



IN
MISTRUST
WE
TRUST

Can Democracy Survive When
We Don't Trust Our Leaders?

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Citizens are losing trust in democratic institutions not because these institutions are less efficient or more corrupt, but because we have lost our power to influence them.

Introduction: Democracy without trust

This is a book about democracy. Not democracy as an ideal or as a set of institutions but democracy as a collective experience. It is, primarily, a book about the nature and sources of our present disappointment with democracy. Both as a concept and as a reality, democracy is undergoing profound transformation. The Woodstock-to-Wall-Street social and political revolution of the 1970s and 1980s; the “end of history” revolutions of 1989; the digital revolution of the 1990s; the demographic revolution; and the political brain revolution that is unfolding in front of our eyes, brought by the new discoveries in the brain sciences and behaviorist economics, have made citizens freer than ever before. But these revolutions have simultaneously eroded the power of the democratic voter. Our rights are no longer secured by our collective power as voters but are subject to the logic of the financial market and the existing constitutional arrangements. Voters can change governments, yet it is nearly impossible for them to change economic policies. The elites have broken free from ideological and national loyalties and have become global players, leaving society in the broken shell of the nation state. There has been a profound decline of the public’s trust in the performance of public institutions. This mistrust is not an outcome of the deterioration of public services. It is an outcome of the voters’ sense of their lost power — in their disillusionment with democracy.

Some of the most insightful theorists of modern democracy — including Pierre Rosanvallon in his brilliant book [Counter Democracy](#) — insist that we are wrongly alarmed with the declining trust in the institutions of representative democracy. They say that mistrust is a critical element of the political system and that democracy is not so much about trust as about the organization of distrust. In short, we live in an age in which average citizens will be able to efficiently monitor the executive power and voters will be able to kick out the rascals in power, yet in which citizen-voters will also have to concede that it is not up to them to decide in what kind of society they will live.

Do you believe in such a democracy of mistrust? Can we enjoy our rights without enjoying real political choice? I do not, and this short book is an attempt to explain why.

This book is not meant to be a polemic or problem-solving manual. It is a reflection and should be read for the pleasure of the questions it provokes, not for the utility of the pat answers it provides. It is written as a jazzlike play in a mode of cheerful skepticism: skeptical about the already published obituaries for democracy, as well as the related enthusiasm for reviving democracy via the irresistible power of the technological imagination. It is an improvisation on a theme of democracy and trust. Simply put: Can democracy survive without trust?



Opposition poster against President Yanukovich, displayed during a protest in Kiev, Ukraine, in September 2012. Former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was sentenced to seven years in jail for a gas deal with Russia. Image: SVLuma/Shutterstock

Voter mistrust

“Elections don’t change anything,” reads graffiti scrawled across a wall in the center of my hometown of Sofia, Bulgaria. “If elections changed something, they would be banned.”

No one remembers when the graffiti first appeared or who wrote it — probably some young anarchist or not-so-young street artist. No one knows why the well-to-do owners of the building never removed it (that the municipality did not clean it is no mystery, as it never has money for such things). But as time passed, the graffiti began to serve as a motto for the journey of Bulgarians through the wilds of democracy. When asked, Bulgarians never miss the opportunity to inform pollsters, reporters, and friends that elections won’t change a darned thing. And it is not only Bulgarians who speak and think this way.



Crowds assemble in Kiev on the first day of the Orange Revolution to protest Ukraine’s presidential election.

Image: Serhiy/Creative Commons

To underscore the public’s cynicism about contemporary party politics, it’s worth retelling the story of [Vladimir Boyko](#). A young Ukrainian, Boyko is ambitious, pragmatic, and entrepreneurial. In 2004, he was one of thousands of young people who spent their days and nights on Kiev’s central square protesting the falsification of Ukraine’s presidential elections. He and people like him were the symbol of the nation’s dream for genuine democracy, expecting it to bring them prosperity, opportunity, and change. Alas, as we know, what Ukraine witnessed instead in its post-Orange revolutionary decade has been the corruption, arrogance, and hubris of those in power. Ukrainian

oligarchs have turned out to be the only true beneficiaries of the change. Soon after the revolutionary days, the leaders of the movement went on the offensive, bitterly attacking not corruption but another. The economy was in free-fall. The revolution's villains were thereafter reimagined as the saviors of the nation. As for Boyko, he ceased being interested in changing the nation and focused instead on making money. He is now in the business of "crowd renting." His company, Easy Work, has assembled a database of several thousand students, pensioners, and unemployed people whom he can mobilize at a moment's notice to turn up at political party demonstrations anywhere in Kiev, stand for hours at a time, and cheer or jeer on cue. Ideology hardly matters to Boyko or his employees who they agree to play "citizens" in such demonstrations. What really matters is that the money — usually four dollars per hour — is paid on time. What was civic activism in the days of the Orange Revolution is mercenary activism nowadays. Democracy no longer stands for politics; it is a business proposition.

It's reasonable to say that Bulgaria and Ukraine are extreme examples of the disillusionment with democracy. But it's also true that the mood of Bulgarian and Ukrainian voters is representative of a wider trend. In the last three decades, people throughout the world are voting more than ever before, but in many European countries the majority of people no longer feel that their vote really matters. There is a secular trend of decline of the electoral turnout in most of the Western democracies, and the people least likely to vote are the poor, the unemployed, and the young — in short, those who should be most interested in using the political system to improve their lot. The dramatic decline of trust since the 1970s is sharply illustrated by the fact that anyone under the age of 40 in most Western societies has lived his or her entire life in a country where the majority of citizens do not trust the national government.

	% Very high/ High	% Average	% Very low/ Low
Nurses	85	12	3
Pharmacists	75	21	3
Medical doctors	70	26	4
Engineers	70	25	3
Dentists	62	33	4
Police officers	58	32	10
College teachers	53	34	10
Clergy	52	33	9
Psychiatrists	41	43	11
Chiropractors	38	46	11
Bankers	28	48	24
Journalists	24	45	30
Business executives	21	50	27
State governors	20	48	31
Lawyers	19	42	38
Insurance salespeople	15	49	36
Senators	14	39	45
HMO Managers	12	52	27
Stockbrokers	11	48	39
Advertising practitioners	11	50	36
Members of Congress	10	34	54
Car salespeople	8	43	49

Gallup, Nov. 26-29, 2012

Gallup asked U.S. residents to rate the "honesty and ethical standards" of people in certain professions as very high, high, average, low, or very low. Members of Congress were regarded as

shiftier than every profession except car salesmen; Senators fared only slightly better.

— So while there seems to be a more universal appeal of democratic principles, and while the number of democracies in the world grows (with Libya and Egypt being the latest arrivals), trust in the components of a democracy — parties, elections, parliaments, governments — is in serious decline. Professor Mary Kaldor and her team at the London School of Economics recently conducted a study on the sources of the new protest movements in Europe. Results indicate that many of the participants aren't protesting specific governmental policies so much as they are expressing a general belief that powerful interests have captured democratic institutions in many Western democracies and that citizens are powerless to bring change. Not surprisingly, a growing number of people tend to vote for protest or extreme parties. The new populism that is on the rise in Europe and the United States, however, does not represent the aspirations of the repressed but, rather, the frustration of the empowered. It is not a populism of "the people" enthralled with the romantic imagination of nationalists, as was the case a century and more ago. It is a populism of the pessimistic and threatened majority fearing that their demographic decline will also mean a loss of power. In the words of American political theorist Mark Lilla, "It gives voice to those who feel they are being bullied, but this voice has only one, Garbo-like thing to say: I want to be left alone."

Despite pundits deciding that people have lost faith in democracy, somewhere in the world there are citizens storming the streets to reclaim their right to self-government. At the very moment when Boyko was renting crowds to the Ukrainian political class for four dollars an hour, tens of thousands of representatives of Moscow's middle class in Putin's Russia — those who normally earn at least 20 dollars per hour — took to the streets believing that free and fair elections are Russia's only chance for a better future. In the Arab world, millions of people have stormed the barricades demanding a democratic and accountable government. As for Bulgarians, they may not have a lot of faith in democracy, but they don't believe in any of the alternatives, either. For every story of frustration and despair, there is another example of energy and civic courage. Ultimately, it is up to you, dear reader, to become depressed or inspired. It is for you to decide whether democracy is in crisis.

A trap for fools

Modern European history has always remained highly suspicious of the charms of bourgeois democracy. “Elections: A Trap for Fools” was the title of Jean-Paul Sartre’s [essay](#) on the eve of the 1973 parliamentary elections in France. A century earlier, Jacob Burckhardt was even more cogent: “I know too much history to expect anything from the despotism of the masses but a future tyranny which will mean the end of history.” But in order to truly understand the political attitude toward democracy in 20th-century Europe, it is essential to grasp the fear of the revolutionary masses that underlay so much of that experience. “We tend to see revolution as in theory a movement to bring liberation,” Raymond Aron wrote in *The Dawn of Universal History*. “But the revolutions of the twentieth century seem rather to promote servitude, or at least authoritarianism.”

Even as “democracy” was Western Europe’s battle cry in its confrontation with Soviet communism, mistrust of democracy was part of the Cold War European consensus. Democracies were regarded as weak and unstable. They were ineffective at combating destructive enemies. They were too idealistic and too slow to act when it came to making tough decisions about the use of violence. Democratic decision making was shortsighted, divisive, and prone to demagoguery and manipulation. And it was none other than Winston Churchill who dryly observed that “the best argument against democracy is a five-minute talk with the average voter.”

In the 1970s, Germany’s Social Democratic chancellor Willy Brandt was convinced that “Western Europe has only 20 or 30 more years of democracy left in it; after that it will slide engineless and rudderless, under the surrounding sea of dictatorship, and whether the dictation comes from a politburo or a junta will not make that much difference.” It was meritocracy, not democracy that was the true ideal of Europe’s educated classes. Meritocracy and liberal rationalism — not democracy — lay at the very foundation of the project of European integration. But while the doubts about democracy were always present in Europe, the European public never lost trust in the capacity of democratic society for self-correction and in the power of the voters to bring change and pursue a collective purpose.

So why in the very moment when democracy has become the only political idiom spoken globally do so many in Europe and the United States question the ability of their democratic regimes to serve a collective purpose? What has changed? I believe the link between the personal freedom of the individual and the collective power of the voters has been broken. Once upon a time the individual knew that he needed other people to defend his personal rights; he joined political parties and went on strike. Now the individual either takes his freedoms for granted or believes that he can defend them on his own, either by the click of the mouse or by suing the government. What we are witnessing in all this is not the end of democracy but, rather, its radical transformation.

Transformation of democracy

Some argue that what we are seeing is the rise of post-democratic capitalism. In my view, what is more likely happening is the emergence of a post-political democracy. It is politics in crisis. It is still true that in capitalist democracies, governments depend on the confidence of the voters. But the nature of the dependency has changed. In post-crisis Europe, we are witnessing the rise of a strange division of labor between voters and markets when it comes to the work of the government. Economic decision-making is methodically being taken out of democratic politics as the spectrum of acceptable policy choices has been dramatically narrowed. Politics has been reduced to the art of adjusting to the imperatives of the market.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, citizen liberties were protected by the collective power of the individual to make change. People received rights and preserved them because they were powerful enough to stand in their defense. Now our freedoms are protected by the logic of the market and not by our collective power as voters. The market believes in free, autonomous individuals capable of taking risks and ready to face responsibilities. Voters can decide who will be in government — their votes still “choose” the winning party. But it is the market now that decides what will be the economic policy of the government irrespective of who wins the election. In the heated debate in Europe today about the future institutional architecture of the eurozone, it is clear that the new rules will additionally constrain the ability of the voters to influence economic decision making. Simply put, markets want to be confident that voters will not make foolish decisions. In economic terms this may make a lot of sense, yet in political terms it raises uncomfortable questions: Are the people still in charge? Does the power still lie with the voters? Has representative democracy become something of a sham?



Students in Milan protest against Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's government and a proposed

The influence of the market was also at play in the fall of Italy's Silvio Berlusconi. The day of his downfall, the streets outside the presidential palace pulsed with chanting demonstrators waving Italian flags and popping champagne bottles. The scene looked like some sort of revolutionary moment. But it was far from it. Instead, this was a triumph of the power of financial markets. It was not the will of the voters that had kicked Berlusconi's corrupt and ineffective clique out of office; it was the explicit joining of financial markets with the commanding bureaucratic heights in Brussels (and the European Central Bank's leadership in Frankfurt) that had sent the message "Berlusconi must go." It was also these powers that had selected Berlusconi's successor, the former European commissioner and technocrat Mario Monti, to be Italy's next prime minister. People on the streets of Rome had every reason to feel simultaneously ecstatic and powerless. Berlusconi was gone, but the voter ceased being the most powerful figure in crisis-torn Italy. The people on the street were not the actors but the spectators of history. The market had become the primary actor.

"Markets are voting machines," Citibank's CEO Walter Wriston once said. "They function better than taking referenda." But respect for the influence of the customer is not the same as respect for the power of the voter. What the market does not believe in is the right of the people and their governments to intervene when they have decided that the markets have failed. In the early 19th century democratic France and England, only 5 percent to 10 percent of the people had the right to vote — the educated and propertied males, who had the right to decide on all social, political, and military issues. Today, the right to vote is far more widespread. But we are witnessing a shrinking number of issues decided via the political process. An increasing number of issues, such as the question of what an acceptable budget deficit should be, in the case of eurozone countries, have been stripped from electoral politics.

In his book [*The Globalization Paradox*](#), Harvard economist Dani Rodrik argues that we have three options in managing the tensions between national democracy and the global market. We can restrict democracy in order to gain competitiveness in the international markets. We can limit globalization in the hope of building democratic legitimacy at home. Or we can globalize democracy at the cost of national sovereignty. What we cannot have is hyperglobalization, democracy, and self-determination all at once. Yet this is exactly what governments want to have. They want people to have the right to vote, but they are not prepared to allow them to choose "populist policies." They want to be able to reduce labor costs and to ignore social protests, but they don't want to publicly endorse authoritarianism. They favor free trade and interdependence, but they want to have the final say in deciding the law of the land. So instead of selecting among sovereign democracy, globalized democracy, or globalization-friendly authoritarianism, political elites try to redefine democracy and sovereignty in order to make the impossible possible. The result is democracies without choice, sovereignty without meaning, and globalization without legitimacy.

In short, the voter has lost the capacity to counterbalance the power of the market in the name of a shared public interest. The crisis of democracy today can be best understood not as a threat to individual freedom or as a risk of a return to authoritarianism (the opposition to democracy/authoritarianism has frankly lost much of its utility when it comes to making sense of Western politics) but, again, as the frustration of the empowered. Voters do not believe that their voice really matters in governing their country, even when they agree that elections are free and fair. People find fewer and fewer reasons to vote. Or, to put it differently, they find more and more reasons to vote with blank ballots. The voice of the citizenry has been rendered mere noise.

The blank-ballot majority

It was a humdrum election day in a small and, at least in name, democratic country somewhere on the periphery of Europe. Pouring rain all morning kept people in their homes and made politicians fear — or hope — for a low electoral turnout. There was no sign of crisis in the air. The general atmosphere was one of boredom and decorum. The government was expected to win the elections, and the opposition was expected to survive the defeat. In the midafternoon, the rain finally stopped and people began to go to the voting booths to exercise their civic duty or political passion — perhaps even simply for the pure appreciation of a contested race. After all, citizens find very different reasons for voting. But then something strange and truly horrible happened.

When voters cast their ballots, it turned out that the number of valid votes did not quite reach 25 percent, with the party of the right winning 13 percent, the party of the center, 9 percent, and the party of the left, 2½ percent. There were very few spoiled ballots and only a handful of abstentions. All other ballots, more than 70 percent of the total votes cast, were blank. The establishment, in this case the government and the opposition, were disturbed and confounded. Why did citizens vote blank? What did they want? How had the “blankers” managed to organize themselves? Why did they not stay home if there was nobody they wanted to vote for? Why not vote for the opposition if they detested the government? And why not rally in front of the parliament or storm the post office if they despised the system, as it seemed?

The government’s energetic attempts to find the leaders of the blank-vote conspiracy ended in frustration and despair. It turned out that the blank vote did not have ideologues or organizers. It was neither planned nor prepared. It was not even tweeted. A secret police investigation ascertained that prior to the vote, the concept of blank ballots was not even publicly discussed, and no telephone or Skype conversation was recorded during which the idea of voting white was raised. The only rational explanation was that the protest was either some otherworldly conspiracy or that the majority of the people at one and the same time — and separately from one another — arrived at the idea of issuing blank ballots. As a result, the government had no one to negotiate with, no one to arrest, no one even to blackmail or co-opt. In short, the frustration of the government mirrored the frustration of the citizenry. After a week of anxiety, the elections were held again. But, lo and behold, this time 83 percent of the people proffered blank ballots.

This is an abridged version of the story of the blank-ballot rebellion. The rebellion itself surprisingly did not take place in austerity-torn Italy or broken Greece, where if we believe recent opinion polls, only one in five citizens think their vote still matters in national politics. It did not take place in Romania or Bulgaria, where strange things seem to happen all the time. The blank-ballot rebellion did not even take place in France or Germany, where world-shattering events more customarily occur. In the end, it took place in a novel by the Nobel Prize winner Jose Saramago, ex-Stalinist and die-hard anarchist, in his classic book [Seeing](#). But the blank-ballot rebellion could realistically happen nearly anywhere in Europe today. It calls to mind the old Soviet joke about a man who stands near the Kremlin handing out leaflets. When the police finally arrest him, they see that the leaflets are all blank. ““Well,” the man says, “everyone knows what’s wrong, why should I write down?”” But do we really know what’s wrong today?

“The centre cannot hold”

The public mood toward democracy in Europe today is best described as a mixture of pessimism and anger, something along Yeats’ famous lines: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / ... The best of all lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.” (W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming”)

This mood is reflected in many recent surveys. In April 2012, while the majority of Europeans agreed that the European Union is a decent place to live, their confidence in the economic performance of the EU and its capacity to play a major role in global politics declined. Even more troubling, almost 90 percent of Europeans saw a widening gap between what the public wants and what governments do; only a third of Europeans said they feel that their vote counts at the EU level and only 18 percent of Italians and 15 percent of Greeks said they feel their vote counts even in their own country. In a different survey, 76 percent of Europeans said their economic system is unfair, delivering only to the very few at the top.

In the U.S., one can detect a similar combination of anger and mistrust toward both elites and public institutions. The growing dissatisfaction with the way the American political system works makes many doubt this is America’s best time ever. The protagonist of the popular TV drama *The Newsroom* captures this new mood of bitterness and frustration when he reveals to the public that while America used to talk about itself as the greatest nation in the world, in reality “we are seventh in literacy, 27th in math, 22nd in science, 49th in life expectancy, 178th in infant mortality, third in the median household income, No. 4 in labor force, and No. 4 in exports. We lead the world only in three categories: number of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real, and defense spending, where we spend more than the next 26 countries combined.” Democracy has been turned into a game of chicken, in which preventing the other side from governing is more important than governing yourself. “Gridlock” has become the concept that best characterizes the way Americans describe their political system. From 2008 to 2012, Republicans in Congress have used the filibuster as much as it was deployed in the seven decades between World War I and the end of Ronald Reagan’s second term.

Not surprisingly, viewed from Europe, the U.S. looks like a dysfunctional post-communism democracy in which politics is an ungovernable zero-sum game; and from the American perspective European democracies resemble decaying semi-authoritarian regimes in which elites make all the choices behind the backs of voters.

In some sense, the difference in the American and European elite responses to constraints on democratic politics resembles the contrast between the Hollywood movie and the French experimental novel. American politicians hope to keep voters interested in politics by retaining a traditional plot — and that choice should be black and white. European politicians, however, ditched the plot and worked instead to convince voters to focus on the style and sophistication of the writing. In the U.S., the risk is that voters will at some point realize that although their political representatives disagree on nearly everything, their economic policies are awfully similar. It is here where the anti-elite resentment skyrockets and people are ready to endorse radical platforms. In Europe, the risk is that voters will simply stop “reading”; in other words, the nonvoter will become the protagonist of European politics.

In the end, Saramago’s novel, published almost a decade ago in pre-crisis 2004, has captured the state of public mind better than any possible political analysis. It has captured the sense of power lost on the side of voters — the depressing realization that citizens live in a world of rights but of no real choices.

Passionate, leaderless movements

The representatives of the new social movements — Occupy Wall Street in the U.S., the Indignados in Spain, the Pirates in Germany, Sweden, and other countries of Northern Europe — that emerged out of the ruins of the current economic crisis resemble Saramago's blankers. They are passionate, leaderless, and mysterious. They want change but lack a clear idea of what the change should look like or where it might come from. They are brilliant at making political gestures but weak at advancing political action. When the establishment in Spain pressed the outraged radicals to present their demands, what it got was a demand for minor changes in the electoral system, as if written by some second-year political science student in an underfunded Spanish university.

In many respects the new radicals resemble the lost tribe of the 1960s — in their enthusiasm and idealism, in their anger, and in their belief that we need a different world and not simply a different party in power. But the new protest movement is not the second coming of 1968. It is less utopian, ideological, and future-oriented. In 1968, the general sense was that in the world to come, you can screw anyone you want. In 2008, the feeling is that anybody or anything (that is, human or institutional) might screw you. Michael Lewis' best-seller [*The Big Short*](#) was one of the very few recent books equally popular among Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. In a peculiar sense, the new generation of radicals is conservative and nostalgic. They take to the streets not to ask for change but to prevent change. If in 1968 protesters on the streets of Paris and Berlin demanded to live in a world different from the one of their parents, the new radicals insist on the right to live in the world of their parents. They do not want to take power. Their ambition is to change the way power is exercised. They have succeeded in producing "global noise" and to raise issues such as growing social inequality. But they have failed to advance a strong and realistic voice that can advocate for concrete reform policies.

And contrary to the expectations of many political observers, the economic crisis has not weakened but rather strengthened the appeal of identity politics. The xenophobic Right, not the egalitarian Left, benefits the most from the crisis in pure political terms. Yet we must be careful here. The sharp Left-Right divide, which structured European politics ever since the French Revolution, is blurring. Threatened majorities — those who have everything and who therefore fear everything — have emerged as the major force in European politics. They fear that immigrants or ethnic minorities are overtaking their countries and threatening their way of life. They fear that European prosperity can no longer be taken for granted and worry that Europe's influence in global politics is in decline. They have put into question the axioms of the liberal consensus. And the emerging illiberal political consensus is not limited to right-wing radicalism; it encompasses the transformation of the European mainstream itself.



Standing before Mexico City's iconic Ángel de la Independencia monument, a protestor calls for a null vote in the midterm elections of 2009.

— Looking more closely at the political dynamics of European and American democracies today it is not unimaginable to witness a blank-ballot majority. The blank vote provides the voter the satisfaction of protest without the need for action. It easily fits the new mantra of both anti-welfare-state market libertarians and anti-security-state leftist libertarians: The best government is the one that is either invisible to us or simply absent.

What I am trying to understand is why voters have lost trust that their vote can bring change. Is there something more than disappointment with particular democratic regimes in this current dissatisfaction with democracy? Why has the democratization of society resulted in the decline of trust in democratic institutions? Can democracy survive without trust?



Protesters decry government spending cuts and tax raises in Aliados Square in Porto, Portugal, in 2012. Image: dinozaver/Shutterstock

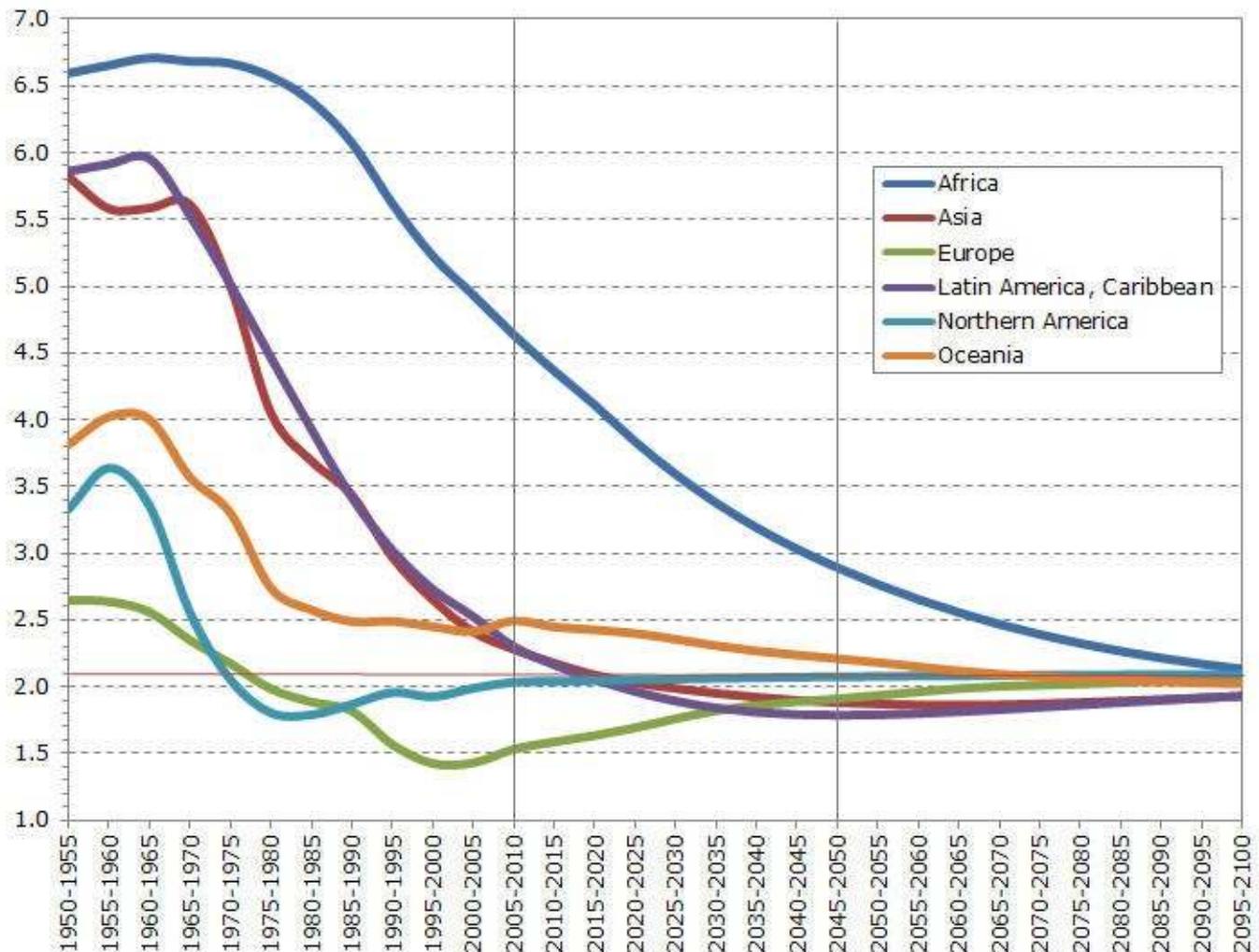
Crisis of democracy

The coinage “crisis of democracy” has circulated so broadly in the post-crisis West that it is easy to forget that democracy has always been in crisis. Library shelves groan with piles of books on the crisis of democracy occurring in just about every decade of the last century. In the last two centuries, defeated politicians were nearly always ready to declare a crisis of some sort; or when people took to the streets to defend their rights, experts were quick to conclude that democracy was in crisis (alternatively, when no one showed up on the streets, others were anxious that the same democracy was in crisis). Making a convincing argument about the idea of democratic crisis can be a futile exercise, but if we shelve the seduction of “crisis rhetoric,” there is an important dimension of the crisis of democratic society today that should not be ignored. At its essence, open societies are self-correcting societies. Their legitimacy and success don’t depend on their capacity to bring prosperity (autocratic regimes can do that just fine), nor on their capacity to make people happy (we know far too many unhappy democracies), but rather on their capacity to correct failing policies and actions.

In this sense, the real crisis of democracy does not have to derive only from the breakdown of democratic regimes and the emergence of authoritarian governments. Democracy can lose its capacity for self-correction with the democratic facade untouched. A democracy that constantly changes its governments but fails to correct its dysfunctional policies is a democracy in crisis. A democracy in which public conversation has lost its capacity to change opinion and in which debate is reduced to the confirmation of existing ideological biases is a democracy in crisis. A democracy in which people have lost hope that their collective voice can bring change and serve collective purpose is a democracy in crisis. In this sense, the existence of democratic institutions is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the existence of an open and democratic society. The question that we then need to explore is whether the decline of trust in democratic institutions eroded the capacity of democratic regimes to be self-correcting. Have we reached a point at which our democratic institutions merely sustain a failed status quo?

Five revolutions

What makes the current crisis of democracy so different from previous crises is that it is marked by disillusionment and decline in trust in democratic institutions, yet it is not accompanied by a loss of freedom or the rise of a powerful anti-democratic alternative. The current crisis of democracy is not an outcome of some institutional failure of democracy; on the contrary, it is a product of democracy's success. It is the result of five revolutions that have shattered our world in the last 50 years and made us more free but less powerful than before: the Woodstock-to-Wall-Street revolution of the 1970s and 1980s; the “end of history” revolutions of 1989; the digital revolution of the 1990s; the demographic revolution; and the political brain revolution ushered in by new discoveries in the brain sciences and behavioral economics.

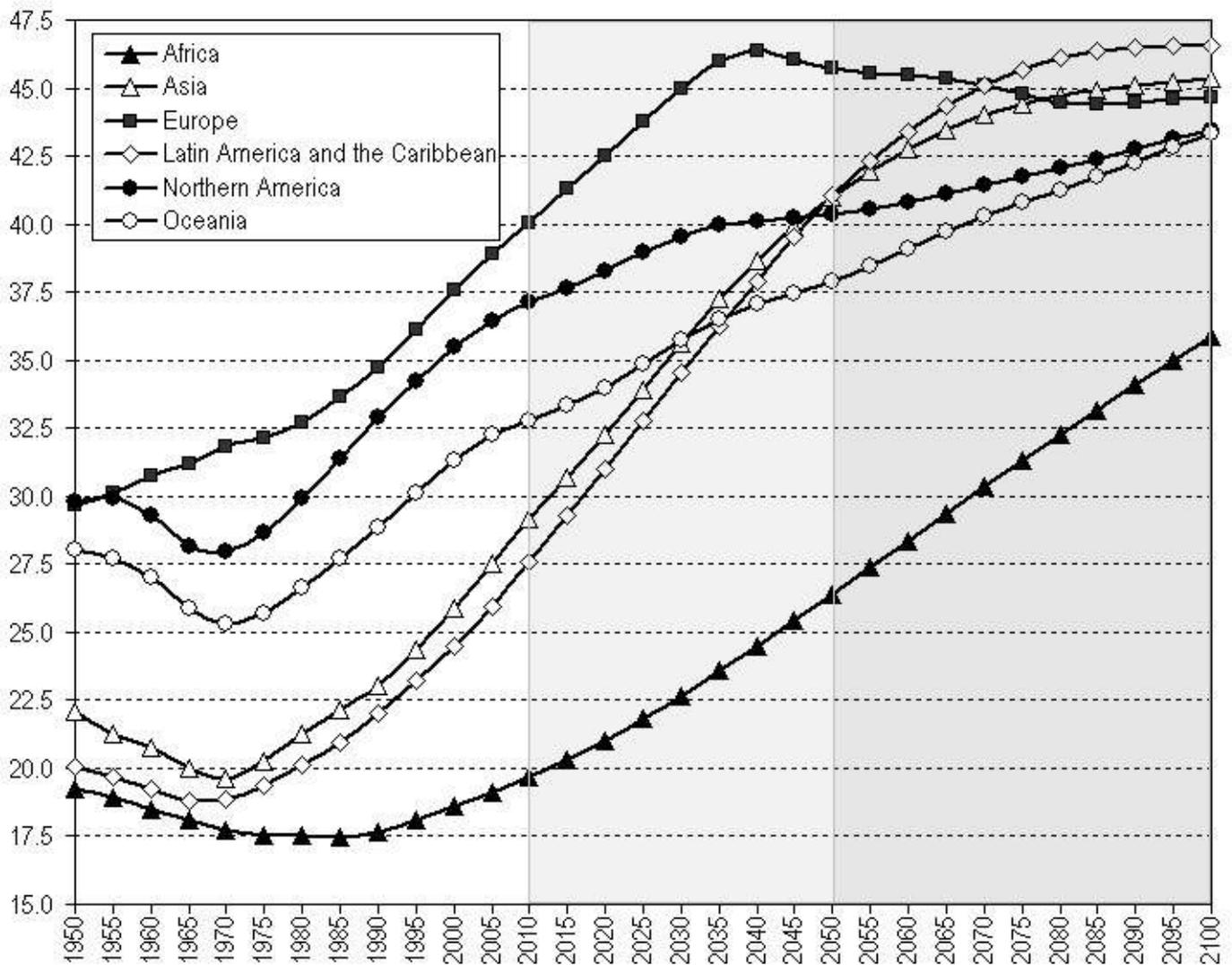


Total fertility (in children per woman), measured as of 2010 and projected to 2100 by the United Nations.

Source: United Nations Population Division

All five of these revolutions profoundly deepened our democratic experience. The Woodstock-to-Wall-Street revolution and the unholy but happy marriage between the social revolution of the 1970s and the market revolution of the 1980s broke the chains of the authoritarian family and weakened gender and racial stereotypes, giving new meaning to the idea of individual freedom. It made consumer choice an undisputed value and the sovereign individual the lead protagonist of the social drama (“The market gives people what the people want instead of what other people think that they ought to want,” opined Nobel Memorial Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman). The demographic revolution, marked by the decline in birth rates and the rise in life

expectancies, contributed to the social, economic, and political stability of Western societies. The “end-of-history” revolutions succeeded in making democracy the default option of mankind and gave birth to a truly global world. The revolution in the neurosciences offered a deeper understanding of individual decision making and broke down the wall between the mythical rational voter and the irrational voter. And, when it comes to democracy, the promise of the digital revolution might be summarized in five words: “Make democracy real, not representative.” It made us believe that societies could once again become republics.



Median age of the population (in years), measured as of 2010 and projected to 2100 by the United Nations.

Source: United Nations Population Division

Paradoxically, the same five revolutions that deepened our democratic experience no longer animate the current crisis of liberal democracy in the West. The Woodstock-to-Wall-Street revolution contributed to the decline of a shared sense of purpose. As the politics of the '60s devolved into the aggregation of individual private claims upon society and the state, our society became more tolerant and inclusive, if increasingly separate and unequal. The demographic revolution made aging societies culturally insecure and fearful of immigrants. The European “end of history” revolutions of 1980s deemed democratization to be essentially a process of how best to imitate Western institutions and took the creative tensions out of it. The revolution in brain sciences expelled ideas and visions from politics and reduced electoral campaigns to the processing of big data and the application of different techniques of distraction, customer targeting, and simulating real political change, while ultimately retaining the status quo. Meanwhile, the digital revolution questioned the very legitimacy of the

institutions of representative democracy, calling for a more transparent and simplified point-and-click democratic ethos. It strengthened the negative power of the citizen while weakening the deliberative nature of democratic politics. The Internet is better at “No” than “Go,” in the words of Micah Sifry, co-founder and editorial director of Personal Democracy Media.

All five revolutions empowered the citizen while simultaneously removing much of his or her voting authority. The negative outcomes were multifold: a fragmented society, a growing mistrust between the elites and the public, and a profound crisis of democratic politics that assumes different forms in Europe and the United States. In the U.S., the crisis is seen in the government’s paralysis and the incapacity of the country’s institutions to govern. In Europe, the crisis is witnessed by the suspension of politics and an attempt to substitute democracy with technocratic government.

The best mystery writers teach us that to see the obvious you should make sense of the illogical. Thus any rigorous attempt to understand the nature of the transformation of 21st-century democracy should be able to respond to three critical questions: Why did the triumph of democracy in the world result in the crisis of democracy in Europe and America? Why did governments not regain the trust of the public after the Great Recession of 2008 despite the fact that markets truly failed? And why are the current elites more meritocratic and less trusted than their predecessors?

The perils of normalcy

What the British essayist Walter Bagehot observed about monarchy more than a century ago — that “it is an intelligible government” because “the mass of mankind understand it and they hardly anywhere in the world understand any other” — is now true for democracy. Democracy is not without its enemies, to be sure, but it is devoid of appealing alternatives. And it was the “end of history” revolutions in Central Europe more than any other historical event that earned democracy its “no alternative” status.

“It was the best of years,” suggested British diplomat and political thinker Robert Cooper commenting on 1989. It “divides the past from the future almost as clearly as the Berlin Wall divided East from the West.” Just as similarly, many will argue that the digital revolution was “the best of revolutions,” as it divides the past from the future in just the same manner. The paradox, however, is that these two peaceful and splendid revolutions tore democracy in two distinctly opposite directions. The “revolutions” of 1989 were conservative revolutions in the actual meaning of the word: They wanted to return to the world as it existed in the Cold War West. Their slogan was “no experimentation” because they wanted to freeze time and have the East dive into the West. The digital revolution, though, is a radical revolution, promising that everything will change and that democracy as we know it will change first. My generation was the child of both revolutions. We loved each of them, and we now suffer the slings of their divorce.

By assuming democracy to be the normal state of society and restricting democratization to a mere imitation of the institutions and practices of developed democracies, Central Europe’s post-communist ideology of normality committed two sins. It ignored the tension between democracy and capitalism, which is inherent and even necessary to all market democracies, and it contributed to a sense of triumphalism that turned democracy from a regime type of choice into a default option for humankind. Although history is the best argument why democracy and the market go together — most prosperous societies are market democracies — the tensions between the market and democracy are also well known. Whereas democracy treats individuals as equal (every adult has an equal vote), free enterprise empowers individuals on the basis of how much economic value they create and how much property they own. Thus it is fair to expect that the average voter in a democracy will protect the property of the rich only if he believes that it can increase his own chances to become wealthier. If the capitalist system does not enjoy popular support, democracy will not tolerate the inequality produced by the market. The revolutions of 1989 made the grievous mistake of assuming that after the collapse of the communist system, the popular legitimacy of capitalism would be taken for granted and that all inherent tensions between democracy and capitalism would be bypassed or ignored.

The discourse of democratic triumphalism, on the other side, has eroded the intellectual foundations of modern democratic regimes. No longer is democracy considered the least undesirable form of government — the best of a bad bunch. Instead, it has become the best form of government for a period. People were eyeing democratic regimes not merely to save themselves from something worse but also to deliver peace, prosperity, and honest and effective governance in one overall package. Democracy was presented as the only correct answer to a slew of unrelated questions: What is the best way to bring economic growth? What is the best way to protect one’s country? Is it as the famous Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky said: “freedom anywhere will make the world safer everywhere”? What is the best way to fight corruption? What is the best way to respond to demographic or migratory challenges? The answer to all of these questions is, yes, democracy. Rhetoric has won over reality. Yet what the missionaries of democracy failed to recognize was that it is one thing to argue that problems such as corruption and integration can be better dealt with in a democratic environment and a totally different thing to insist that the mere introduction of free and fair elections and the adoption of

liberal constitution can solve all these problems. In the imagination of the Central European revolutions of 1989, democratization was not so much about representation as about the imitation of the institutions and political practices of the West. Refugees from the brave new world of communism, Central European societies were longing for boredom and predictability. But amid the quest for normalcy, the “end of history” revolutions of 1989 radically transformed the nature of public expectations from democracy. Exhausted from living in a dialectical world where everything was its opposite, post-communist citizens developed a worldview in which all good things should go together. Democracy meant prosperity; authoritarianism meant poverty. Democracy meant no conflict; authoritarianism meant permanent conflict. In a way, the revolutions of 1989 turned into an updated version of Voltaire’s Dr. Pangloss, who famously believed that “all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds.”

But democracies were not and could not be satisfaction machines. They do not produce good governance the way a baker turns out doughnuts. (Good governance is a welcome but far from inevitable product of democratic governance.) Another error of the 1989 revolutions was that they mixed up the real advantages of democracy. Democracies can’t offer dissatisfied citizens dream fulfillment, but they can offer the satisfaction of having the right to do something about dissatisfaction. This is democracy’s real advantage over the high-growth authoritarian-type regime of, say, China. Democracy is the political regime that best fits our current age of dissatisfaction. In his insightful book [*The Paradox of Choice*](#), Barry Schwartz demonstrates that the perverse effect of an explosion in choices is the rising dissatisfaction in the choices we make. The more we choose, the less we appreciate our choices and the less satisfied we feel. The customer who returns her dress 48 hours after she bought it so as to purchase another one is our new model citizen. She is dissatisfied with her choice but asks for another option; choosing is therefore not the instrument but the goal. What gives meaning to her is the opportunity for nonstop choosing and not the choices she makes. It is the capacity of democracy today to adjust to the world of dissatisfied citizens and consumers, and not its ability to satisfy, that makes it so attractive not only to everyday people but also to elites.

The digital rupture

The digital revolution did not try to put democracy on ice, it put it on a Red Bull diet. It feared that current democratic practices were divorced from the rhythm of the age, fueling growing expectations that the rise of modern technology would mark the return of democracy in a more authentic form. In the view of the digital natives, democracy doesn't have to be representative any longer. Thus the digital revolution has, in its own way, contributed to the delegitimation of the institutions of parliamentary democracy. It democratizes social life at the cost of deleting politics. Political communities have lost their relevance to our lives. Now the followers of political parties are just one form of social group among the multitude of expressionistic groups living on the Web.

“A central paradox of this connected age,” Ethan Zuckerman, of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, writes, “is that while it's easier to get information and perspectives from different parts of the world, we may be encountering a narrower picture of the world than we did on less connected days.” This “segregation” effect of the Internet has been well examined. It also has its critics. But what is indisputable is that connectivity is not the same as commonality. Increased ethnic diversity within nation states, fragmentation of the public space, and our fashionable obsessions with individual rights have in fact eroded the foundations of national solidarity.

For the younger generation, the experience with democracy is not necessarily through the prism of politics. Democracy can be said to be omnipresent. Today people vote as effortlessly as they breathe. While the vote may be losing its power in governing our countries, it is ironically becoming a new fashion in other spheres. Today citizens can vote for the top act in the Eurovision song contest. They can elect the dentist of the month and the hairdresser of the year. Sports, too, are becoming increasingly democratized. In 2008, the third-division soccer team Ebbsfleet took a major step toward democracy: For a modest fee of 35 pounds (about \$57 in 2012), fans were offered the right to manage the team themselves by voting in real time on the Internet regarding all important issues, which ranged from the transfer of players and the management of the budget to the design of souvenirs in the team store. Thirty-two thousand supporters from 122 countries joined what has been called “the ultimate football fantasy.” People were empowered to “directly” run teams at the same moment when they started losing their power to influence government policy.

The problem with the expansion of “voting” as a universal principle in making decisions is that it becomes much more difficult for people to see the advantages — and not simply the downsides — of representative institutions. Representative democracy was never just a transitional stage between the direct democracy of the ancients and the point-and-click democracy of the future. It had merits of its own. It secured for us the unparalleled advantages of the separation of powers and guaranteed the liberal nature of democratic power. In a manner very similar to how the revolutions of 1989 weakened democracies by making them static and unexciting, the digital revolution remade the public expectations of democracy by simultaneously expanding the principle of majority rule to nonpolitical spheres of life and eroding the legitimacy of the institutions of representative democracy. Now, for the majority of people, improving democracy means achieving more direct democracy.

The metaphors of the 19th century seem increasingly to look like works in progress. When that century's French historian and philosopher Ernest Renan defined the nation as a “daily plebiscite,” he was speaking like a poet. Nowadays, making the nation's existence “a daily plebiscite” appears to be a feasible project. Since the launching of any new Apple Computer product is akin to the science fiction story of old, we should hardly be surprised if some activist is even now devising a plan for replacing representative institutions, such as parliament, with the instruments of direct democracy. Iceland has already offered up the first example of crowd-sourcing the creation of a constitution. After the collapse of the country's banking system and the subsequent profound crisis of trust in politics

institutions, the majority of the island's politicians decided that crowd-sourcing the writing of the new constitution was the only way to revive democracy in a country where the people had been betrayed by their once-trusted leaders. The experiment is currently open-ended, but we can expect that the Internet-inspired egalitarianism and crowd-sourcing will become major factors in the move to reform democracy. Be prepared for brave new projects in which people use crowd-sourcing and instant voting not only to improve representative institutions but also to replace them.

Imagine a constitutional project that envisions that on the day of the inauguration of the newly elected president, a bomb is implanted in his body, and the bomb is connected to the smart phones of all citizens who have the right to vote. After every decision the president makes, voters press Yes or No to signal whether or not they agree. If on more than three occasions the tally for No is higher than the tally for Yes, then the bomb automatically detonates. Can you imagine the president being uninterested in the voice of the majority? Certainly not. But is this country a democracy?

The consequence of the dual pressure on democracy from the "normalizing" impulses of 1980s and the "making democracy real" inclinations of the digital revolution is that our politics today have been turned into a game of hope and despair. The waning of the Cold War world as we know it was experienced as the end of the world by nostalgia-driven '89ers, while the promise of a digital paradise makes the younger generation excessively critical to everything they perceive as yesterday's democracy (not fundamentally different, really, from the old battles between the Old and New Left). Politics is shaped by the demographic imagination (the fear that we are losing our world) and the technological imagination that promises that we can build the world that we want. The room for genuine political reform has actually disappeared. We are asked either to defend the democracy of yesterday or to embrace the democracy of tomorrow. Meanwhile, we lose what we have in common yet we are more connected than ever before. The rise of the new populism in the West cannot be understood correctly if we fail to understand this play between the demography-fueled fears of a community lost and the Internet-propelled hopes of living in a community of choice. Anti-immigrant reactionaries and technology-minded progressives will most likely shape the future of our democracy.

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