CHAPTER TWELVE

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 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 democracy. The Cold War was over, and the West had won. In many ways, people in the affluent democracies live longer, healthier, freer, safer and more enriching lives than any of their predecessors (Pinker 2018).

Despite these advances, public opinion surveys find that people are more critical of politicians, political parties, and political institutions than they were a generation ago. 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. Political dissatisfaction is also common in other affluent democracies (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011; van Ham et al. 2017).

In recent years, some scholars have gone further and claimed that growing political cynicism has generalized to discontent with the democratic process itself. Unresponsive elites, growing inequality, unaddressed social needs and other problems fuel this dissatisfaction. The rise of populist movements, polarized politics, and

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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

similar trends have further stimulated a chorus of voices claiming that American democracy is at risk (Mounk 2018; Sunstein 2018; Wolfe 2006). A sense of malaise is clearly in the air, at least among some experts. For example, if you are fortunate enough to browse through Paris bookshops, you might see titles such as *France in Freefall*, *Bankrupt France*, and *France's Misfortune*. In Germany, recent books and films also reflect a pessimistic mood: *Nervous Republic*, *Fear for Germany*, and *The End of Germany*. Barnes and Noble in the United States displays a similar list of titles on its new books display. Apparently, pessimism sells. It is an ironic puzzle if while enjoying the fruits of economic and political development, people are really losing faith in the democratic process.

Admittedly, anxiety about the health of democracy is a regular feature of political science and political punditry. An important debate about America's postwar goals occurred during the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, President John F. Kennedy asked Americans to renew their commitment to state and nation, and Watergate tested the vitality of democratic process (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. But the debate continues; a recent Google search found almost as many results for democratic failure as for democratic success–over 320 million results for each.

It does seem that attitudes toward government are changing in basic ways, and citizens in most affluent 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 (Dalton and Welzel 2015).

This chapter looks at how people judge the democratic process today. How is it that as democracy celebrates its successes 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 patterns and the implications for the democracy's future.

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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. 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 political officeholders or the broader 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

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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 ingrained 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—similar to Almond and Verba's emphasis on system affect. 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.

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. 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. These young people led the populist revolt in the East that weakened the regime in the fall of 1989. Opinion surveys in early 1990 found a broad endorsement of democracy among citizens in the communist east.

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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.

Recent comparative studies have 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

Several 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 received 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 affluent democracies.

Rather than focus on individual officeholders, we examine citizen images of political leaders in general. A variety of evidence points to Americans' decreasing trust in 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

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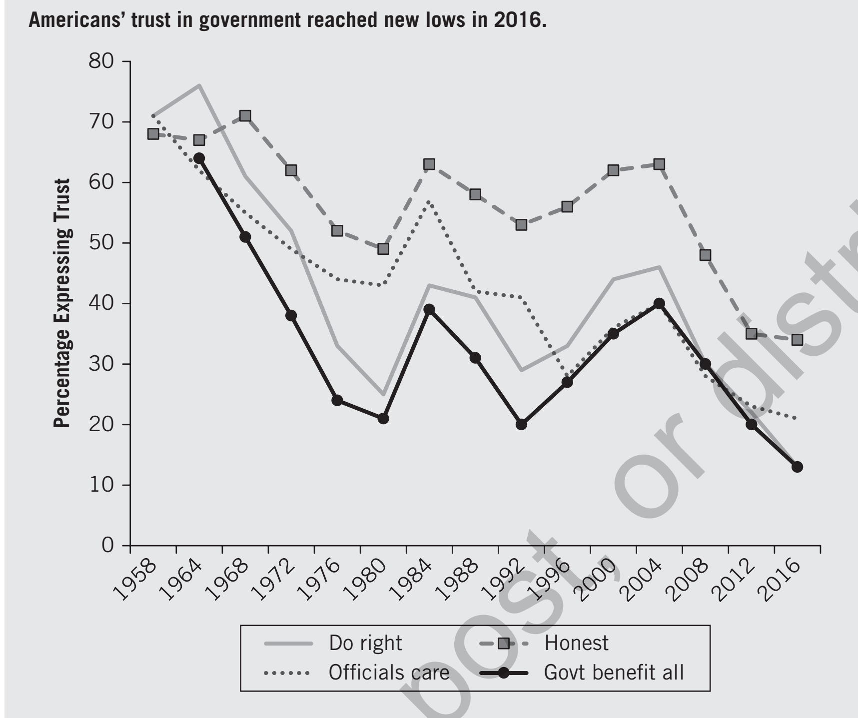
Figure 12.1 Trust in Political Elites



Source: American National Election Studies, 1958–2016.

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 2016 elections, all four trust measures recorded historic lows. Politicians' indifference to these trends probably contributed to the populist revolt of 2016.

Virtually all long-term public opinion series show similar downward trends. For example, since 1966 the Harris poll has asked, "The people running the country don't really care what happens to you." In 1966, only 29 percent shared this opinion; in 2016, a full 82 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, there are events that may have diminished the reputations of elected politicians: Watergate, the House banking scandal, Iran-Contra,

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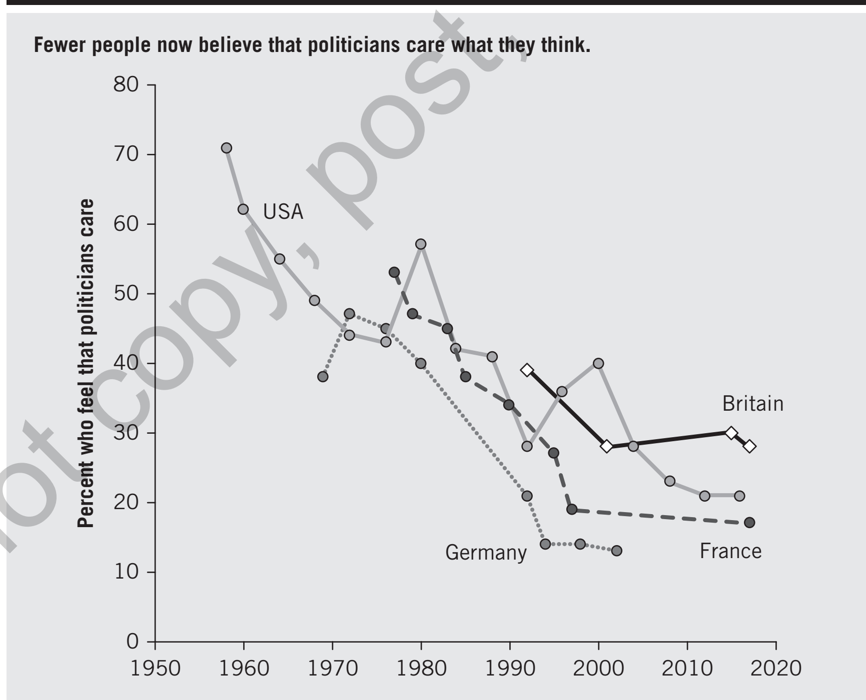
Bill and Monica, the invisible WMD in Iraq, and so on. In policy terms, candidates promise one thing at election time, but they regularly fail to deliver and may even violate their promises once in office (for example, George H. W. Bush's promise, "Read my lips, no new taxes"). In addition, some of the 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. It is difficult to get cross-nationally comparable survey data over a long time period. Figure 12.2 tracks one of the common questions: the belief that politicians care what people think.[3] In addition to the decreasing government support among Americans described above, the same broad pattern exists in the other three democracies. For example, in 1977 a majority (53 percent) of the French public said that government cares—by 2017 this group had declined

Figure 12.2 Do Politicians Care?



Sources: the United States, American National Election Studies, 1956–2016; Great Britain, 1992–2017 British Election Surveys; Germany, German Election Studies, 1969–2002; France, SOFRES Polls, 1977–97; French Election Study 2017.

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to 17 percent (Mayer 2002). Similarly, 39 percent of the British public believed politicians cared what they thought in 1992; by 2017, only 28 percent shared this opinion. Other trends from these four nations generally display the same pattern of abysmally low trust in elected officials (Norris 2011).

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 government from national surveys in sixteen Western democracies (Dalton 2004). Typically beginning in the late 1960s or 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 the government after the 2008 recession or a major political crisis. However, the puzzle is that this trend toward negativity occurred at a time when the political systems of most affluent democracies were making real advances in addressing the needs of their nations. In addition, these trends have paralleled an increase in citizen access and involvement in politics. It was the best of times and the worst of times. And now, when economic times are bad, dissatisfaction has generally deepened. The OECD (2017, 215) showed that confidence in the national government increased between 2007 and 2016 in twelve of its member states, but declined in nearly two dozen.

VIEWS OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

I am a big fan of *The West Wing* reruns on TV. Why do employees in the White House always use the term "Mr. President" when they talk to Josiah Bartlet (I think only Abbey Bartlet can call him "Jeb")? In part, it's a matter of respect and etiquette. In one episode they explain that 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.

So our next question asks whether skepticism about political elites has generalized to attitudes toward the institutions and structure of government. This question was first taken up by Arthur Miller (1974a, 1974b) who argued that Americans were generalizing their dissatisfaction with politicians and repeated policy failures into a 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.

In contrast, Jack Citrin (1974) 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, 987) 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

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deeper opposition to the game of democratic 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, more than four decades later, public disenchantment has deepened. 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 great deal of confidence in the executive branch (41 percent) and Congress (42 percent), but these positive evaluations dropped substantially over time (table 12.1). In the spring of 2016, only

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	2016	Change
Military	62	37	33	41	49	54	55	53	–9
Medicine	72	54	50	45	41	42	39	36	–36
Higher education	61	38	32	16	24	20	26	26	–35
Supreme Court	50	35	32	33	34	31	29	26	–24
Organized religion	41	35	30	26	24	20	22	20	–21
Major corporations	55	26	27	25	20	13	17	18	–37
Banks and finance	—	37	26	20	27	10	11	14	–23
Organized labor	22	14	12	11	10	13	12	14	–8
Executive branch	41	19	18	14	15	17	15	13	–28
Press	29	25	18	11	10	11	9	8	–21
Congress	42	17	14	10	13	10	7	6	–36
Average	48	31	27	22	24	22	23	21	–25

Sources: 1966 from Harris Poll; 1973–2016, General Social Surveys.

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

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Table 12.2 Confidence in Institutions across Nations

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

Political Institution	United States	Great Britain	France	Germany
Courts	66	60	40	60
Environmental groups	59	70	65	60
Civil service	61	46	54	34
Press	26	14	39	34
Labor unions	36	30	39	34
National government	41	34	29	27
National legislature	36	36	35	26
Major companies	32	37	40	26
Political parties	22	18	16	15

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.

13 percent of Americans had confidence in the executive branch, and confidence in business, labor, higher education, organized religion, the press, and the medical profession has also suffered declines over the past four decades. And coming in at last place is Congress with only 6 percent of Americans expressing great confidence. Thus, California's former governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, recently listed the things that Americans rate more positively than Congress in other surveys: hemorrhoids, Nickelback, traffic jams, cockroaches, root canals, colonoscopies, and even herpes.[4] It would be funny if it were not so true.

Furthermore, the drop in confidence in democratic institutions is not unique to the United States. Opinion trends in other affluent democracies show that trust in the national legislature has fallen in most nations—including all four of our core nations (Dalton 2004, 37–39). For example, the European Values Survey finds that British trust in Parliament decreased from 40 percent in 1981 to 23 percent in 2009; West Germans' trust in the Bundestag decreased from 51 percent in 1981 to only 37 percent in 2008.

The 2005–08 World Values Survey (WVS) compared confidence in institutions across the four core nations (see table 12.2).[5] The question wording and set

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of institutions differ from those in table 12.1, so the percentages 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. On average, 18 percent of people in these four nations had confidence in political parties—far below the average for the other social and political institutions. 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 U.S. courts and the courts in Europe than they are about elected government 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 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). If people lose faith in the norms or 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.

The recent rise of populist forces in Europe and the United States, intensifying political polarization, and low levels of political trust have led some scholars to claim that democracy is now in peril (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Foa and Mounk 2017; Mounk 2018; Sunstein 2018).[6] Much of this writing places the fault at the feet of the citizenry, claiming that their support for democratic values and democratic procedures is eroding. To some of these skeptics, there is a potential for democratic deconsolidation despite the progress of the past. And often these criticisms argue that the young are to blame (Foa and Mounk 2016; Denemark, Donovan, and Niemi 2016). The vitality of democracy is a very important topic, and we should be vigilant in its defense—so what does the evidence show?

The available evidence suggests that the current situation is different from previous historical examples. Support for democratic norms and procedures has grown

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over past generations as a function of social modernization—even while trust in government has decreased. For example, people have become more politically tolerant, and expressed support for civil liberties is commonplace (Dalton 2015, ch. 5; Welzel 2013). The extension of democratic rights to women, racial and ethnic minorities, and others has broadened citizen rights within the span of a generation (see chapter 6). Other evidence points to the widespread support of democratic values among contemporary publics (Thomassen 2007). At least in principle, there is a widespread public endorsement of the political values and norms that underlie the democratic process.

The heart of the issue, however, is whether current economic and political tensions have eroded support for democracy as a form of government. To assess support for democracy, the 2017 Pew Global Attitudes Survey asked for approval of different systems of government as a method to make political decisions.[7] This survey was done after the 2008 recession and the subsequent financial difficulties, after Brexit and Trump's victory in the United States, and as Europe struggles with a host of political challenges. Nevertheless, over 80 percent of the public in affluent democracies express approval for representative democracy (figure 12.3). The Pew survey also shows that over 70 percent favor an expansion of democracy to allow the public to vote directly on major national issues—something possible in very few of these nations. These endorsements of democracy are not unanimous, but the current high level of support allows little room for any major erosion in these sentiments in recent years.[8]

The most recent time series evidence comes from Gallup's annual Voice of the People (VoP) survey. In 2004, 82 percent of the public in our four core nations agreed with the statement that "democracy may have its problems, but it is the best form of government." This echoes Winston Churchill's famous line that democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the others. When the VoP was repeated in 2015, 81 percent of these four publics held the same positive view of democracy.[9] Slightly different questions from the World Values Survey show a relatively stable endorsement of democracy across the affluent democracies since the first surveys in the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s (Voeten 2017). We are inevitably frustrated by the workings of democracy, but support for the democratic process remains high.

The Pew survey also asked about support for experts making decisions according to what they think is best for the country, or a system where a strong leader can make decisions without interference from the other branches of government (figure 12.3). The interpretation of these items is a bit unclear in the context of affluent democracies. For instance, having a strong leader decide may reflect people's frustration with the stalemates and inefficiencies of democracy (specific support), rather than a preference for an autocratic system (diffuse support). For example, an April 2018 Pew poll found that about three-quarters of the American public (76 percent) say it would be "too risky" to give presidents more power to deal directly with the nation's problems. But even so, across the affluent democracies,

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Figure 12.3 Good Ways to Govern

Most citizens are positive about representative and direct democracy, while an autocratic government is a distant last place.

Source: 2017 Pew Global Attitudes Survey

Note: The figure presents the percentage in each group who think each method is a good way to govern; missing data is included in the calculation of percentages.

only 13 percent support autocratic decision making. By comparison, 48 percent of Russians support this view.

It is difficult to measure the depth of public commitment to democracy (Merkel and Kneip 2018; Alexander and Welzel 2017; Diamond and Platter 2008). This is because democracy has such a positive connotation that it is like supporting apple pie or chocolate—and frustration with democratic performance can be expressed as dissatisfaction with democracy. However, these results

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cautiously suggest 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. Still, it is important to keep monitoring public support for democracy in various ways.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

A final aspect of political support concerns orientations toward the political community and society. Community support includes 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. Western democracies that endured the onset of the Great Depression possessed a public that believed democracy would address the problems. Such a reservoir of popular support 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 basic measure of such feelings is pride in one's nation. Figure 12.4 displays the percentages of citizens who feel very proud of their nation within the affluent democracies in the early 1980s and again in 2005–08.[10] Overall, feelings of national pride are relatively high, but with significant national differences (T. Smith 2009).

National pride is exceptionally high in the United States: 76 percent of the public in 1981 and 65 percent in 2008 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 ranking 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. Young Germans especially feel that the nationalist excesses of the past must never be repeated. The Federal Republic therefore 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. The WVS surveys suggest that national pride is actually 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, T. Smith 2009). As one should expect from affective feelings toward the nation, these sentiments have been relatively impervious to the erosion in other aspects of political support.

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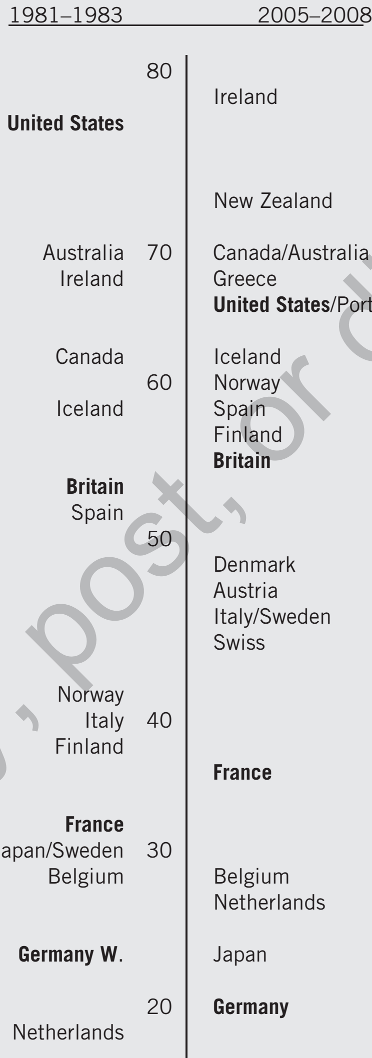
Figure 12.4 National Pride

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.

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DISSATISFIED DEMOCRATS

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.

And yet, people have grown more critical of political elites, more negative toward political parties, and less confident of political institutions—and these attitudes represent a basic change in the political norms of democratic publics. At the same time, 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 2014). Dissatisfied democrats are another characteristic of the new style of citizen politics, although researchers debate this point. The significance of the trends partially rests on what shapes 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

Some researchers claim that widespread political dissatisfaction occurs because excessive public demands are overtaxing governments' ability to satisfy them. These analysts use the elitist theory of democracy (see chapter 2) to offer a solution to this crisis. 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. Fareed Zakaria (2003, 248) offered his blunt critique of American democracy: "What we need in politics today is not more democracy, but less." More recently, Francis Fukuyama (2014, 471) wrote, "There is, in short, too much law and too much 'democracy' relative to American state capacity." I suspect these elitists would be critical of the Tea Party movement, Occupy Wall Street, or similar movements in Europe as excesses of populism, while downplaying the frustrations that give rise to such activism.[11] Elite pessimism about democracy continues.

Another elitist perspective questions the ability of many citizens to make wise political decisions (Achen and Bartels 2016; Wolfe 2006). In a different vein, John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (2002) maintained that people want to be less involved in government; they suggest that democracy be reformed to spare people the burdens of democratic citizenship. This is a provocative argument, but it runs counter to their own evidence (and figure 12.3) that most people favor the expansion of direct democracy. These elitist views also generate questions about whether the average citizen has sufficient understanding of democracy and appreciation for democratic values

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(Mounk 2018; Foa and Mounk 2016). Such elitist sentiments can lead to epistocratic solutions that limit the role of citizens in the democratic process (Brennan 2017).

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.

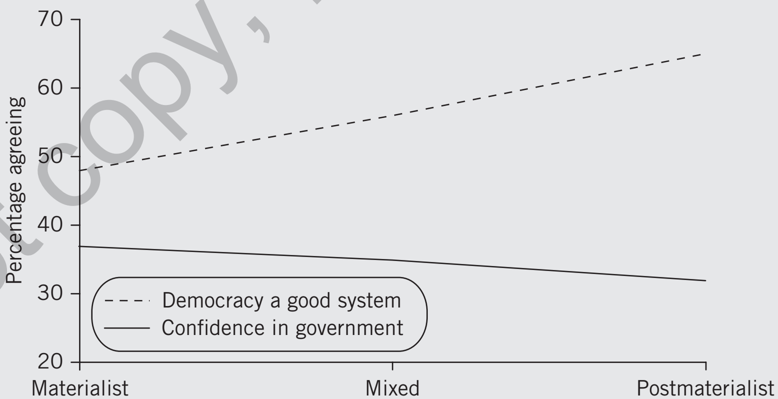
A Democratic Citizen Perspective

A contrary perspective offers a much different image of contemporary democracy. Political dissatisfaction arises because social modernization and cognitive mobilization lead citizens to have higher expectations of government; people are more demanding of politicians and more critical of how the process functions (Klingemann 2014; Dalton 2004, ch. 5; Dalton and Welzel 2015). Because more people follow politics and are more concerned about what government does, they hold the government to a higher standard than people did in the past.

We can see the link between social modernization and changing political expectations by correlating postmaterial values with two measures of political support. Figure 12.5 shows that postmaterialists are distinctly *less likely* than materialists to express confidence in government. Postmaterialists are dissatisfied with the political

Figure 12.5 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.

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status quo. At the same time, postmaterialists are much *more likely* to believe that democracy is a good thing. Only 48 percent of materialists in the four core nations strongly agree that democracy is a good form of government, compared to 65 percent of postmaterialists.[12] 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.

The dissatisfied democrat perspective offers a different diagnosis of current patterns of political support. It is ironic for academics to castigate current publics. They are the most educated in the history of democracy. They have greater access to political information than any prior electorate. They are more politically tolerant than prior publics. People are also more conscious of their political rights and more demanding in their individualism. If there is a problem with democracy, it is not because the caliber of the citizenry has diminished. The new style of citizen politics stimulates new demands on the political system to improve, in contrast to the affective deference and loyalty of the past.

From this perspective, the solution to political dissatisfaction is not to restrict the democratic process but to expand and enrich democracy. The solution is to make democracy work better. This dissatisfaction with the status quo is the driving force that has led to the expansion of democracy over its history.

THE NEW STYLE OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

Dissatisfied democrats are likely to have many effects on the patterns of political behavior. For example, political participation patterns will increasingly include 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 also alter the style of interest representation, because people can focus their efforts on specific policy concerns—and work through methods of direct action. 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 systems need to accommodate the changing patterns of citizen politics. For example, the current structure of representative democracy limits the potential for citizen participation. 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

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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 policy making, political cartels, and bureaucratized administration. 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 number of political demands—the needs of youth, women, immigrants, consumers, displaced workers, the homeless 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. A system that distorts access to the political process is necessarily inefficient in meeting all of society's needs.

Finally, greater citizen input ultimately benefits the quality of government decision making. There is some evidence that an active, critical citizenry leads to better governance (Geissel 2008; Welzel and Dalton 2014). 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 (G. Smith 2009; Cain, Dalton, and Scarrow 2003). Many nations are reforming administrative procedures to give citizen groups access to the formerly closed processes of policy administration. In many democracies, citizen action groups have won changes in the administrative law to allow for their participation in local administrative processes. New Freedom of Information laws and ombudsman offices are making government more transparent and accessible to its citizens (Cain, Fabrinni, 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

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public directly in policy making (Pállinger et al. 2007; Bowler and Glazer 2008). More individual citizens and public interest groups are turning to the courts to guarantee their rights to democratic access and influence (G. Smith 2009; Cichowski and Stone Sweet 2003). Public interest groups in many nations have gained legal standing in the courts so they can sue to curb the harmful actions of municipalities or government agencies.

Governments are also adopting more inclusive methods of soliciting citizen input through citizen panels or citizen deliberations (Nabatchi et al. 2012; G. Smith 2009). A growing number of cities and other governing bodies in the United States are empaneling small groups of citizens (mini-publics) to deliberate on issues ranging from setting budget priorities to local planning decisions. A 2010 report from the National League of Cities in the United States found that 81 percent of municipalities at least sometimes used deliberative methods to address local problems, albeit of varying formats (Barnes and Mann 2010, 5). Gianpaulo Biocchi and Ernesti Ganuza described a similar expansion of citizen engagement across local governments in Europe (Baioccu and Ganuza 2017, 39).

Additional changes are occurring within democratic party systems. 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 increasing diversity of party choice through the formation of new parties and the realignment of existing parties gives voice to more citizens. Voters in multiparty systems have more opportunities to vote for a party that shares their policy views, as well as those who represent contrasting views. This complicates politics in these electoral systems, but it gives more opportunities for voice to the citizens.

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 U.S. Populist movement of the early 1990s. 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 when discussing democracy during an earlier "crisis of democracy" era,

> 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)

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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.

One of the unanticipated consequences of the expansion of citizen access to politics has been a growing inequality in who participates (Dalton 2017a; Bovens and Wille 2017). Because greater resources are required to lobby government, to organize a public interest group, or participate in other new assertive forms of action, these activities may leave behind those in society who lack the education and other resources needed for direct action politics. The education bias in voting turnout has increased in most affluent democracies, leaving the less-educated and less-affluent with a weaker voice. The social status participation gap for other forms of activity is even wider. If expanded citizen participation disproportionately enriches the well-off, this may be a step backward for democracy. The demands of those who most need government assistance will not be addressed if they lack a voice. So moderating the participation gap should also be a goal of democratic reformers.

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 *aggregate these interests* into 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. Political institutions often 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 of contemporary democracies is to find new ways to bring diverse interests together.

A skeptical public is likely to act differently (Hetherington 2005). Research finds 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.

Participatory democracy contains an equilibrium mechanism to encourage political balance in the long term. In the 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. It may be that we

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suffer from muddled policies, greater disagreement, and inefficiency if we want to strengthen democratic voice and representation.

I have optimistically written about the potential of democratic renewal over several editions of this book, and I remain guardedly optimistic today. However, I have become less positive about recent trends. Governments and those benefitting from the status quo naturally resist change. Rising wealth and income inequality threaten the potential for greater political equality. The old order seems to be grasping to maintain its influence, and the reaction against social modernization is more active. 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. While I am sanguine about our present situation, the need for further democratic reform and government accountability seems to confront a political establishment that wants to preserve what remains of their power. The challenge to democracies is to discover whether they can continue to evolve, to guarantee political rights, and to increase the ability of all citizens to control their lives. Can we move democracy closer to its theoretical ideals?

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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 some of the differences are methodological rather than substantive. For additional comparisons, see Norris (2011) and tables 12.1 and 12.2 in this chapter.
4. This is part of his campaign for electoral reform: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qfc3N0ZngXs.
5. For a more extensive comparison of confidence in institutions, see Dalton (2004), Norris (2011), and van Ham et al. (2017).
6. In the 1920s and 1930s, dissatisfaction with politicians or political institutions on the far-left and far-right often led to (or arose from) disenchantment with the democratic process itself and the collapse of democracy in several nations. 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.
7. Lee Drutman, Larry Diamond, and Joe Goldman (2018) repeated these questions in another survey of the American public in 2017, and found broadly similar results.
8. About 5–10 percent of the survey respondents do not answer these questions, so the level of support does not mean all the remainder are negative.
9. Gallup's Voice of People study asked a different question in 2004 and 2006 before the financial crisis and in 2015 in the midst of the recent debates about democratic decline: "Democracy may have problems but is it the best system of government?" There is little change across the four core nations:

	2004	2006	2015
United States	84	87	82
Britain	79	81	76
France	84	79	76
Germany	80	79	86

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10. 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. There is some evidence that national pride is decreasing in the U.S. from 78 percent saying they were very proud in 1981, to 65 percent in 2007, to 59 percent in the 2011 World Values Survey. This warrants more attention.
11. 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.
12. 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.

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