PART I

INTRODUCTION

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Democratic Hopes and Fears

Are contemporary democratic states experiencing a major legitimacy crisis? Does the public lack trust in government and confidence in the political process? Has public skepticism spread upward to corrode citizens' evaluations about the performance of democracy? Many think so. Since the early 1990s, several scholars of American public opinion have detected signs of a rising tide of popular discontent and voter anger (Dionne, Craig, Tolchin, Wood) as well as deep mistrust of government (Nye, Zelikow and King, Hetherington), with the U.S. Congress held in especially low regard (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse).[1] These observations are commonly coupled with behavioral indicators of civic engagement, notably low or falling voter turnout (Teixiera, Wattenberg), eroding social capital (Putnam), and declining party loyalties (Aldrich), weakening connections between citizens and the state.[2] Commentators point to multiple signs which are thought to indicate contemporary discontent with American democracy, from voter anger against incumbents of both major parties and the outbreak of the Tea Party populist rebellion to public frustration with gridlock and divisive partisanship in Washington, DC.

During the last decade, similar anxieties have infected other post-industrial societies.[3] In Western Europe, it is claimed that people hate politics (Hay), political parties have lost loyal voters (Franklin et al., Dalton and Wattenberg) as well as grassroots members (Mair and Biezen), while electoral turnout has fallen (Franklin) and public disaffection has spread (Torcal and Montero, Dogan, Andrain, and Smith).[4] Support for populist and radical right parties is seen as another symptom of the rejection of mainstream European politics.[5] Reflecting upon the broader meaning of these entrails, haruspices have even speculated gloomily about the 'winter of democracy' (Hermet), the era of 'post-democracy' (Crouch), and the 'death of democracy' (Keane).[6] The most comprehensive and thorough diagnosis of the cross-national survey evidence, by Russell Dalton, concludes, more cautiously, that citizens in advanced industrial societies remain staunchly committed to democratic principles although they have gradually become more distrustful of politicians, detached from parties,

and doubtful about public sector institutions.[7] Signs of parallel developments elsewhere in the world remain more mixed.[8] If long-established democracies are in trouble, however, and if these problems spread, this may contribute toward what some observers have identified as a global democratic recession.[9]

To be sure, the picture should not be exaggerated or overblown, as anxiety about public trust in government usually ebbs and flows over the years. Not all commentators share a common interpretation of the available indicators, by any means; indeed a long-standing debate about their meaning remains unresolved after more than four decades.[10] Nevertheless the prevailing view suggests that, for reasons which continue to remain unclear, political disaffection has worsened in recent decades, with significant consequences for democratic governance.

THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Why another book about these issues? Is there anything new to say? Perhaps surprisingly, a lot. This book lays out a series of reasons, backed by systematic survey evidence drawn from more than fifty countries worldwide, which challenge the conventional diagnosis, reframe the debate, and recalibrate the evidence about citizens' attitudes toward democratic governance. There is no question that the conventional 'crisis of democratic legitimacy' thesis needs revising. Several core claims lie at the heart of this book.

(i) Trendless fluctuations in system support

First, the evidence demonstrates that, contrary to the prevalent view, *public support for the political system has not eroded consistently across a wide range of countries around the world* – including in established democracies. Nationalism maintains identification with the nation-state, confidence in government does not decline uniformly, and popular support for authorities fluctuates among states. Despite widespread concern about a legitimacy crisis, in the United States and Western Europe, the evidence available to monitor long-term trends in public opinion demonstrates no systematic and consistent loss of support for the political system and its components. Instead, trust and confidence in political institutions usually waxes and wanes over the years in these societies, as well as varying among the different branches of government. Indicators of political behavior – such as any erosion of voter turnout, associational membership and party activism which has occurred – can be attributed to multiple factors which are not necessarily related to feelings of political legitimacy.

(ii) The importance of the democratic deficit

Nevertheless this does not imply that widespread concern about the health of democratic cultures is groundless, all smoke and no fire, by any means. Closer scrutiny of the evidence highlights the second argument presented in this study: *in many countries today, satisfaction with the performance of democracy diverges from public aspirations*. It has long been thought that regimes are more likely to endure and flourish where a balanced equilibrium exists

between citizens' aspirations for democracy (measured by how much people value democratic ideals and reject autocratic alternatives) and its perceived supply (monitored by public satisfaction with the democratic performance of their own country).[11]

The gap between aspirations and satisfaction is captured here by the concept of *democratic deficits*. The notion first arose in debates about the legitimacy of the European Union (EU). The core decision-making institutions in the EU have been regarded by some commentators as falling well short of the standards of democratic accountability and transparency that exist at the national level within each of the member states.[12] The original idea of deficits judged the legitimacy of decision-making processes within the European Union against the democratic standards of European nation-states. But this useful concept is not confined to this context; it can be applied more widely to any object where the perceived democratic performance fails to meet public expectations, whether concerning a specific public sector agency or institution, the collective regime or constitutional arrangements governing the nation-state, or the agencies of global governance and multilateral organizations, including the United Nations.[13] The idea of a democratic deficit also builds upon work developed more than a decade ago which first identified the phenomenon of 'critical citizens.'[14] This group aspires to democracy as their ideal form of government, yet at the same time they remain deeply skeptical when evaluating how democracy works in their own country. This book can be seen as the direct descendent of the earlier study, although it seeks to update and expand the evidence, reframe the analysis, and refine the diagnosis.

(iii) Explaining the deficit

What explains the size and distribution of democratic deficits in different states worldwide, and thus why satisfaction with the way that democracy works fails to match citizens' aspirations for democracy? This question leads to the third core claim which is central to this book: *The most plausible potential explanations for the democratic deficit suggest that this phenomenon arises from some combination of growing public expectations, negative news, and/or failing government performance.* The extensive research literature focused on explaining satisfaction with democracy and trust in government has proposed a long shopping list of potential causes, whether ad hoc explanations (including the impact of particular historical events) or more systematic generalizations. The number of rival hypotheses can prove daunting; a recent study in the Netherlands, for example, identified ten distinct propositions that were thought to account for falling public confidence and trust in the Dutch government.[15] In the United States, the events during the late 1960s and 1970s are commonly cited, from the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, to stagflation, malaise, the energy crisis, and urban riots.[16] The long list of potential causes can be whittled down and integrated into the more comprehensive, parsimonious, and coherent general theory to explain why satisfaction with the perceived democratic performance of any regime diverges from public aspirations, as illustrated schematically in Figure 1.1.
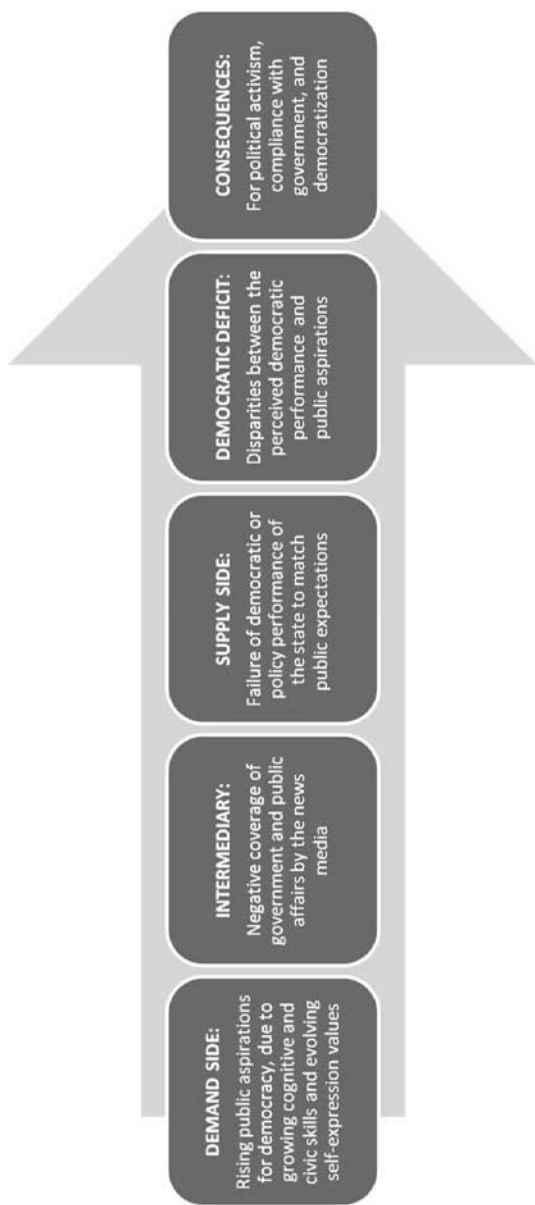
FIGURE 1.1. General model of democratic deficits.

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Each of the interrelated components featuring in Figure 1.1 generates certain logical general propositions that can be tested against the empirical evidence.

- *Demand-side theories* focus upon enduring cultural shifts among the mass citizenry.

  - Societal modernization theories attribute rising democratic aspirations to long-term processes of human development, especially growing levels of literacy, education, and cognitive skills, leading to emancipative values. If correct, then the public living in affluent, post-industrial societies, especially the younger generation and better educated sectors, should display the strongest endorsement for democratic values.
  - Alternative theories of social capital predict that a long-term erosion of social trust and community networks has undermined faith in democratic governance. If true, then attitudes toward democracy should reflect indices of social capital.

- *Intermediary accounts* emphasize the role of political communications in how people learn about democracy and regime performance.

  - Cognitive theories regard the mass media as one of the primary agencies for learning about democracy, alongside education and the legacy of historical political traditions.
  - Theories of priming and framing suggest that the news media shape public perceptions of government performance. If true, stronger disenchantment with the way democratic governance works should be linked with negative news and scandal coverage about politics, government, and public affairs.

- *Supply-side theories,* by contrast, lay the blame for public dissatisfaction with either the process or the policy performance of democratic governments, as well as with the institutional arrangements.

  - *Process* accounts emphasize that rational citizens have the capacity to judge how democracy works in their own country; it follows that public satisfaction should reflect the quality of democratic governance existing in different countries.
  - *Policy* performance explanations emphasize public dissatisfaction with the capacity of governments to manage the delivery of public goods and services. If true, democratic deficits should relate to perceptual and/or aggregate indicators of policy outputs and outcomes.
  - Last, *structural* accounts emphasize that democratic deficits are conditioned by the constitutional arrangements in any state, especially by power-sharing arrangements. If correct, satisfaction with democracy should prove greater among electoral winners than losers, as well as being minimized in countries with power-concentrating regimes.

These components have often been treated separately by sub-disciplines in the fragmented and scattered research literature. A more satisfactory and integrated understanding arises where these are understood as building blocks in a sequential process. In a loose market model, mass culture reflects the demand side, communications is the connective information environment, and government performance represents the supply side of the equation. In short, deficits may arise from complex interactions involving rising democratic hopes, negative political news, and perceptions of failing performance. The logical arguments, and the empirical evidence supporting each of these explanations, and how they fit together like pieces of a complex jigsaw puzzle, deserve careful scrutiny and systematic examination.

(iv) Why does the deficit matter?

Last, why does this phenomenon matter? Debate continues about all these issues. The most sanguine and positive interpretation suggests that any symptoms of disaffection reflect the run-of-the-mill midterm blues and public disgruntlement directed against specific politicians and parties, resolved periodically in democracies through the ballot box. On the positive side of the equation, citizen dissatisfaction may also spark progressive reform movements, catalyze citizen activism, and thus serve ultimately to strengthen processes of democratization in all societies.[17] Some emphasize that any loss of public confidence and trust in government has not contributed toward regime instability.[18]

More commonly, however, commentators regard opinion polls as the canary in the coal mine where signs point toward pervasive doubts about the role and powers of government, sentiments which, it is feared, can slide into deep-rooted popular aversion and hostility toward all things political. A leaking reservoir of political trust is seen as tying policy makers' hands and limiting voluntary compliance with government authority.[19] Dissatisfaction with democratic performance is also usually regarded, at least implicitly, as an important cause of civic disengagement, encouraging an erosion of conventional participation among citizens. At worst, fragile regimes lacking a broad and deep foundation of legitimacy among the mass public are widely believed to face serious risk of instability and even breakdown.[20]

Rather than supporting blasé assumptions that no serious implications follow, or alternatively presenting exaggerated claims that the sky is falling, the fourth and final argument presented in the book suggests that *the democratic deficit has important consequences – including for political activism, for allegiant forms of political behavior and rule of law, and ultimately for processes of democratization.*

Accordingly, this book seeks to understand the causes and consequences of the democratic deficit, integrating prior knowledge into a theoretical framework which challenges conventional assumptions and provides a more complete and accurate diagnosis and prognosis. The remainder of this chapter clarifies the core argument and provides a roadmap to guide readers through the rest of the book.

ROAD MAP OF THE BOOK

Part I: Theoretical Framework

The first section of the book clarifies the core concepts, the central theoretical argument, and the primary sources of evidence and multilevel methods of analysis. Scholars have long debated how best to understand public attitudes toward government. For example, do the available indicators concerning trust and confidence in political institutions reflect a relatively superficial and healthy skepticism about the performance of politicians and the normal ups and downs in popular fortunes expected of any party in government? Or alternatively, do signs suggest more deep-rooted loss of citizens' trust in all public officials, lack of faith in core institutions of representative democracy, and ambivalence about fundamental democratic principles? Another important issue that remains unresolved concerns the relationship between support for democratic ideals and practices. In particular, will public faith in democratic values gradually spread downward to encourage trust and confidence in the core institutions of representative democracy? Or instead, will skepticism about the way that democratic states work eventually diffuse upward to corrode and undermine approval of democratic principles? Or, alternatively, it may be that these ambivalent tensions between ideals and practices will persist in parallel. There is nothing particularly novel about these concerns; after all, the post–World War II era is commonly assumed to be the halcyon era of trust in the federal government in Washington, DC; yet one of the first studies of U.S. public opinion documented ambivalent attitudes during the late 1950s, concluding that American citizens "tend to expect the worst in politics but hope for the best."[21] Following the turbulent street protests, urban riots, and rise of new social movements during the 1960s and early 1970s, a major report for the Trilateral Commission warned that a legitimacy crisis was undermining Western democracies.[22] The latest angst is thus only the most recent of a long series of similar waves of concern which have moved in and out of intellectual fashion over the years.

To explore these issues, Chapter 2 unpacks the core concepts. The traditional foundation for understanding how citizens orient themselves toward the nation-state, its agencies, and actors rests on the idea of 'system support,' originally developed by David Easton in the 1960s. In an earlier book, *Critical Citizens* expanded the Eastonian conceptual framework to distinguish five dimensions of system support, and the updated survey evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates that these distinctions continue to prove robust. Building upon these ideas, the chapter clarifies and operationalizes the concept of democratic deficits. This chapter also outlines the reasons that certain behavioral indicators adopted by other studies to monitor political support are rejected as inappropriate here, including evidence concerning partisan dealignment and declining party membership, behavioral indicators of civic engagement such as voting turnout or campaign activism, and measures of social capital, including

associational membership and interpersonal trust. Behavioral factors are a vital part of any comprehensive understanding of democratic citizenship and civic engagement. But social psychological attitudes and values are treated here as analytically distinct from any acts flowing from these orientations.

To examine the comparative evidence, more than a decade ago, I edited a volume, *Critical Citizens,*[23] that brought together a network of international scholars to consider the global state of public support for democratic governance in the late twentieth century. David Easton's seminal insights into the conceptual framework of political support provided the classic starting point for the study.[24] Drawing upon these ideas, the earlier book framed the idea of 'political support' broadly as a multidimensional phenomenon ranging from the most diffuse to the most specific levels. Hence this notion was conceived to include five components:

1. The most general and fundamental feelings of citizens toward **belonging to the national community,** exemplified by feelings of national pride and identity.
2. **Support for general regime principles,** including approval of democratic and autocratic values.
3. **Evaluations of the overall performance of the regime,** exemplified by satisfaction with the workings of democracy.
4. **Confidence in state institutions,** notably governments, parliaments, parties, the civil service, the courts, and the security forces.
5. Trust in elected and appointed **officeholders,** including politicians and leaders.

Critical Citizens scrutinized a wide range of survey indicators for evidence concerning each of these dimensions, including global, regional, and national comparisons of public opinion from the 1960s until the mid-1990s. The volume brought together experts on diverse countries and regions, utilizing different datasets and surveys, as well as assembling scholars drawn from multiple theoretical perspectives and disciplines. Despite the multiplicity of viewpoints, based on the survey evidence, a common understanding quickly emerged about the most appropriate interpretation of trends. The collaborative volume concluded that citizens in many countries had proved increasingly skeptical about the actual workings of the core institutions of representative democracy, notably political parties, parliaments, and governments. At the same time, however, public aspirations toward democratic ideals, values, and principles, or the demand for democracy, proved almost universal around the globe. The tension between unwavering support for democratic principles but skeptical evaluations about democratic practices was interpreted in the book as the rise of 'critical citizens.' Subsequent studies have understood this phenomenon, with perhaps an excess of alliteration, as 'disaffected,' 'dissatisfied,' or 'disenchanted' democrats.[25] Each of these accounts, however, framed the central issue in terms of individual citizens. Reframing the phenomenon to

understand how social-psychological orientations relate to the broader environmental context set by the news media and regime performance provides a more comprehensive account.

Building upon this foundation, this book updates the evidence by analyzing trends in citizens' attitudes and orientations toward the nation-state, regime, and authorities within established democracies, comparing the United States and Western Europe. Support for the political system continues to be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon ranging from the most generalized feelings of attachment and belonging to a nation-state, through confidence and trust in the regime and its institutions, down to specific approval of particular authorities and leaders. Trends over time are established using survey indicators to relate this study to the broader research literature and to clear away some of the most pervasive myths. After providing a general overview of a wide range of indicators of system support, the book then focuses upon comparing disparities worldwide in the democratic deficit, understood to combine the components of values and judgments.

Chapter 3 outlines the technical detail of this study, including the sources of evidence, the comparative framework, the methods of multilevel analysis, and the classification of regimes used throughout the study. The empirical foundation for the body of work comparing attitudes toward democracy was established by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's *The Civic Culture*.[26] Previously only a few other cross-national attitudinal surveys had ever been deployed, notably William Buchanan and Hadley Cantril's nine-country *How Nations See Each Other* (1953), sponsored by UNESCO; sociological surveys of social stratification; and USIA (United States Information Agency) surveys of attitudes toward international affairs.[27] The pathbreaking civic culture survey, conducted in 1959–1960, laid the groundwork for a long series of cross-national public opinion surveys. The series of American National Election Surveys are commonly regarded as canonical, not least because they now facilitate analysis of more than a half-century of public opinion trends in the United States. The geographic scope of cross-national surveys grew considerably in the early 1980s and 1990s to facilitate comparison of citizens' political and social attitudes in a wide range of states worldwide.[28] This includes the Eurobarometer and related European Union (EU) surveys (which started in 1970), the European Election Study (1979), the European Values Survey and the World Values Survey (1981), the International Social Survey Programme (1985), the Global Barometers (including regional surveys conducted in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, Arab states, and Asia (1990 and various), the Comparative National Elections Project (1990), the European Voter and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (1995), the European Social Survey (2002), the Transatlantic Trends survey (2002), the Pew Global Attitudes project (2002), World Public Opinion, and the Gallup World Poll (2005). Numerous survey datasets are also available for detailed case studies of trends in public opinion within particular countries, including the extensive range of academic national election studies, general social surveys, and commercial public opinion polls.