1999). Dissatisfied democrats appear to be another characteristic of the new style of citizen politics, although researchers debate this point.

The significance of the trends rests in part on what is shaping these new citizen orientations. Political scientists interpret these trends in dramatically different ways. The remainder of this section discusses the two contrasting views of the changes.

The Democratic Elitist Perspective

One group of scholars cites widespread political dissatisfaction as evidence of a crisis of democracy (Zakaria 2003; Macedo et al. 2005; Wolfe 2006). Some researchers claim that excessive public demands are overtaxing governments' ability to satisfy them. Thus, these analysts use the elitist theory of democracy (see chapter 2) to offer a solution to this crisis. In a crude exaggeration of democratic theory, they maintain that if a supportive and quiescent public ensures a smoothly functioning political system, then we must redevelop these traits in contemporary publics. The centrifugal tendencies of democratic politics (and the demands of the public) must be controlled, and political authority must be reestablished. Samuel Huntington assumed the ermine robes as spokesperson for this position when political trust first started to decline:

The problem of governance in the United States today stems from an "excess of democracy." . . . [T]he effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and non-involvement on the part of some individuals and groups. The vulnerability of democratic government in the United States comes . . . from the internal dynamics of democracy itself in a highly educated, mobilized, and participatory society. (1975, 37-38)

More recently, Fareed Zakaria (2003, 248) is even blunter in his critique of American democracy: “What we need in politics today is not more democracy, but less.” There is limited research on the Tea Party movement or the Occupy Wall Street movement, but I suspect these elitists would be critical of both as excesses of populism.⁹

In short, these analysts maintain that a crisis of democracy has developed because too many people want to apply its creed of liberty and equality to themselves but democratic systems cannot meet these expectations. The critics contend that democracy has become overloaded because minorities are no longer apathetic, women are demanding equality, students are no longer docile, and the average citizen is no longer deferential. If these groups would only leave politics to the politicians—and their expert advisers—“democracy” would again be secure.¹⁰

Another element of the elitist perspective calls for a reduction in the scale of government. These analysts argue that governments have assumed too large a role in society, which contributes to the overload. This tenet was one of the underpinnings of Thatcher’s, Reagan’s, and other neoconservatives’ attempts to limit the size of government starting in the 1980s and has been revived in reaction to the economic strains we now face. However, such calls for retrenchment are often biased in determining which programs the government should no longer support; usually targeted for cuts are social services or environmental programs rather than programs that benefit conservative constituencies.

John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (2002) claim that people want to be less involved in government; they suggest that democracy be reformed to spare them the burdens of democratic citizenship. This is a provocative argument, but it runs counter to the study’s own evidence as well as the evidence presented here and in other research. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s survey of American public opinion found that 86 percent favored more ballot initiatives and an expansion of democracy (2002, 75). Similarly, the British public strongly favors a variety of institutional reforms that will expand citizen access and input into the political process, such as greater use of referendums and direct election of local candidates (Curtice 2013).

Taken together, the cures offered by elitist theorists are worse than the problem they address; democracy’s very goals are ignored in its defense. The critics of citizen politics forget that democracy means popular control of elites, not elite control over the populace.

The New Politics Perspective

The New Politics perspective offers a contrasting image of contemporary democracy. Political dissatisfaction has generally increased the most among the young and the better educated—those who disproportionately hold New Politics values and who benefit most from the social modernization of advanced industrial societies (Klingemann 1999; Dalton 2004, ch. 5; Dalton and Welzel 2013). These individuals have higher expectations

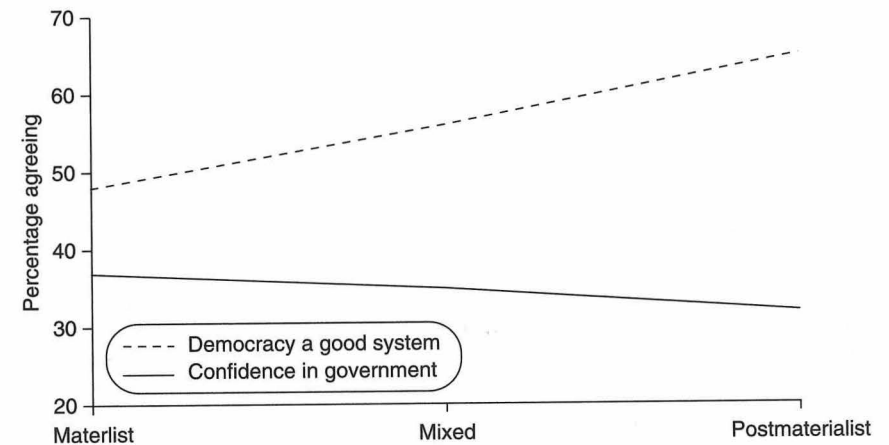
of government: they are more demanding of politicians and more critical of how the process functions. Because they follow politics and are more concerned about what government does, they hold government to a higher standard than people did in the past.

Consequently, dissatisfied democrats may represent another step in democracy’s progress toward its ideals. Just as earlier periods of dissatisfaction led to the expansion of the mass franchise, the granting of voting rights to women, and populist reforms that strengthened the democratic process, we may be in a new period of democratic reform.

The link between postmaterial value change and the growth of dissatisfied democrats is illustrated in figure 12.4. The figure shows that postmaterialists are distinctly *less likely* than materialists to express confidence in government. At the same time, postmaterialists are much *more likely* to believe that democracy is a good thing. Only 48 percent of materialists in our four core nations strongly agree that democracy is a good form of government, compared to 65 percent of postmaterialists.¹¹ Postmaterialists therefore illustrate the creedal passion in support for democracy that some analysts lament—but that offers the potential for democracy to move toward its theoretical ideal, on the horizon.

Figure 12.4 Changing Expectations

Postmaterialists are more supportive of democratic principles but express less confidence in their governments.



Source: Combined data from United States, Britain, France, and Germany from the 2005–08 World Values Survey.

Note: Figure plots the percentages of those strongly agreeing that democracy is a good system of government and those who are confident in the national government.

In short, the New Politics approach offers a different diagnosis of current patterns of political support. People today are better informed and more highly skilled than previous electorates, and they carry different expectations about how the democratic process should function. People are also more conscious of their political rights and more demanding in their individualism. The new style of citizen politics encourages a diversity of political interests (issue publics), instrumental choice in contrast to the affective partisan loyalty of the past, and more direct styles of political action.

Dissatisfied democrats are also likely to change their patterns of political participation to use protest, direct action, and other forms of contentious action (chapter 4). These new forms of activism often strain the democratic process, as demonstrators challenge established political elites and current government structures. The rise of new social movements and citizen interest groups further institutionalizes the changing nature of citizen politics. These groups change the style of interest representation, because people can focus their efforts on specific policy concerns—and work through methods of direct action. (One might add the creation of an omnipresent mass media to this change in the pattern of politics.) Public interest groups also present a challenge to political parties and the established processes of representative government. The structures of representative democracy that were created in the late 1800s often seem ill suited to deal with the plethora of new interests, articulated in new ways and functioning by new rules.

Democratic governments need to accommodate the changing patterns of citizen politics. For example, the structured system of representative democracy limits the potential for citizen participation, especially in Western Europe. Opportunities for electoral input are scandalously low for most Europeans; the option to cast only a few votes during a multiyear electoral cycle is not an admirable democratic record. Moreover, beyond elections, many democracies offer their citizens few ways to participate in the decisions of government that affect their lives. Indeed, governments often shielded themselves from public scrutiny and intentionally limited the direct impact of the citizenry—as in the constitutional structure initially devised by the founders of the United States (or the constitutional structure of many European parliamentary systems). The fundamental structure of contemporary democratic institutions was developed in the nineteenth century—and society has changed a good deal since then.

The emphasis on new forms of citizen access and influence is not simply a call for participation for participation's sake. Expanding citizen participation can open up political systems that have become sclerotized by corporatist policymaking, political cartels, and bureaucratized administration. The triumvirate of business-labor-government in many advanced industrial democracies often restricts the political interests of other groups. A system that distorts access to the political process is necessarily inefficient in meeting all of society's needs.

Opening up the political process may also prompt governments to become more responsive to a broader spectrum of political demands. This method doesn't increase the quantity of political demands—the needs of the environment, women, consumers, and other groups exist—but it ensures

that the demands receive fair attention from the government and thereby improves the government's ability to address all societal needs.

Greater political involvement also educates citizens in the democratic process. James Wright (1976, 260) noted a basic irony in the elitists' criticisms of citizen participation. The democratic elitists believe that governments can generate more support by convincing citizens of a lie (a sense of political efficacy that is fictitious) than by encouraging citizens to participate and learn of the necessary limits to their influence. The "big lie" may work for a while, but as soon as someone points out the gap between myth and reality, the political credibility of the system falters. It happened to the Eastern European governments in 1989–91. Call it co-optation, pragmatism, or Jeffersonian idealism, but involving citizens in the democratic process is one method to increase their identification with the process.

Finally, greater citizen input ultimately ensures the quality of government decision making. There is some evidence that an active, critical citizenry leads to better governance (Geissel 2008; Putnam 1993). As we noted in chapter 1, Thomas Jefferson viewed the public as the major constraint on the potential excesses of government officials. Citizen participation is not, however, a panacea for all of modern society's ills; even educated, informed, and politically involved citizens will still make errors in judgment. As Benjamin Barber (1984, 151) also noted,

Democracy doesn't place endless faith in the capacity of individuals to govern themselves, but it affirms with Machiavelli that the multitude will on the whole be as wise or wiser than princes, and with Theodore Roosevelt that "the majority of plain people will day in and day out make fewer mistakes in governing themselves than another smaller body of men will make in trying to govern them."

Since I presented this evaluation of contemporary democratic politics in the first edition of *Citizen Politics*, the calls for political reform have become more commonplace. And there are encouraging signs that politicians and governments are responding.

Significant institutional reforms are restructuring the democratic process (Cain, Dalton, and Scarrow 2003; G. Smith 2009). Many nations are reforming administrative procedures to give citizen groups access to the formerly closed processes of policy administration. In Germany local citizen action groups have won changes in administrative law to allow for citizen participation in local administrative processes. Similar reforms in the United States offer individual citizens and citizen groups greater access to the political process. New Freedom of Information laws and ombudsman offices are making government more transparent and accessible to its citizens (Cain, Fabbrini, and Egan 2003).

Other forms of direct democracy are also more apparent. Citizen groups in the United States and Europe are making greater use of referendums to involve the public directly in policymaking (Pállinger et al 2007; Bowler and Glazer 2008). More individual citizens and public interest groups are

turning to the courts to guarantee their rights of democratic access and influence (G. Smith 2009; Cichowski and Stone Sweet 2003). Environmentalists in many nations have gained legal standing in the courts so they can sue to curb the harmful actions of municipalities or government agencies.

Reforms can be seen within the structured system of party government. The formation of new parties is one sign of adaptation, but even the established parties are changing internally to give their members more influence. The term limits movement is one expression of these reformist sentiments. A majority of U.S. states have now enacted some type of term limits legislation, normally through citizen initiatives.

These institutional changes are difficult to accomplish. They proceed at a slow pace and often have unintended consequences. But once implemented, they restructure the whole process of making policy that extends beyond a single issue or a single policy agenda. The degree of institutional change during the past three decades rivals the reformist surge of the Populist movement of the early 1990s (Cain, Dalton, and Scarrow 2003). The processes of contemporary democracies are being transformed to reflect the new style of citizen politics.

Indeed, these adaptations reflect the ability of democracy to grow and evolve; the lack of such adaptivity is what brought about the downfall of communism. As German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf noted,

What we have to do above all is to maintain that flexibility of democratic institutions which is in some ways their greatest virtue: the ability of democratic institutions to implement and effect change without revolution—the ability to react to new problems in new ways—the ability to develop institutions rather than change them all the time—the ability to keep the lines of communication open between leaders and led—and the ability to make individuals count above all. (1975, 194)

Such change in the style of representative democracy is not without risk. The political process may experience some growing pains as it adjusts to greater citizen participation, especially in the more tightly structured European political systems.

A skeptical public is likely to act differently (Hetherington 2005). Public opinion surveys suggest that people who think their government wastes tax money and is unresponsive to their interests may feel they are justified in fudging a bit on their taxes or bending the law in other ways. The skeptical citizen may also be hesitant to serve on a jury or perform other public service activities. In short, political support is part of the social contract that enables democracies to act without coercion and with the voluntary compliance of the citizenry. Decreasing support erodes this part of the social contract.

Another potential problem is the possibility of a growing participation gap between sophisticated and unsophisticated citizens (see chapter 3).

Because the resources required to lobby government directly or to organize a public interest group are greater than those required to vote, a change in the style of political activity may leave behind those in society who lack the education and other skills and resources needed for direct action politics.

Democracies must also face the challenge of balancing greater responsiveness to specific interests against the broader interests of the nation. In the vernacular of political science, we have seen a dramatic increase in the expression of interests over the past generation but an erosion in the ability to integrate these interests in coherent government programs. In other words, citizen interest groups, social movements, individual citizens, and various political groups are now more vocal about their political interests and have greater access to the democratic process. At the same time, political institutions struggle to balance contending interests—and to make interest groups sensitive to the collective needs of society. The collective interest is more than just the sum of individual interests, and one of the pressing needs for contemporary democracies is to find new ways to bring diverse interests together.

Participatory democracy can produce political overkill, but it also contains an equilibrium mechanism to encourage political balance. In the long political history of the United States, the process has generally succeeded in retaining the benefits of new ideas while avoiding the ominously predicted excesses of democracy. We should remember that democratic politics is not supposed to maximize government efficiency or to increase the autonomy of political elites. Just the opposite. In fact, efficiency is partially sacrificed to ensure a more important goal: popular control of elites. Expanding participation is not a problem but an opportunity for the advanced industrial democracies to come closer to matching their democratic ideals.

In summary, the current crisis of democracy is really just another stage in the ongoing history of democracy's development. Democracies need to adapt to present-day politics and to the new style of citizen politics. As Dahrendorf (2000, 311) has observed, "Representative government is no longer as compelling a proposition as it once was. Instead, a search for new institutional forms to express conflicts of interest has begun." This process of democratic experimentation and reform may be threatening to some, and it does present a risk—but change is necessary. The challenge to democracies is to discover whether they can continue to evolve, to guarantee political rights, and to increase the ability of citizens to control their lives. Can we move democracy closer to its theoretical ideals?

Suggested Readings

Dalton, Russell. 2004. *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Dalton, Russell, and Christian Welzel, eds. 2013. *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hetherington, Marc. 2005. *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hibbing, John, and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 2002. *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, Pippa. 2011. *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
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- Nye, Joseph, Philip Zelikow, and David King. 1997. *Why People Don't Trust Government*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pharr, Susan, and Robert Putnam, eds. 2000. *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Notes

1. In the mid-1980s, Samuel Huntington (1984) was explaining why there would be no more democracies in the world, a theme consistent with his elitist view of democracy. By the end of the decade, he was describing democratization as a wave that was transforming the international order (Huntington 1991).
2. The argument is also made that diffuse regime support existed in other Western democracies in the 1930s and that dissatisfaction focused only on the performance of political elites. These beliefs were channeled within the political process, and the basic structure of democratic government persisted in the United States, Britain, and France.
3. The question wording and coding categories differ slightly across nations, so one shouldn't directly compare the cross-national levels of support in the figure. For such comparisons, see Norris (2011) and tables 12.2 and 12.3 in this chapter.
4. Watch old episodes of the television program *West Wing*. In seven seasons, there are only a handful of times when anyone except his immediate family doesn't address Jed Bartlett as "Mr. President."
5. For a more extensive comparison of confidence in institutions, see Dalton (2004) and Norris (2011).
6. Some counter evidence is apparent for Britain, where the British Social Attitudes survey shows a drop in tolerance and civil liberties in 2005

- (Johnson and Gearty 2007). But a good deal of time has passed since the previous survey, and the 2005 result may have been affected by the terrorist attacks in London that occurred in the midst of the interviewing for the survey.
7. The two questions were as follows: "Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government. Do you agree or disagree?" and "Would you say it's a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of governing this country: Having a democratic political system?"
 8. The 2005–08 World Values Survey shows little change for the four core nations: United States (93 percent), Britain (86 percent), France (86 percent), and Germany (68 percent). The question was asked, "How proud are you to be (nationality)?" The responses were (1) very proud, (2) quite proud, (3) not very proud, and (4) not at all proud. The figure presents the "very proud" and "proud" responses.
 9. In fact, throughout 2011 Zakaria used his appearances on CNN to call the Tea Party antidemocratic and a threat to democracy; then various Fox News reporters were equally critical about Occupy Wall Street.
 10. Huntington's advice on limiting political demands overlooks the possibility of constraining the input of Harvard professors, corporate executives, and the upper class. His focus solely on the participation of average citizens suggests that he has confused the definitions of plutocracy and democracy.
 11. These results are from the 2005–08 World Values Survey combining results from the United States, Britain, France, and Germany. The democracy item asks about approval of a democratic form of government; the confidence in government question is the same as presented in table 12.2.