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Journal of Democracy, Volume 29, Number 4, October 2018, pp. 136-150
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0069>



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LIBERAL DEMOCRACY'S CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

Richard Wike and Janell Fetterolf

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Liberal democracy is experiencing a crisis of confidence. Scholars and pundits may disagree about the nature and depth of the problem, but few would argue that nothing is amiss. Commentators decry an increasingly familiar list of trends, including weakening civil liberties, eroding democratic norms, rising nativism, and growing support for parties and leaders whose commitment to democratic values and practices seems shaky. Progress toward democracy has been stalled or reversed in many emerging and developing nations, while several wealthy, supposedly “consolidated” democracies have experienced significant and unexpected setbacks.

These anxieties are being driven not only by subjective observations of political dynamics, but also by a growing body of data. Indices designed to measure the health of democracy generally tell a similar and dispiriting story. Freedom House’s 2018 *Freedom in the World* report found democratic declines in 71 countries, while only 35 registered improvements, marking the twelfth year in a row in which the organization has documented a deterioration in democracy around the world.¹ The Economist Intelligence Unit likewise reported a global decline in democracy in 2017, with particularly worrisome trends for free speech and media freedom.²

Public-opinion data have also supplied plenty of reasons for concern. In these pages and elsewhere, Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk have used World Values Survey (WVS) data to document declining support for democracy and growing support for nondemocratic forms of government among the publics of established democracies.³ The recent success of populist parties in Europe has spawned numerous studies that delve into the forces underlying this antiestablishment wave. And in the

United States, Bright Line Watch and Democracy Project surveys have found that, although Americans continue to want democracy, many are frustrated with the way the country's political system is functioning. A recent Democracy Fund survey also showed widespread support for democracy in the United States, but revealed that notable minorities display at least some fondness for authoritarian approaches.⁴

Recent surveys by Pew Research Center shed further light on global public opinion regarding democracy. The results suggest that democracy remains a broadly popular idea and that publics in regions around the world largely endorse democratic rights and institutions. Yet these surveys also find in many nations a surprisingly high degree of openness to nondemocratic modes of governing. And even though people tend to believe it is important to live in a country where democratic rights are respected, support for these rights is often tepid. Moreover, it is clear that people around the world have very different understandings of individual rights and the boundaries of individual liberty. In short, liberal democracy is popular among average citizens, but their commitment to this system of government is frequently underwhelming.

Representative Democracy and Its Rivals

To explore these issues, Pew Research Center in 2017 conducted a 38-nation survey that asked respondents about five different approaches to governing: representative democracy, direct democracy, rule by experts, military rule, and rule by a strong leader who "can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts."⁵ For each of these options, respondents were asked whether the approach in question would be a very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad, or very bad way of governing their country. These questions are similar to items that have been asked on previous waves of the WVS, although there are differences. For instance, the WVS asks about "democracy" in general, whereas the Pew survey included separate items on representative and direct democracy. This survey thus allows us to examine attitudes specifically toward representative democracy, as well as four potential alternatives to this system.

The results show that representative democracy has wide appeal (see Figure 1 below). Across the 38 nations surveyed, a median of 78 percent of respondents say that "a democratic system where representatives elected by citizens decide what becomes law" is a very or somewhat good way to govern. More than half hold this view in every nation polled. Still, the intensity of support for representative democracy is often limited. The median share of respondents who say it is a *very* good way to run a country is just 33 percent, and there are only five nations in which half or more give this response. Reservations about representative democracy are especially common in Latin America: More than 30

FIGURE 1—SUPPORT FOR REPRESENTATIVE AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Representative Democracy - % responding “a democratic system where representatives elected by citizens decide what becomes law” is a very or somewhat good way to govern their country.

Direct Democracy - % responding “a democratic system where citizens, not elected officials, vote directly on major national issues to decide what becomes law” would be a very or somewhat good way to govern their country.



Source: Pew Research Center, 2017 Global Attitudes Survey.

percent in Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Brazil, and Peru consider it to be a very or somewhat bad approach to governing.

While publics around the globe largely say that representative democracy is a good thing, there is also considerable support for direct democracy. A median of 66 percent across the 38 countries believe that “a democratic system where citizens, not elected officials, vote directly on major national issues to decide what becomes law” would be a very or somewhat good way to govern their country. Direct democracy is broadly appealing across regions and among nations in all income categories (high, middle, and low). There are only two countries (Tunisia and Jordan) in which majorities say it would be a very or somewhat bad approach. Perhaps notably, support for direct democracy is relatively low in the post-Brexit United Kingdom, where 56 percent consider it a good way to make national decisions.

Nondemocratic approaches to governing are less popular globally than either representative or direct democracy (see Figure 2 below). Nonetheless, there is significant support for nondemocratic alternatives in many nations. In fact, the survey finds global publics almost evenly divided on the virtues of expert rule. A median of 49 percent across the 38 nations polled say that a system in which “experts, not elected officials, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country” would be very or somewhat good. This approach holds particular appeal in several emerging and developing nations, including Lebanon (where 70 percent say it is a good idea), Vietnam (67 percent), India (65 percent), and Nigeria (65 percent). Fewer respondents in higher-income nations endorse expert rule. Still, at least about four in ten believe this could be a good way to govern in the United States, Canada, Spain, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands, South Korea, Japan, and Australia.

Although autocracy is less popular, it also has its supporters. “A system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts” is considered a very or somewhat good way to govern by a median of 26 percent across the 38 nations. Half or more of those surveyed in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines say this is a good system, as do 48 percent of Russians. Across the six sub-Saharan African nations polled, a median of 39 percent hold this view, and in South Africa the figure is a strikingly high 44 percent. The strong-ruler model is again less popular in wealthier nations, but it nonetheless receives notable levels of support in many of these countries: In the United States, Italy, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Japan, and South Korea, more than 20 percent believe that government by a strong leader could be a good approach.

Finally, a median of 24 percent across the countries surveyed believe that “a system in which the military rules the country” would be very or somewhat good. This option enjoys particularly high support in Vietnam and Indonesia, where roughly seven in ten say it could be a good way

to govern. Elsewhere in Asia, 53 percent of Indians and 41 percent of Filipinos share this opinion. In Africa, positive views of military rule are especially common in South Africa (52 percent), Nigeria (48 percent), Ghana (46 percent), and Kenya (45 percent). Four-in-ten or more also hold such views in Tunisia (42 percent), Mexico (42 percent), and Peru (40 percent). Even in long-established Western democracies, military rule has a significant number of supporters: Fully 17 percent—nearly one-in-five—in the United States, Italy, and France believe a political system where the military is in charge could be good.

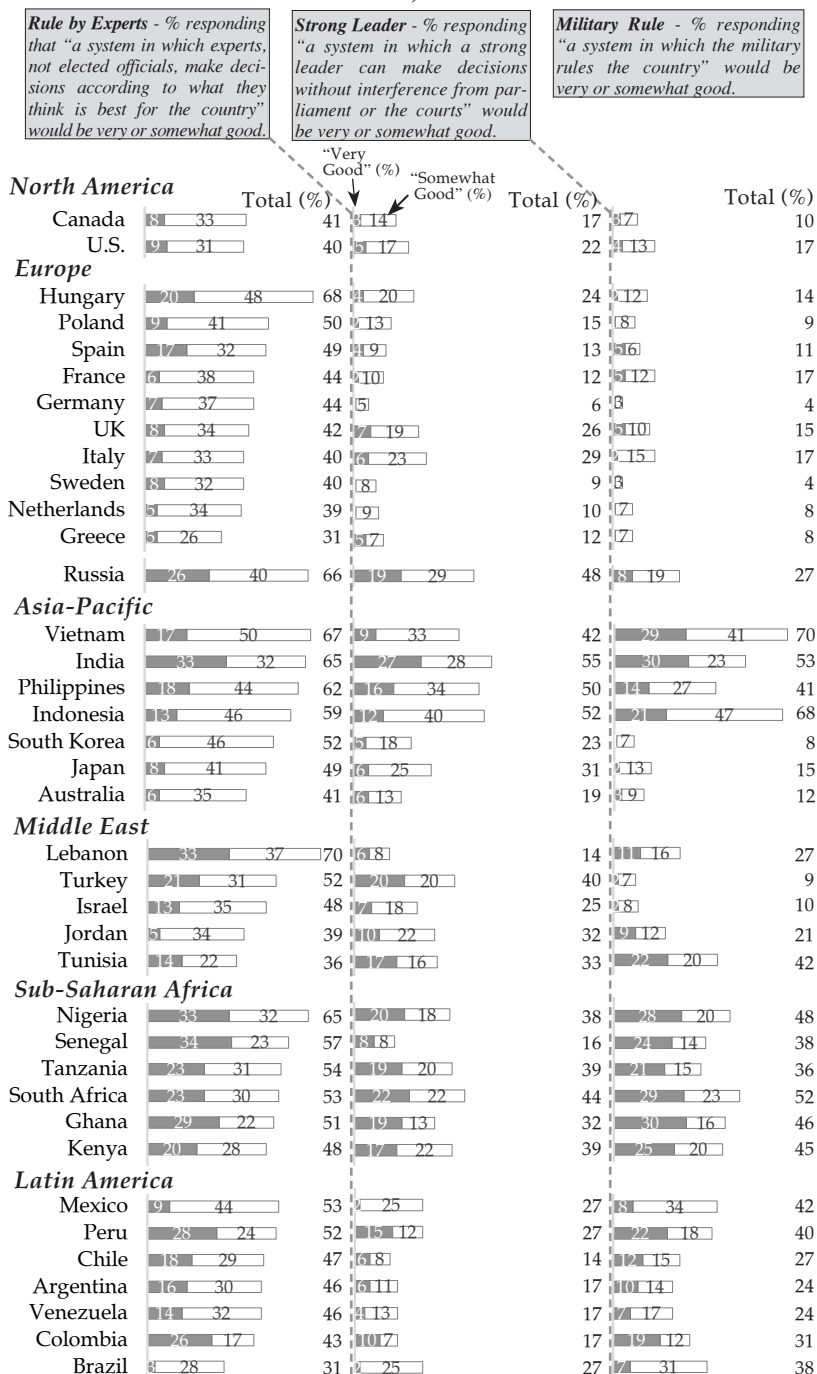
Another way of gauging the popularity of nondemocratic alternatives is to calculate the percentage of people in each country willing to entertain at least one such alternative. In 34 of 38 countries, half or more of the public views at least one nondemocratic approach—expert rule, autocracy, or military rule—as a good way to govern. The percentages are highest in certain emerging and developing nations, such as Vietnam (88 percent) and Nigeria (85 percent), although many in economically advanced nations also endorse at least one nondemocratic option. This includes 64 percent of respondents in Japan, 60 percent in South Korea, 59 percent in Israel, 57 percent in the United Kingdom, 56 percent in France, 56 percent in Spain, 55 percent in Australia, 53 percent in the United States, 51 percent in Italy, and 50 percent in Canada.

Although few people actually reject representative democracy, many appear open to multiple options when it comes to types of government. Particularly large shares of respondents in India (34 percent) and Indonesia (31 percent) say all five approaches could be good. Among the 79 percent of Italians who believe representative democracy is a good approach, roughly eight in ten believe the same about direct democracy, while notable minorities say this about expert rule (45 percent), autocracy (28 percent), and military rule (17 percent).

Ideology, Demography, Democracy

To explore the factors that correlate with opinions about democracy, we examine the bivariate relationships between a range of attitudinal, ideological, and demographic variables on the one hand and attitudes toward various forms of government on the other. For example, we categorize respondents as either high-income or low-income depending on whether their household incomes fall above or below the median for their country. Then we compare the percentages of people who hold a political attitude—say, support for representative democracy, or openness to one of its alternatives—in each of the two income groups. Where we find a statistically significant difference between the two groups in the same direction across many countries—for instance, if people with lower incomes are less supportive of representative democracy in many countries and few if any countries show an

**FIGURE 2—SUPPORT FOR RULE BY EXPERTS,
A STRONG LEADER, OR THE MILITARY**



Source: Pew Research Center, 2017 Global Attitudes Survey.

association in the opposite direction—we take that as a sign of a broad cross-national pattern.

One such pattern emerges when we look at respondents' ideological beliefs: Support for nondemocratic approaches, specifically autocracy and military rule, is often greater on the political right. In 22 countries, the survey asked respondents to place themselves on a left-right spectrum.⁶ The results show that in several nations people on the right are more likely to favor a government with a strong leader who can make decisions without interference from parliament and the courts. Those on the right are significantly more likely to endorse this model (with a double-digit gap between right and left) in Italy, the United Kingdom, Israel, the United States, Canada, Chile, Greece, and Germany; the difference between right and left is 20 percentage points in South Korea and Australia. In the former, 35 percent of those on the right say the strong-leader model would be good, while only 20 percent in the center and 15 percent on the left take this position. There is also a double-digit gap in Venezuela, ruled for many years by left-wing autocrat Nicolás Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chávez, but here the difference runs in the opposite direction: Just 9 percent on the right and 10 percent in the center back autocracy, compared with 40 percent on the left.

Venezuelans on the left are also more likely to support military rule (45 percent of these respondents say it would be a good approach, while just 21 percent in the center and 16 percent on the right agree). Hungary is the only other country polled where those on the left are more likely to endorse military rule. In 11 nations, people on the right are significantly more likely than those on the left to favor having the military in charge. The divide is especially large in two countries that have had right-wing military dictatorships in the relatively recent past: Among Chileans on the right, 41 percent back military rule, compared with 17 percent in the center and 20 percent on the left. In Spain this form of government receives support from 17 percent on the right, but only 9 percent in the center and 6 percent on the left.

The survey data also show an association between attitudes toward populist parties (on both the right and left) and support for certain alternatives to representative democracy. People with a favorable view of the extreme-right National Front in France, for example, are more likely to offer positive opinions about military rule, and the same is true in the United Kingdom among supporters of the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP). Direct democracy is also particularly popular among supporters of UKIP, which strongly backed the Leave position in the Brexit referendum. Supporters of populist parties in other European countries are similarly more likely to endorse direct democracy. In the Netherlands, 77 percent of people with a positive opinion of Geert Wilders's right-populist Party for Freedom favor a system in which citizens would vote directly on major national issues, compared with just 49 percent

among those who give the party a negative rating. In Spain, 88 percent of Podemos supporters approve of direct democracy, while just 68 percent among those with an unfavorable view of the left-wing populist party share this attitude. Many populist parties have featured calls for direct democracy in their campaigns, and the concept clearly resonates among their supporters, many of whom subscribe to these parties' preferred narrative of "the people" confronting a corrupt elite.

Education is a major dividing line in attitudes toward types of government. People with lower levels of educational attainment are less supportive of representative democracy in 19 nations.⁷ Among the non-democratic approaches featured in the survey, the education gap is especially wide regarding military rule. Those with less education are more likely to consider military government a good thing in 23 countries, and in 18 of these countries the difference is at least 10 percentage points. The largest gap exists in Peru, where 55 percent of those with less education view military rule positively, compared with 32 percent among Peruvians in the higher education group. There is an education gap on this question in the United States as well: 24 percent of Americans with a secondary education or less say rule by the military would be good for their country, compared with 7 percent of those with more than a secondary education. Americans with less education are also likelier than those with more education to favor the strong-leader model (28 percent versus 13 percent). Significant divides along educational lines on the question about autocracy are present in the United Kingdom, Poland, South Korea, Peru, France, and Japan as well.

There are few education divides in opinions about direct democracy, although people with higher levels of education are more likely to say this is a good way to govern in six of the seven Latin American countries surveyed. In the few countries in other regions where education differences emerge, however, those with more education are *less* likely to support direct democracy. For example, 70 percent of Americans with a secondary education or less say governing through referendums is a good approach, compared to 64 percent of those who have at least some college education.

Class and Income

At least since the publication of Seymour Martin Lipset's research on "working-class authoritarianism" more than half a century ago, scholars have debated the role that class and income play in shaping attitudes toward democratic and authoritarian rule.⁸ This survey finds that differences between income groups are more frequent in advanced—rather than developing or emerging—economies. People with incomes below the median for their country are less likely to support representative democracy in the United States, Canada, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Japan, South

Korea, and the United Kingdom. Those with lower incomes are also more likely to support rule by a strong leader in twelve countries and military rule in eighteen countries. In France, for instance, 19 percent of those with household incomes below the median endorse the autocratic model, and 26 percent believe military rule could be good; the corresponding numbers for the higher-income group are 8 percent and 11 percent, respectively.

The relationship between age and views about democracy has recently been the subject of considerable debate, sparked by Foa and Mounk's research showing that young people in a number of Western nations tend to see democracy as less essential for their countries than do their elder compatriots.⁹ Overall, the Pew survey finds relatively few consistent differences between older and younger adults in their views on systems of government. When differences arise, younger adults (those ages 18 to 29) are often more likely than those ages 50 and older to view the approach in question—whether democratic or nondemocratic—as a good way to govern. For example, young Mexicans are likelier than those ages 50 and older to support both direct (69 percent versus 53 percent) and representative democracy (66 percent versus 46 percent), but they are also more likely to say that autocratic rule would be a good option for their country (33 percent versus 19 percent). And there are signs that young people in some countries are particularly open to alternatives to representative democracy. For instance, in the United States, Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Japan, people ages 18 to 29 are more likely than those 50 and older to support expert rule, while in Canada, Spain, Sweden, South Korea, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Venezuela younger people are especially likely to say direct democracy would be good for their countries.

Beyond the 2017 survey on attitudes toward different types of government, other Pew Research Center polling sheds light on the limits of global support for democracy. In many nations over the years the Center has asked the following question: "Some feel that we should rely on a democratic form of government to solve our country's problems. Others feel that we should rely on a leader with a strong hand to solve our country's problems. Which comes closer to your opinion?" Results have consistently shown that significant minorities, and occasionally majorities, believe a leader with a strong hand would be better positioned to deal with national challenges. In 2012, for example, 61 percent of Pakistanis and 57 percent of Russians expressed this opinion.

Surveys also show that publics are often willing to prioritize economic progress over democracy. When asked, "If you had to choose between a good democracy or a strong economy, which would you say is more important?" significant numbers of respondents in many countries say the economy is more important. For instance, when this question was asked in post-Arab Spring North Africa in 2014, Egyptians were evenly divided in their responses (49 percent opted for a good democracy, 49

percent for a strong economy), while nearly 73 percent of Tunisians said they would choose a strong economy.

A 38-nation Pew survey in 2015 found that support for democratic rights and institutions was widespread, but sometimes lukewarm.¹⁰ Although the results showed broad global approval of the ideas of religious liberty, gender equality, multiparty elections, free speech, freedom of the press, and freedom on the internet, these sentiments were not always very intense.

Views regarding freedom of expression illustrate this pattern. Survey respondents were asked how important it is to live in a country where “people can say what they want without government censorship,” “the media can report the news without government censorship,” and “people can use the internet without government censorship.” Globally, medians of greater than 80 percent say all of these are very or somewhat important—but the share who rate these conditions as *very* important is much smaller. Only 56 percent say free speech is very important; just 55 percent say this about media freedom; and only half take this stance regarding free use of the internet.

Free expression and the other principles mentioned on the survey tended to be more popular in the United States, Latin America, and Europe than in the Asia-Pacific region, sub-Saharan Africa, or the Middle East. For example, 71 percent in the United States said it is very important that people can say what they want without government censorship, as did medians of 69 percent in Latin America and 65 percent in the European Union. Yet the median share of respondents who held this view was just 50 percent in Asia, 46 percent in Africa, and 43 percent in the Middle East. The study also highlighted the very different ways in which people around the world conceive of free expression and its parameters. Publics tend to support free speech in principle, but they also want limitations on certain types of speech. While a global median of 80 percent believe people should be allowed to freely criticize government policies, only 35 percent think they should be allowed to make public statements that are offensive to minority groups or that are religiously offensive. Even fewer support allowing sexually explicit statements or calls for violent protests.¹¹

Economics, Culture, Politics

Democracy continues to have wide appeal, but commitment to it is not always very deep. This low level of commitment can create an environment of relative tolerance for actions that bend or break democracy’s rules. It may open the door to restrictions on free expression, the overuse of executive power, or even military intervention in politics. Democratic institutions may be challenged and democratic norms may erode. In their recent book *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt

have made a persuasive case that norms such as mutual toleration and forbearance are crucial for a well-functioning democracy. These “soft guardrails” prevent democratic competition from becoming a fight to the death, and they place checks on leaders and parties with authoritarian tendencies.¹² But if citizens are open to nondemocratic approaches, would-be autocrats may find opportunities to transgress the unwritten rules that help to hold democracies together.

Among the multitude of factors shaping this unsettling moment in global public opinion are economic anxiety, cultural conflict, and political dysfunction. The link between economics and attitudes has been debated for decades, but many scholars have found a relationship between economic progress and the likelihood that a country will have a successful liberal democracy. The 2017 Pew survey finds that negative views about the economy are associated with lower levels of satisfaction with how democracy is functioning and less commitment to the principle of representative democracy. The poll asked about satisfaction with democracy in 36 nations, and in all but one of these, people who said the national economy is in bad shape were more likely than those who said it was in good shape to be dissatisfied with how democracy is working in their country. (The exception is Greece, where there are not enough people who say the economic situation is good to allow for analysis.) When it comes to representative democracy in principle, people who think the state of the economy is poor are less likely to believe this system is good for their country in 19 of 38 nations, including the United States, Canada, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. In the other half of the countries surveyed, views of the economy are not related to support for or opposition to representative democracy.

There is also less enthusiasm for representative democracy among people who are pessimistic about the long-term economic future. In 16 of 38 nations polled, support for this system is lower among those who believe that children growing up in their country will be worse off financially than their parents. For instance, among Peruvians who think that the next generation will be worse off, just 45 percent say representative democracy is a good thing, compared with 68 percent among those who expect today’s children to be better off than their parents.

Even in emerging nations that have performed relatively well economically over the past decade, there are concerns that the spoils of economic growth are not being shared equitably. Meanwhile, in Western countries economic anxieties in the wake of the Great Recession have been one factor driving the rise of populist leaders and parties on both the left and the right. In different ways, these parties have appealed to voters’ frustration by crafting narratives around economic injustice.

Culture also undoubtedly plays a role in the current crisis of confidence in liberal democracy. Liberal democracy’s principles include the

idea that all citizens should be treated equally regardless of race, religion, or ethnic background; yet in many nations immigration, growing diversity, or the empowerment of previously excluded groups has given

In surveys, many people say that their vote does not give them an adequate voice in national politics, that elected officials do not care what people like them think, and that average citizens could do a better job than elected officials of dealing with their country's problems.

rise to tensions that threaten these principles. Public-opinion data suggest that opposition to diversity and pluralism is linked with a lack of commitment to representative democracy. A 38-nation Pew poll in 2017 asked respondents, "Overall, do you think having people of many different backgrounds, such as different ethnic groups, religions and races, makes our country a better place to live or a worse place to live?" In thirteen nations, people who think diversity makes their country worse

are less likely than those who believe it makes their country better to say representative democracy is a good system. The difference is roughly 10 percentage points or greater in Spain, Israel, Mexico, Argentina, Australia, Sweden, Canada, and the United States. In South Africa, a nation with a tragic history of racial oppression and division, nearly three-in-four respondents (73 percent) who see diversity as an asset endorse representative democracy; among those who say diversity makes South Africa worse, just 54 percent hold this view. Another five nations show a similar, though only marginally significant pattern, while in the remaining countries views of diversity are not related to support for or opposition to representative democracy.

Culture figures prominently in the nostalgic rhetoric common among some contemporary populist movements. In their study of nostalgia as a cultural and political force in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, Sophie Gaston and Sacha Hilhorst of the British think tank Demos recently described "an omnipresent, menacing feeling of decline; that the very best of their culture and communities has been irreversibly lost, that the nation's best days have passed, and that the very essence of what it means to be French, or German, or British is under threat."¹³ These views tie in to anti-immigrant sentiment: Polling data make clear that many in Europe have restrictive, exclusionary notions of national identity that could be threatened by the recent wave of immigration. In a 2016 Pew survey, majorities in Hungary, Greece, Poland, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom said that to be truly Hungarian, Greek, Polish, and so forth, one needs to have been born in the country.¹⁴

Polling also shows how views about the past can shape attitudes toward democracy. The 2017 global survey found somewhat less enthu-

siasm for representative democracy among those who feel that people with whom they identify have not made progress in recent decades. In 23 of 38 nations, those who say that life in their country is worse than it was fifty years ago for people like them are less likely to say representative democracy is a good thing. For instance, 83 percent of Poles who think life is better than it was fifty years ago for people like them believe representative democracy is a good approach; among those who say life is worse, just 62 percent support this form of government.

The negative reaction to increased immigration has clearly had a cultural component in many nations, and fears about growing diversity and immigration from the Middle East and other regions have helped fuel recent upheavals in European politics. As Ronald Inglehart has recently noted, “The immediate cause of rising support for authoritarian, xenophobic populist movements is a reaction against immigration (and, in the United States, rising racial equality).” And as Inglehart also notes, “Economic insecurity can exacerbate these cultural pressures toward authoritarianism.”¹⁵ Recent debates about the relative power of economic and cultural dynamics as drivers of the rise of authoritarian populism may sometimes miss the degree to which these factors interact with, reinforce, and multiply one another.

The economics versus culture debate may also miss another source of discontent: politics. Survey findings illustrate the many ways people are unhappy with the current functioning of their political systems. When respondents in 36 countries in the 2017 global survey were asked whether they were satisfied with the way their democracies were working, a median of 52 percent said no, while 46 percent say yes. The same survey’s findings regarding the wide appeal of direct democracy further highlight public frustration with representative systems.

People generally like representative democracy in theory, but many are frustrated with it in practice. In surveys, many say that their vote does not give them an adequate voice in national politics, that elected officials do not care what people like them think, and that average citizens could do a better job than elected officials of dealing with their country’s problems.¹⁶

Moreover, this frustration with the political system is shaping attitudes on a variety of issues. A recent eight-country Pew poll conducted in Europe shows that negative opinions about economic issues and immigration are more common among people disillusioned with representative systems (those who feel that politicians do not care what they think and that ordinary citizens could do a better job than elected officials). And these respondents are considerably more frustrated than others with institutions such as parliaments, banks, the media, and the EU.

Economic and cultural factors—not to mention advancing technology and geopolitical influences—may be contributing to the current

backlash against democracy, but there may be more explicitly political causes at work as well. Although few average citizens seem to have given up on representative democracy or the fundamental rights and institutions of liberalism, their frustrations with how political systems are working are clear. These frustrations are manifesting themselves not only in support for new parties and leaders, but also in a willingness on the part of discontented citizens to consider other, sometimes less democratic approaches to governing.

NOTES

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6. This question was asked in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Venezuela. In the United States, the question asked was: "In general, would you describe your political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?"

7. For the purpose of comparison across countries, we standardize education levels based on the UN International Standard Classification of Education. The lower education category is below secondary education and the higher category is secondary or above in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia, Turkey, Venezuela, and Vietnam. The lower education category is secondary education or below and the higher category is postsecondary or above in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

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