CITIZENS AND COMMUNITY

The related subjects of political legitimacy and system support are key theoretical concerns of students of democratic societies. They have received very little scholarly attention, however, because of the conceptual and methodological complexities they engender. In this book the authors address these concerns through systematic multivariate analyses of the sources, distribution, and consequences of variations in citizen support for key political objects in one such society, Canada. Although the authors do so within a comparative context, their primary focus is on Canada because it is one of the world’s oldest democracies and is a country that has experienced support problems that periodically have reached crisis proportion. Many of the problems facing Canada are more extreme examples of difficulties that have vexed other democracies. This study helps illuminate both the conditions under which democracies in general are able to sustain themselves and those under which they could flounder.

The authors demonstrate that political support has its origins in people’s political socialization experiences and their instrumental judgments about the operation of key political and economic institutions and processes. They find that political support is not “of a piece.” Average citizens are able to distinguish among and ascribe different degrees of support to key objects such as parliament, the bureaucracy, judiciary, political parties, federalism, political authorities, and the national political community itself. Support also is dynamic and can vary markedly over relatively brief intervals of time. For example, periodic national elections, changing economic conditions, and the activities of political parties have a significant impact on support levels. And, differences in support for authorities, regime, and community do matter. They affect the levels of public participation in a variety of conventional and unconventional political activities as well as the relative willingness of people to comply with the authoritative edicts of government.
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CITIZENS AND COMMUNITY

POLITICAL SUPPORT IN A REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

ALLAN KORNBERG
Duke University

HAROLD D. CLARKE
University of North Texas
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Introduction: Political support and representative democracy

Prognoses about the health of representative democracies have changed markedly during the twentieth century. During the 1930s and again in the 1970s and early 1980s the democracies seeming inability to cope with economic distress engendered by unemployment, sluggish growth, soaring national debt and, in the latter period, stagflation and an inability to pay for costly social programs made their future appear problematic. In several cases, additional threats were posed by apparently irreconcilable differences based on various combinations of class, ethnocultural, religious, and regional cleavages in their populations. For some observers these compounded difficulties signaled the onset of a generalized “legitimacy crisis” to which democracies, in varying degrees, were in danger of succumbing.

At other times optimistic appraisals were the norm. The virtues of democracies were widely proclaimed after their victories in two world wars and throughout the period of protracted economic prosperity that followed the second of these conflicts. The revitalization of the economies of many Western countries in the mid-1980s, the collapse of Communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe at the end of the decade and in the Soviet Union itself in the summer of 1991 made earlier predictions of the imminent demise of democracies appear both short-sighted and invalid. They seemed based on unwarranted interpretations of public discontent produced by short-term social and economic dislocations. The discontent was real, but it was focused on governing political parties and their leaders. A more general legitimacy crisis existed only in the minds of disaffected right- and left-wing intellectuals. Among ordinary citizens support for representative democracy remained strong and stable.

In our view, both types of forecasts have been too easily rendered, because despite the vast literature on public attitudes and behavior, much remains to be learned about support for democratic political systems, their components, and the factors that influence them. Also, surprisingly little research exists on how variations in support affect crucial attitudes, such as the willingness of people to voluntarily comply with the edicts of duly constituted authorities, or their periodic proclivity to engage in confrontation-
al protests. Our study addresses such questions through a case study of political support in Canada, one of the world’s oldest, continuously functioning democracies, but one which also has experienced support problems that have occasionally reached crisis proportions. The most serious crises were the referendum of May 1980 advanced by a separatist provincial government in Quebec and the June 1990 failure of all the provinces to ratify the Meech Lake Accord. Had it succeeded, the referendum would have given the Quebec government a mandate to begin the process of establishing a sovereign Quebec and, by so doing, dismembering the Canadian political community. If the provinces and the federal government are unable to resolve the constitutional crisis generated by Meech Lake, the 1990s may well be the decade in which Canada in its current form ceases to exist. For these and other reasons Canada provides an excellent locale for investigating the complex of factors that have been said to threaten the viability of democratic politics. Such an investigation into the Canadian experience can also illuminate the conditions under which democracies can be sustained.

The story we tell in this book is that political support in a democracy such as Canada is not “of a piece.” We find that average citizens, no less than political philosophers, distinguish among and ascribe different degrees of support to key political objects. Thus, even in a country having Canada’s history of integration problems, support for the national political community is markedly higher and more stable than that for major regime institutions and top-level political authorities. Support for the latter two not only is significantly lower, it also is compressed. In our view, this compression occurs because the presence of a Westminster-model parliamentary system, cohesive legislative parties, the brokerage electioneering strategies practiced by competing party elites, and long periods of one-party dominance at both the national and provincial levels of the federal system tend to obfuscate the distinction between government-of-the-day and government-as-regime. Despite these inhibiting factors, citizens do distinguish between the political regime and the authorities who are the temporary occupants of its various positions. Moreover, they also distinguish among regime structures, separating their feelings about policy-making and policy-implementing institutions (parliament and bureaucracy) from feelings about institutions that adjudicate those policies and pass judgment on their constitutionality (the judiciary).

We argue that political support has its origins in people’s political socialization experiences and their instrumental judgments about the operation of key political institutions and processes. Each of these “twin pillars” of support, in turn, has two principal components. Those are individual and group identities and democratic norms and values in the case of socialization experiences, and effectiveness and equity-fairness judgments in the case of the operation of the political system. We demonstrate that
Introduction

the relative importance of these determinants varies. Socialization experiences have their greatest direct impact on community support, whereas instrumental judgments have their strongest effects on the regime and authorities. Moreover, although support is not a seamless web, its components are interrelated and, in the Canadian case, support flows "upward"—from authorities, to regime, to community.

Although the normative and instrumental bases of political support are conceptually distinct, the former factors provide the context in which the latter judgments are made. Support also is dynamic; it can vary markedly over relatively brief intervals of time. We find that periodic national elections are events that stimulate increases, albeit temporary ones, in support for political authorities, institutions and processes, the political community, as well as promoting attitudes such as political efficacy, interest, and trust, which are hallmarks of democratic citizenship. Changing economic conditions or, rather, public evaluations of those conditions and attributions of responsibility to government, especially the government-of-the-day, also have significant effects. However, the impact of these judgments is asymmetric; citizens are more likely to blame than to praise government for its handling of the economy, and are more likely to credit themselves than government for their own material well-being. Asymmetry also characterizes people's judgments about national conditions and their own circumstances. Faraway pastures do not "look greener." Just the opposite, is the case. We attribute this condition to the tendency of people to make judgments about their own condition and that of their local community largely on the basis of personal experience. Global judgments about the country as a whole, in contrast, rest more heavily on information from, and interpretations by, the mass media.

In contemporary democracies such as Canada, a healthy economy and its effective management by government are not enough. People expect government to undertake a wide variety of other initiatives, and evaluations of its success in doing so have important effects on support. Equally significant, however, are public perceptions of how fair and equitable government is in discharging its many responsibilities. Conventional wisdom might suggest that combinations of extremely positive or negative effectiveness and equity-fairness judgments would interact and, in so doing, have particularly strong effects on support levels. In fact, however, they constitute separate streams of influence.

Periodic, constitutionally sanctioned, free and competitive elections are the principal mechanisms whereby people express their effectiveness and equity-fairness judgments and choose among governing and opposition parties. Democratic theory ascribes a variety of functions to elections. We argue that perhaps the most important is that free, competitive elections demonstrate to citizens that their political system is indeed a democracy and, in so doing, elections stimulate significant, albeit temporary, increases
in support for key political objects as well as attitudes such as political efficacy and trust that are hallmarks of a democratic citizenry. Although elections help to generate support, the quality of the choices that citizens make in any election in part is affected by the kinds of strategies competing parties pursue. In Canada the brokerage strategies traditionally employed by the national parties have tended to obfuscate policy differences among them and thereby to decouple societal cleavages from their articulation by the party system. One important result is that the direction and intensity of psychological attachments to parties and their leaders are highly volatile. The volatility of support for political authorities, in turn, has important consequences for the political support process more generally.

The last part of the story we tell is that differences in support for authorities, regime, and community matter. Democratic theory holds that extensive citizen participation is fundamental to the continuing good health of a democratic polity. Over time, both the democratization of political institutions and processes and the repertoire of legitimate citizen political action have expanded greatly. We demonstrate that political participation in Canada is multimodal and is the preserve of overlapping groups of active minorities. Differences in support influence involvement in both conventional, electorally related forms of behavior and unconventional behavior, ranging from signing petitions to participating in potentially violent protests.

Democracies are like other systems of governance in that they require their citizens to comply with laws and regulations promulgated by duly constituted authorities. In Canada there are two types of compliance orientations, which we have labeled “laws and regulations” and “service and obedience.” Both types vary over relatively short periods of time in response to changes in levels of political support, and evaluations of the performance of the political system and its leaders. We may infer from this that political authorities in contemporary democracies cannot take public compliance for granted. Compliance is a renewable resource, but it is one that must be continually replenished by actions that animate and sustain the institutions and processes of democratic government.

Our study of political support is based on evidence from a now lengthy series of national surveys, which are described in the Appendix. We began our inquiry in the late 1970s, using data gathered in several federal election studies. Throughout the 1980s research funding provided by the National Science Foundation and other agencies enabled us to expand our data base by conducting a set of national cross-sectional and panel surveys focusing on political support, its correlates and consequences. The materials gathered in these surveys, together with those from the earlier election studies and other sources, provide an extensive portrait of public political attitudes and behavior in Canada during a period when the country was experiencing economic problems that waxed and waned, but which always
had an impact on support for the political system and its leaders. This is because representative democracies such as Canada are a special breed. The market-oriented economies that generate wealth and great strength also produce a plethora of continuing problems. In Canada the economic problems of the 1970s and the early 1980s were conjoined with an ongoing series of integration crises that threatened to tear the country apart. These crises continued into the early 1990s. Consequently, the Canadian experience reflected in the story we tell will help us to comprehend both how representative democracies are able to sustain themselves and the conditions under which they may fail.