# INTRODUCTION

This is a book about you, me, and the people around us—as citizens, voters, protesters, campaign workers, community activists, party members, and political spectators, we are the driving force of the democratic process. The spectacle of an American party convention, the intensity of a French farmers' protest, the community spirit of a New England town meeting, or the dedication of a German environmental group create an impressive image of democracy at work.

Yet, there is now an active debate on the vitality of contemporary democracy. During the past three decades, we watched in awe as the force of "people power" tore down the Berlin Wall, led to freedom in South Africa, and created a democratization wave on a global scale. Long-term social modernization in the West and globally has dramatically improved the income and living standards of the average person. Trends across the established democracies show that crime rates are down, life expectancy has increased, most people have more leisure time, women and minorities have more rights, and average incomes are higher (Pinker 2018). Social modernization also improves citizens' political skills and support for democratic politics (Welzel 2013). Political interest and overall participation rates have grown across the democratic world (Dalton 2017a; Vráblíková 2017). In many ways, it seems that democracy is working better now than in the past.

At the same time, however, new political challenges confront the established democracies. The rise of populist parties in Europe and the increasing fragmentation of these party systems create political strains in these nations. The surprising results of the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the Trump victory in the United States, and the almost instantaneous reinvention of the French party system are signs of major changes from the democratic politics of the past. New economic and cultural issues are creating new forms of political division: rising inequality, racial tensions, gender conflicts, gay rights, and other issues. These developments are apparent across the established democracies. I engage these new issues in this edition.

The claims of democratic malaise go deeper, however. Some of the leading political scientists warn that democracy is at risk. Various experts claim that social and civic engagement is weakening (Putnam 2000). Other evidence shows

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that contemporary publics are becoming skeptical about politicians, parties, and democratic political institutions. Or they claim that we are not good democratic citizens (Sunstein 2018; Achen and Bartels 2017; Brennan 2016; Caplan 2007). Contemporary democracies are supposedly facing a malaise of the spirit that arises from their own citizens and that erodes the very foundations of the democratic process. There are common criticisms of institutions and structures of democracies and their inability to match their democratic ideals (Mounk 2017; Wolfe 2006). Each week my news posts on Facebook include dire warnings about democracy's future, with different dire warnings the following week. I'm waiting.

How can this be the best of times, and the worst of times, at the same time? The previous six editions of this book discussed this ebb and flow in scholars' evaluations of the democratic process and its citizens. Indeed, this is a long-standing debate, because each generation seemingly argues about the vitality of democracy. Both of the contrasting perspectives are. Democracy is a dynamic system, and it changes to succeed and advance. This dynamism causes tensions and strains, but if successful it deepens and enriches the democratic process. The contemporary debate about democracy arises from the tremendous social changes that the established democracies have experienced in the past several decades. The political world is changing. Our puzzle is to understand how and why, and the implications of these changes.

This book focuses on the citizen's role in the democratic process, how this role has changed over time, and how these changes are altering the nature of democracy. The story is incomplete because we do not study the role of elites, interest groups, and other political actors. We also do not presume that the public is all-knowing or all-powerful. Indeed, there are many examples of the public's ignorance or error on policy issues (as there are examples of elite errors). The democratic process, like all human activities, is imperfect—but its strength lies in the premise that people are the best judges of their own destiny. The success of democracy is largely measured by the public's participation in the process, the respect for citizen rights, and the responsiveness of the system to popular demands. As Adlai Stevenson once said, in a democracy the people get the kind of government they deserve (for better or worse).

I also must acknowledge the complexity of studying the citizen's role in democracy. It is difficult to make simple generalizations about public opinion because the public isn't homogeneous. There isn't a single public. The public in any nation

consists of millions of individuals, each with his or her own view of the world and of their role in politics. Some people are liberal, some moderate, some conservative; others are socialist, reactionary, communist, or none of the above. Opinions on contemporary political issues are often divided—this is why the issues are controversial and require a political decision. Some people favor strict environmental laws; some see environmental standards as excessive. Some favor international trade; some are skeptical of its claimed benefits. The study of public opinion illustrates the diversity of the public.

In short, as social scientists, we deal with the most complex problem in nature: to understand and predict human behavior. Yet this isn't a hopeless task. Scientific public opinion surveys provide valuable tools for researchers. From a sample of a few thousand precisely selected individuals, we can make reliable statements about the distribution of attitudes and opinions (Asher 2016). An opinion survey allows the researcher to assess behavior as well as to study the motivations and expectations guiding behavior. Furthermore, we can divide a survey into subgroups to examine the diversity in individual opinions.

This book relies heavily on public opinion surveys. I do not claim that all we know about the public is found in the statistics and percentages of public opinion surveys. Some of the most insightful writings about people are qualitative studies of the topic. And yet, even insightful political analysts may make contradictory claims about the public. The value of the empirical method is that it provides a specific standard for evaluating different descriptions of public opinion or actions. Thus survey research is a tremendously valuable research tool for social scientists.

Drawing on an extensive collection of opinion surveys, this book examines public opinion in several advanced industrial democracies.[1] I describe how people view politics, how they participate in the process, what opinions they hold, how they choose their leaders through elections, and their images of government. These findings should help us to understand the public's role in the political process in contemporary democracies.

## COMPARING PUBLIC OPINION ACROSS NATIONS

If you have ever traveled to a foreign country, you have already learned the first lesson of this book. Humans have many values and beliefs in common, but there are often differences in our values and behaviors. For example, the British stand in lines; the Germans don't. The Americans love hamburgers; the French don't. We realize what is distinctive to a nation only by making these comparisons.

There are several advantages to the comparative study of public opinion across the established democracies. Although these nations differ in their governments and party systems, they share broad similarities in the functioning of the democratic process and the citizen's role in the process. A comparative approach is a way to identify those aspects of political behavior that apply across nations. General theories of why people participate in democratic politics should apply to people

regardless of their nationality. Theories to explain party preferences should hold for Americans and Europeans if they represent basic features of human nature.

In most instances, we expect to find similar patterns of behavior in different democracies. If our theories do not work similarly across nations, then we have learned something new and important. Science often progresses by finding exceptions to the general theory, which necessitate further theoretical work. The same applies to social science.

Comparative analysis can also examine the effects of political structures on citizens' political behavior. For example, does the nature of a nation's electoral system affect people's voting choices? Or, does the structure of political institutions affect the patterns of political participation? Each nation represents a "natural experiment" wherein general theories can be tested in a different political context.

Finally, even if we are interested only in a single nation, comparative research is still very valuable. An old Hebrew riddle expresses this idea: "*Question:* Who first discovered water? *Answer:* I don't know, but it wasn't a fish." Immersing oneself in a single environment makes it harder to recognize the characteristics of that environment. It is difficult to understand what is unique and distinctive about American politics, for example, by studying only American politics. Indeed, many students of American politics may be surprised to learn that the United States is often the atypical case in cross-national comparisons. American public opinion and political processes are unique in many ways, but we perceive this only by rising above the waters.

## CHOOSING NATIONS TO COMPARE

To balance our needs for comparison and attention to national differences, this book focuses on four nations: the United States, Great Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), and France.[2] I chose these nations for several reasons. By many standards, these are the major powers among the Western democracies. Their population, size, economy, military strength, and political influence earn them leadership positions in international circles. The actions of any of these nations can have significant consequences for all the others.

These nations also highlight the major differences in the structure of democratic politics (see table 1.1). For example, Great Britain has a pure parliamentary system of government. The popularly elected House of Commons selects the prime minister to head the executive branch. This produces a fusion of legislative and executive power, because the same party and the same group of elites direct both branches of government. In contrast, the American government has a presidential system, with extensive checks and balances to maintain a separation of legislative and executive power. French politics has a modified presidential system. The public directly elects both the president and the National Assembly, which selects the premier to head the administration of government. Germany has a parliamentary system, with the popularly elected Bundestag selecting the chancellor as head of the executive branch. However, Germany also has a strong federal structure and

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## Table 1.1 Comparing Political Systems

| National Characteristic | United States | Great Britain | Germany | France |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Population (in millions) | 326.6 | 64.8 | 80.6 | 67.1 |
| Gross domestic product/capita | $59,500 | $43,600 | $50,200 | $43,600 |
| Political regime established | 1789 | Seventeenth century | 1949 | 1958 |
| State form | Republic | Constitutional monarchy | Republic | Republic |
| Government structure | Presidential | Parliamentary | Modified parliamentary | Modified presidential |
| Chief executive | President | Prime minister | Chancellor | President |
| Method of selection | Direct election | Elected by Parliament | Elected by Parliament | Direct election |
| Legislature | Bicameral | Bicameral | Bicameral | Bicameral |
| Lower house | House of Representatives | House of Commons | Bundestag | National Assembly |
| Upper house | Senate | House of Lords | Bundesrat | Senate |
| Power of upper house | Equal | Weaker | Equal on state issues | Weaker |
| **Electoral System** | | | | |
| Lower house | Single-member districts | Single-member districts | Proportional representation and single-member districts | Single-member districts |
| Upper house | Statewide elections | Inheritance and appointment | Appointed by states | Appointed by communes |
| Major parties | Democrats Republicans | Labour Liberal Democrats Conservatives | Linke Greens Social Democrats Free Democrats Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) AfD | Communists Socialists Greens En Marche! MoDem Republicans National Front |

*Source:* Compiled by the author; population and GNP statistics are from the *CIA World Factbook, 2017*.

a separation of powers that is uncommon for a parliamentary government. These contrasting institutional forms should influence citizen politics in each nation.

Electoral systems are equally diverse. Great Britain and the United States select the members of their national legislatures from single-member districts, where a plurality is sufficient for election. Germany uses a hybrid system for Bundestag elections; half the deputies are elected from single-member districts, and half are selected proportionately from party lists. The French electoral system is based on deputies winning a majority in single-member districts, with a second ballot (*tour*) if no candidate receives a majority on the first ballot. Several studies demonstrated that such institutional arrangements can affect voting behavior and electoral outcomes (Shugart and Taagepera 2017; Dalton and Anderson 2011; Powell 2000).

The party systems of these four nations also vary. Party competition in the United States is usually limited to the Democratic and Republican parties. Both are broad "catchall" parties that combine diverse political groups into weakly structured electoral coalitions. In contrast, most European political parties are hierarchically organized and controlled by the party leadership. Candidates are elected primarily because of their party labels and not because of their personal attributes; most party deputies vote as a bloc in the legislature. Party options are also more diverse in Europe. British voters can select from at least three major parties; Germans have six major parties in the Bundestag. French party politics is synonymous with diversity and political polarization. Dozens of French parties run in elections, and a large number win seats in parliament. France, a nation of perpetual political effervescence, provides the spice of comparative politics.

When possible, I broaden the cross-national comparisons to include other affluent established democracies.
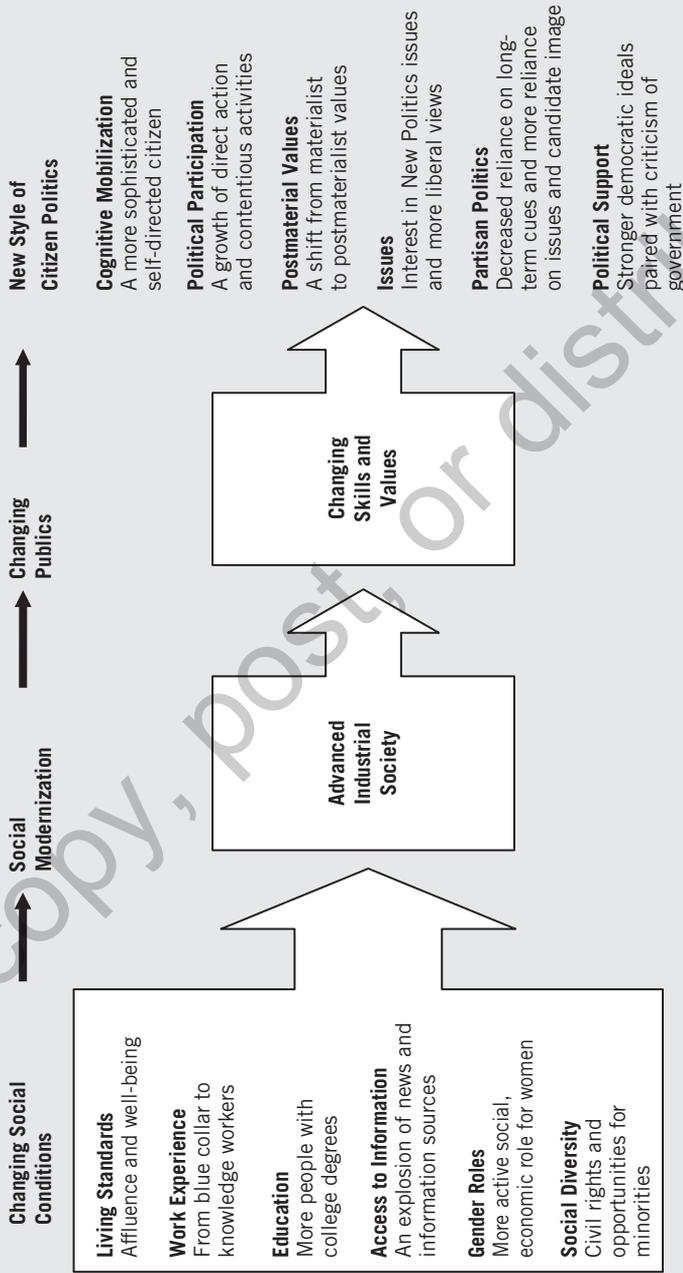
## A NEW STYLE OF CITIZEN POLITICS

The findings of this book can best be described by asking you to do a thought experiment: If you are a student, think back to what politics must have been like several decades ago—when your grandparents were your age. The Constitution has not really changed since then, the institutions of government are basically the same, and the Democrats and Republicans still contend in elections. But, as I argue in this book, the people and politics have changed—and this has transformed the democratic process.

The changing nature of citizen political behavior derives from the socioeconomic transformation of the Western societies over the past fifty years. These countries are developing a set of characteristics that collectively represent a new form of *advanced industrial* or *postindustrial* society (Inglehart 1990; Crouch 1999). These changes are summarized in figure 1.1.

The most dramatic changes involve economic conditions. An unprecedented expansion of economic well-being occurred in the second half of the twentieth

## Figure 1.1  The New Citizen Politics

Modernizing social conditions create an advanced industrial society where citizens' skills and values change, and this produces a new style of citizen politics.

**Changing Social Conditions** → **Social Modernization** → **Changing Publics** → **New Style of Citizen Politics**

**Living Standards**
Affluence and well-being

**Work Experience**
From blue collar to knowledge workers

**Education**
More people with college degrees

**Access to Information**
An explosion of news and information sources

**Gender Roles**
More active social, economic role for women

**Social Diversity**
Civil rights and opportunities for minorities

**Advanced Industrial Society**

**Changing Skills and Values**

**Cognitive Mobilization**
A more sophisticated and self-directed citizen

**Political Participation**
A growth of direct action and contentious activities

**Postmaterial Values**
A shift from materialist to postmaterialist values

**Issues**
Interest in New Politics issues and more liberal views

**Partisan Politics**
Decreased reliance on long-term cues and more reliance on issues and candidate image

**Political Support**
Stronger democratic ideals paired with criticism of government

century. The economies of Western Europe and North America grew at phenomenal rates in the post–World War II decades. For example, analysts describe the astonishing expansion of the West German economy as the *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Miracle). Average income levels in our four nations are several times greater than at any time in prewar history. By most economic standards, these four nations rank among the most affluent nations of the world—and the most affluent in human history. Current economic conditions may distract our attention from the basic economic trends over the past fifty years.

A restructured labor force is another major social change. The number of people employed in agriculture has decreased dramatically in most Western nations, and working-class employment has also declined. At the same time, employment in the service sector and professional occupations has increased markedly. In addition, because of the expansion of national and local governments, public employment now constitutes a significant share of the labor force. Richard Florida (2003) provocatively argued that a new creative class—individuals who create and utilize knowledge—are a vanguard of social and cultural change. Only a minority of jobs in today's economy existed in your grandparents' time. Moreover, social mobility and different career experiences change individuals' values and their outlooks on life. A blue-collar industrial worker on an assembly line, for instance, has a much different life experience than a computer programmer at Google—and this should affect their values.

Advanced industrialism also changes the context of the workplace and the residential neighborhood. Urbanization alters life expectations and lifestyles. It brings an increasing separation of the home from the workplace, a greater diversity of life experiences and interests, an expanded range of career opportunities, and more geographic and social mobility. With these trends come changes in the forms of social interaction, as communal forms of organization are replaced by voluntary associations, which are less institutionalized and more spontaneous. Communities are becoming less bounded; people are involved in increasingly complex and competing social networks that divide their loyalties, and ties to institutions are becoming more fluid.

Educational opportunities also have expanded rapidly over the past several decades. If your grandparents went to school in 1950 or before, most ended their studies with a high school education or less. Access to education steadily increased as minimal education standards were raised and university enrollments skyrocketed. Today, more than three-quarters of American youth and about half of college-age European youth have some form of tertiary schooling. This trend has fundamentally changed the educational composition of contemporary publics.

Citizen access to political information has also changed dramatically. The electronic media, especially television, have experienced exceptional growth, and access to other information sources, such as books and magazines, has grown. Even more revolutionary is the explosion of electronic information processing: computers, the Internet, blogs, Twitter, and related technologies. It seems like any piece of

information is only a Google away. Again, the information environment of today and that of the 1950s–60s almost bear no comparison. Information is no longer a scarce commodity. The contemporary information problem is how to adapt to life in cyberspace, managing an ever-growing volume of sophisticated knowledge.

One of the most basic changes involves the social, economic, and political status of women and minority groups. As noted later in the chapter, the social and political roles of women have been transformed from a restrictive and non-political role to active participants in society and politics. For instance, Britain, Germany, and several other European nations have had a woman head of government, and the 2017 French presidential election included a woman in the final runoff. Before 1945, French women were not even allowed to vote. Similarly, legal and social limitations on the rights and opportunities of racial and ethnic groups have diminished—most dramatically in the United States but also in Europe. Once "the public" was defined as white men (sometimes only property owners), and now the definition of citizenship is more inclusive.

Western governments have also expanded their involvement in society. Government is increasingly responsible for protecting and managing society and the economy. Many European societies have extensive welfare programs, in which a network of generous social programs protects the individual against economic or medical hardship. Unemployment, illness, and similar problems still occur; but under the welfare state, their consequences are less dire than in the past. In addition, most people now see the government as responsible for protecting the environment, ensuring social rights, enabling lifestyle choices, and a host of other new obligations.

Despite these past trends, many political analysts ask whether these patterns can continue. Everywhere, it seems, there has been a retrenchment in government social programs. Increased international economic competition in a globalized economy has created new economic strains within these nations. Elation about the end of the Cold War and the development of new democracies is tempered by worries about growing nationalism, international terrorism, ethnic conflict, and new financial burdens.

Admittedly, the miraculous economic growth rates of the post–World War II period now seem like distant history, especially in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession. Yet, the transformation of advanced industrial democracies involves more than simply the politics of affluence. Changes in occupational and social structures are continuing, and with them an alteration in living conditions and lifestyles. Expanded educational opportunities represent an enduring trait of modern societies. The information revolution is continuing—in fact, it is growing at an amazing rate. Advanced industrial societies are dramatically different from their 1950s predecessors. My expectation is that change will continue, albeit at a slower rate in the decades ahead.

This book maintains that one result of these social trends is the development of a new style of citizen politics. My premise is that as the socioeconomic

characteristics of these nations change, the characteristics of the public change as well. More educational opportunities mean a growth in political skills and resources, producing the most sophisticated publics in the history of democracies. Changing economic conditions redefine citizens' issue interests. The weakening of social networks and institutional loyalties is associated with the decline of traditional political alignments and voting patterns. Contemporary publics and democratic politics have been dramatically transformed over the past several decades.

The parts of this new style of citizen politics are not always, or necessarily, linked together. Some parts may be transitory; others may be coincidental. Nevertheless, several traits coexist for the present, defining a new pattern of citizen political behavior. This book systematically describes this new pattern of political thought and action. Figure 1.1 summarizes this causal process, with the new patterns of citizen politics listed on the right of the figure.

One aspect of the new citizen politics is political engagement (chapters 2–4). Expanding political skills and resources increase the cognitive sophistication of the citizenry. In addition, many people are placing greater emphasis on participating in political and economic decision making. Participation in elections is the most common form of political action—but voting is declining in most countries. However, protest, citizen action groups, boycotts, online participation, and direct forms of action are increasing. People are less likely to be passive subjects and more likely to demand a say in the decisions affecting their lives. The new style of citizen politics reflects a more active involvement in the democratic process.

Another broad area of change involves the values and attitudes of the public (chapters 5–6). Industrial societies aimed at providing affluence and economic security. The success of advanced industrialism fulfills many basic economic needs for a sizable sector of society. Thus, some people are shifting their concerns to new noneconomic cultural issues (Inglehart 1990, 2018). Several of these issues are common to affluent democracies: environmental protection, gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and social equality. In the last decade or so, liberal government policies on these issues have also generated a conservative opposition and new conservative parties. In some instances, historic conditions focus these general concerns on specific national problems—for example, racial equality in the United States, regional conflicts in Britain, or center–periphery differences in France. Many of these issues are now loosely connected to an alternative political agenda that is another element of the new style of citizen politics.

Partisan politics is also changing (chapters 7–11). Comparative electoral research used to emphasize the stability of democratic party systems. This situation has changed. There is increased fragmentation and volatility of these party systems. Declining class voting differences reflect the general erosion in the social bases of voting. In most nations, the public's identification with political parties and affect toward parties has decreased. These patterns have produced a partial *dealignment* of contemporary party systems (Dalton 2012; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000).

These trends are at least partially the result of the addition of new issues to the political agenda and the difficulties of the established parties to respond to these issues. New parties have arisen across the face of Europe—ranging from green parties to new right parties. Trump's 2016 victory in the United States followed a wave of new far-right parties in Europe. The British decision to vote against European Union membership is one example, and the leader of France's far-right party was in the two-party runoff in the 2017 French elections. This book will discuss the evidence of whether this is a sign of democracy's changing future, or a minority protest against how much progressive change is reshaping these societies.

These new political tensions also increase party volatility. Unsophisticated voters once relied on social-group cues and partisan cues to make their political decisions. Because of the dramatic spread of education and information sources, more people can now deal with the complexities of politics and make their own political decisions. Consequently, issues and other short-term factors are more important as influences on voting choices. The new style of citizen politics features a more issue-oriented and candidate-oriented electorate.

Finally, attitudes toward government represent a new paradox for democracy (chapter 12). The democratic process has become more inclusive, and the government has generally improved the quality of life. But at the same time, people have become more critical of the government. The conflict over new issues and new participation patterns may offer a partial explanation of these trends. In addition, emerging value priorities that stress self-actualization and autonomy may stimulate skepticism of elite-controlled hierarchical organizations (such as bureaucracies, political parties, and large interest groups).

One thing you quickly learn about political science is that serious researchers can reach different conclusions based on similar evidence. Many scholars still question this book's basic premises of political change. However, over the previous decades and editions of this book, I have seen a growing body of evidence that affirms the basic premises of this study. Still, begin your reading from a skeptical position, and then see if the evidence supports it. This is what good researchers do.

This is an exciting time to study public opinion because so much is changing. The puzzle for researchers, students, and citizens is to understand how democracy functions in this new context. This new style of citizen politics creates strains for the political systems of advanced industrial democracies. Protests, social movements, partisan volatility, and political skepticism are disrupting the traditional political order. Adjustment to new issue concerns and new patterns of citizen participation may be a difficult process. More people now take democratic ideals seriously, and they expect political systems to live up to those ideals. Democracy isn't an end state, but an evolutionary process. Thus, the new style of citizen politics is a sign of vitality and an opportunity for these societies to make further progress toward their democratic goals.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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## NOTES

1. See appendix A for information on the major public opinion surveys used in this book. Neither these archives nor the original collectors of the surveys bear responsibility for the analyses presented here.
2. For a brief review of these nations, see Powell, Strom, Manion, and Dalton (2017). More detailed national studies are found in Norton (2010) for Britain; Langenbacher and Conradt (2017) for Germany; and Safran (2008) for France.