

Trouble in the Advanced Democracies?

A QUARTER-CENTURY OF DECLINING CONFIDENCE

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A quarter-century ago, Michel J. Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki argued that the nations of Europe, North America, and Japan confronted a “crisis of democracy.”¹ Their starting point was a vision, widespread during the 1960s and 1970s, of “a bleak future for democratic government,” an image of “the disintegration of civil order, the breakdown of social discipline, the debility of leaders, and the alienation of citizens.”

The central thesis of the subtle, nuanced, and wide-ranging analysis by Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki (hereafter CH&W) was that the Trilateral democracies were becoming overloaded by increasingly insistent demands from an ever-expanding array of participants, raising fundamental issues of governability. Within that common framework, the three authors offered somewhat distinct diagnoses of the problems facing their respective regions. In Europe, Crozier emphasized the upwelling of social mobilization, the collapse of traditional institutions and values, the resulting loss of social control, and governments' limited room for maneuver. Huntington asserted that America was swamped by a “democratic surge” that had produced political polarization,

demands for more equality and participation, and less effective political parties and government. His provocative therapy was to “restore the balance” between democracy and governability. By contrast, Watanuki argued that Japan did not (yet?) face problems of “excessive” democracy, thanks in part to rapid economic growth and in part to its larger reservoir of traditional values. Whatever the regional and national nuances, however, the authors sketched a grim outlook for democracy in the Trilateral countries: delegitimated leadership, expanded demands, overloaded government, political competition that was both intensified and fragmented, and public pressures leading to nationalistic parochialism.

In historical perspective, the sense of crisis that permeated *The Crisis of Democracy* may have reflected the confluence of two factors: first, the surge of radical political activism that swept the advanced industrial democracies in the 1960s, which began with the civil rights and antiwar movements in United States and was then echoed in the events of May 1968 in France, Italy’s “Hot Autumn” later that year, and student upheavals in Japan; and second, the economic upheavals triggered by the oil crisis of 1973–74 that were to result in more than a decade of higher inflation, slower growth, and, in many countries, worsening unemployment. The Trilateral governments were thus trapped between rising demands from citizens and declining resources to meet those demands. Moreover, the legitimacy of governments was suspect in the eyes of a generation whose motto was: “Question Authority.” CH&W warned that these ominous developments posed a threat to democracy itself.

A quarter-century is an opportune interval after which to revisit the issue of the performance of our democratic institutions. The intervening years have witnessed many important developments in our domestic societies, economies, and politics, as well as in the international setting.

Most dramatic of all, of course, was the end of the Cold War, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. If it did not signal the end of history, the removal of the communist threat surely did mark the end of a historical epoch. It transformed the fundamental underpinnings of security alliances and eliminated the principal philosophical and geopolitical challenge to liberal democracy and the market economy. In some of the Trilateral countries it also coincided with, and to some extent triggered, an intellectual and ideological revolution. In each country it transformed domestic political calculations and alignments in ways that are still being played out.

Economically, the decades that followed the appearance of the CH&W volume were distinctly less happy than those that preceded it. The oil shocks of 1973–74 and 1979–80 drew the curtain on that fortunate early-postwar combination of high growth, low inflation, and low unemployment. Although economists differ on the origins of the pervasive slowdown, virtually all econometric analyses confirm the view

of the man and woman in the street: Western economies took a turn for the worse around 1973–74, and recovery was a slow and uncertain process. The immediate inflationary effects of the oil crises were overcome by means of stringent monetary policies, but the economic malaise continued. In subsequent years, Europe had unprecedentedly high structural unemployment, the United States endured sharply reduced rates of real wage growth, and after 1992 Japan experienced the longest recession in the country’s postwar history.

“Interdependence” was already widely discussed in the early 1970s, and integration of the world economy has continued at a rapid pace in the years since then. International trade has grown faster than gross domestic products, and foreign investment more rapidly than either of them. Western economies are even more porous internationally now than when CH&W wrote, and our economic fates are even more intertwined. Nowhere is this more true, of course, than in Europe: The European Union has taken shape and extended its reach to an increasing number of policy domains with stunning speed. Moreover, the rise of newly industrializing economies challenges the competitiveness of all the Trilateral countries. Finally, immigration from the less-developed to the more-developed nations of the world has accelerated, creating new difficulties and social tensions.

Socially and culturally, these decades have witnessed significant change. Increased mobility and growing individuation have eroded traditional family and community ties. Some observers believe that the decline in respect for authority that CH&W underscored has continued apace in all sectors of society; others see evidence of increased tolerance of diversity. The role of women in economic life (and to some extent in public life more generally) has grown. The expansion of higher education during the 1950s and 1960s continues to boost the university-educated share of the electorate. The electronic media have transformed how we spend our leisure time as well as how we follow public affairs. In many of our cities, the problems of drugs, crime, homelessness, and blight are even more visible now than a quarter-century ago. Finally, older people occupy a growing share of the population in all Trilateral countries, which is certain to have major consequences for both social and economic policy in the decades to come.

The Trilateral Democracies Today

When *The Crisis of Democracy* appeared, citizens in the Trilateral world were still primarily concerned about market failure in sectors as diverse as social services, culture, and the environment. Demands for government intervention to redress those failures were ascendant. This ideological climate fed the preoccupation of CH&W with governability. As symbolized by the advent of Thatcher, Reagan, Nakasone, Kohl, and

similar figures elsewhere, however, public concern had shifted by the early 1980s from *market* failure to *government* failure. Responding to and in part encouraging this sea change in public opinion, conservative leaders proposed a reduced role for government, and this ideological shift to the right was accelerated everywhere by the discrediting of state socialism after 1989. Facing an altered electoral marketplace, political leaders everywhere now call for less government—less bureaucracy, less regulation, less public spending—although policy has yet to catch up with rhetoric. Even a relatively liberal Democratic president in the United States has proclaimed that “the era of big government is over.” In one sense, the problem of “overload” identified by CH&W appears to have solved itself: Many people seem to have concluded that government action is not the answer to all their problems.² Yet citizens still hold government responsible for their social and economic well-being, and cutting “entitlement” programs remains difficult everywhere.

Against this backdrop of geopolitical, economic, social, and ideological change, how should we assess the current status of the advanced industrial democracies of North America, Western Europe, and Japan? At the outset we want to emphasize a distinction that CH&W felt less need to stress: the distinction between the effectiveness of specific democratic governments and the durability of democratic institutions per se. On the one hand, we see no evidence in any of these countries that democracy itself is at risk of being supplanted by an undemocratic political regime or by social or political anarchy. On the other hand, we do see substantial evidence throughout the Trilateral world of mounting public unhappiness with government and the institutions of representative democracy.

Earlier alarm about the stability of democracy itself—which CH&W were in part responding to and in part amplifying—now seems exaggerated. The happy contrast between political developments in the advanced industrial democracies after World Wars I and II is indeed dramatic. Within two decades after the end of World War I, fledgling democracies had collapsed in Italy, Germany, Spain, and Japan, and more established democracies elsewhere were under siege. Now, more than half a century after the end of World War II, democratic regimes are deeply rooted throughout the Trilateral world and have multiplied in other parts of the world as well. Bearing in mind the tragic failures of democracy in the interwar period, it was entirely natural in the first decades after World War II for observers of Western politics to ask whether the same thing could happen again. Political science has a poor record of prognostication, especially with respect to radical change, and we should not be too presumptuous in writing about such fundamental issues, but with half a century of democratic stability under our collective belts, the answer is almost certainly no.

The case for this optimism does not simply rest on the passage of

time. Decades of surveys in North America, Western Europe, and Japan yield little evidence of diminished support for liberal democracy among either mass publics or elites. If anything, the opposite is true: Commitment to democratic values is higher than ever.³ In sharp contrast to the period after World War I, no serious intellectual or ideological challenge to democracy has emerged. Whether tracked over the more than five decades since the end of World War II or over the decade since the fall of the Berlin Wall, opponents of democracy have lost support. Even where public discontent with the performance of particular democratic governments has become so acute as to overturn the party system (as in Japan and Italy in 1993–95), these changes have not included any serious threat to fundamental democratic principles and institutions. In this sense we see no significant evidence of a crisis of democracy.

Nevertheless, to say that democracy per se is not at risk is far from saying that all is well with the Trilateral democracies. In fact, public confidence in the performance of representative institutions in Western Europe, North America, and Japan has declined since the original Trilateral Commission report was issued, and in that sense most of these democracies are troubled.

Symptoms of Distress

Public attitudes toward democracy can be assessed at various levels of abstraction. We find no evidence of declining commitment to the principles of democratic government or to the democratic regimes in our countries. On the contrary, if anything, public commitment to democracy per se has risen in the last half century. At the other extreme, we are not concerned with day-to-day evaluations of specific leaders, policies, and governments (in the European sense of the word); we assume that evaluations of this kind of governmental performance will rise and fall in any well-functioning democracy. Rather, our concern is with popular confidence in the performance of representative institutions. Among the specific indicators we focus on are trends in: 1) attachment to, and judgments of, political parties; 2) approval of parliaments and other political institutions; and 3) assessment of the “political class” (politicians and political leaders) and evaluations of political trust. Whatever the “normal” background level of public cynicism and censure of politics, citizens in most of the Trilateral democracies are less satisfied—often much less satisfied—with the performance of their representative political institutions than they were a quarter-century ago.

North America. The onset and depth of this disillusionment vary from country to country, but the downtrend is longest and clearest in the United States, where polling has produced the most abundant and systematic evidence.⁴ (The evidence from Canada, if less abundant and dramatic,

conforms to this general picture.) When Americans were asked in the late 1950s and early 1960s, “How much of the time can you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?” three-quarters of them said “most of the time” or “just about always.” Such a response would

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sound unbelievably quaint to most people today. This decline in confidence followed a decade or more of exceptionally turbulent political conflict—the civil rights movement, Vietnam, and Watergate and its successor scandals—that transformed American politics. Third-party challengers for the presidency, divided government, a term-limits movement, and other political developments signaled the public’s increasing disenchantment with the political status quo.⁵ Public confidence in the ability and benevolence of government has fallen steadily over this period. The decline was briefly interrupted by the “It’s Morning in

America” prosperity of the Reagan administration, and even more briefly by victory in the Gulf War, but confidence in government ended up lower after 12 years of Republican rule. Indeed, of the total decline, roughly half occurred under Republican administrations and half under Democratic ones. The economic prosperity of the late 1990s has seen an uptick in confidence in government, but the figures still remain well below those of the 1970s, not to mention those of the halcyon days of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Public-opinion data tell the story of this decline. For example, whereas three-quarters of the American public once trusted the government to do what is right, only 39 percent felt this way in 1998. In 1964, only 29 percent of the American electorate agreed that “the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.” By 1984, that figure had risen to 55 percent, and by 1998, fully 63 percent of voters concurred. In the 1960s, two-thirds of Americans rejected the statement “Most elected officials don’t care what people like me think”; in 1998, nearly two-thirds of Americans agreed with it. This negative assessment applies to virtually all parts of government. Those people expressing “a great deal” of confidence in the executive branch fell from 42 percent in 1966 to only 12 percent in 1997, and equivalent trust in Congress fell from 42 percent in 1966 to 11 percent in 1997.⁶

Almost every year since 1966, the Harris Poll has presented a set of five statements to national samples of Americans to measure their political alienation: 1) “The people running the country don’t really care what happens to you.” 2) “Most people with power try to take advantage of people like yourself.” 3) “You’re left out of things going on around

you.” 4) “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” 5) “What you think doesn’t count very much anymore.” Every item on this list has won increasing assent from Americans since the opinion series began. In the late 1960s—at the very height of the Vietnam protests—barely one-third of Americans endorsed these cynical views; by the early 1990s fully two-thirds of all Americans concurred. By almost any measure, political alienation has soared over the last three decades.⁷ A single comparison captures the transformation: In April 1966, with the Vietnam War raging and race riots in Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta, 66 percent of Americans *rejected* the view that “the people running the country don’t really care what happens to you.” In December 1997, in the midst of the longest period of peace and prosperity in more than two generations, 57 percent of Americans *endorsed* that same view.⁸

Europe. Comparable public-opinion trends in Europe are more variegated, but there, too, the basic picture is one of spreading disillusionment with established political leaders and institutions. Trust in politicians and major political institutions has fallen over the last quarter-century in countries as diverse as Britain, Italy, France, and Sweden.

Britons’ traditional deference to elites has been replaced by growing skepticism. In 1987, for example, fewer than half of Britons believed that either civil servants, the national government, or local councils could be trusted to serve the public interest.⁹ And while 48 percent of the British public expressed quite a lot of confidence in the House of Commons in 1985, that figure had been halved by 1995. Public protests over government decisions had become a common feature of politics in a nation once known for popular deference to political elites. As a symbol of this spreading skepticism, a series of high-profile Parliamentary committees in the 1990s studied issues of government corruption, ethical standards in politics, and campaign-finance abuses. Sweden, which invented the consummate welfare state and was once widely considered to have found a happy “middle way” between the free-for-all of market capitalism and the oppression of state socialism, is emblematic of Europe’s troubled mood. The proportion of Swedes who rejected the statement that “parties are only interested in people’s votes, not in their opinions” decreased from 51 percent in 1968 to 28 percent in 1994.¹⁰ In 1986, even after the onset of the trend of decreasing political trust, a majority (51 percent) of Swedes still expressed confidence in the Riksdag; by 1996, however, only 19 percent did.

Especially striking are the patterns for the postwar democracies of Germany and Italy. Political support grew in these nations during the postwar decades, but the trends reversed at some point, and support has now eroded significantly from postwar highs. For instance, the percentage of Germans who said they trusted their Bundestag deputy to represent their interests rose from 25 percent in 1951 to 55 percent in

1978; by 1992, it had declined to 34 percent.¹¹ Other survey responses point to a general erosion of Germans' trust in government since the early 1980s. Similarly, student unrest and extremist violence in the 1970s strained Italians' postwar democratic agreement, and public skepticism broadened and deepened with the political scandals of the past decade. This was signaled most dramatically by the radical restructuring of the party system in the mid-1990s. The percentage of Italians who say that politicians "don't care what people like me think" increased from 68 percent in 1968 to 84 percent in 1997.

At least until recently, such trends have been less visible in some of the smaller European democracies. Still, patterns of growing political cynicism have become more common in Austria, Norway, Finland, and other small states during the past decade. Almost everywhere, it seems, people are less deferential to political leaders and more skeptical of their motives. Across Europe the pattern of declining political support has apparently accelerated in the past decade. A recent evaluation of all the relevant long-term evidence found "clear evidence of a general erosion in support for politicians in most advanced industrial countries."¹²

Japan. Public evaluations of politics and government in Japan reveal similarly disturbing trends. While *The Crisis of Democracy* portrayed Japan as an outlier, buffered from travails the authors saw looming elsewhere by a deferential political culture in which state authority was accepted,¹³ Japanese citizens' disillusionment with government and political institutions has, if anything, proven to be more persistent than elsewhere in the Trilateral world. Japan began the postwar era with confidence levels at a low point. With a generation of leaders discredited by wartime defeat and with the new democratic institutions imposed by the Occupation as yet untested, it is little wonder that political uncertainty prevailed, as attested to by extremely high proportions of Japanese responding "Don't know" to survey questions. By the 1960s, confidence in democracy per se was well established, and people's evaluations of government and politics had improved somewhat from these abysmal beginnings, but they nevertheless remained low relative to those in most other advanced industrial democracies.¹⁴ Although the mid-1980s witnessed a brief upturn, confidence levels declined noticeably in the politically turbulent and economically distressed 1990s. The long-term trends toward less deference to political leaders, diminished loyalty to established political parties (including the long-dominant Liberal Democratic Party, or LDP), and increased political dissatisfaction all predate the scandals that finally brought down the LDP in 1993 after 38 years of uninterrupted rule.

The proportion of Japanese voters who agree with the deferential view that "in order to make Japan better, it is best to rely on talented politicians, rather than to let the citizens argue among themselves" has

fallen steadily for 40 years. Although this is probably a good indicator of the *strengthening* of the cultural and sociological foundations of Japanese democracy, the proportion of voters who feel that they exert at least “some influence” on national politics through elections, demonstrations, or expressions of public opinion also fell steadily between 1973 and 1993. In other words, Japanese voters have become less and less satisfied over the last 20 years with their limited role in politics, and less content to leave public affairs in the hands of political leaders. This is the backdrop against which a series of political corruption scandals broke prior to 1993, discrediting the LDP and causing public esteem for political leadership to decline still further. In yet another sign of a downturn in confidence, trust in the country’s once-esteemed elite civil servants has also plummeted over the past decade.

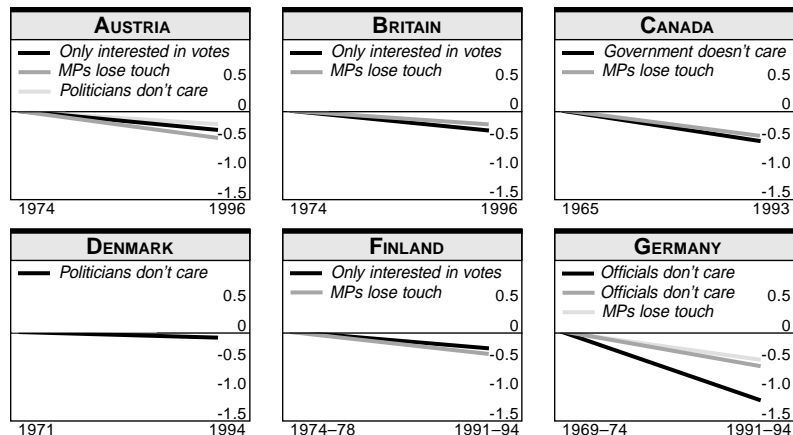
Trends in Political Confidence

When we step back from surveying the Trilateral landscape region by region, the overall picture that emerges is disturbing. Long series of national-election studies and reputable commercial public-opinion surveys provide extensive evidence of how public sentiments have changed over time. Evidence of the decline in political support has been especially apparent in three areas: disillusionment with politicians, with political parties, and with political institutions.

Politicians. If public doubts about the polity surfaced only in evaluations of politicians or the government in power at any particular point in time, there would be little cause for worry. After all, citizens’ dissatisfaction with an incumbent government routinely spurs voters to seek a change in administration at the next election and then extend support to the new incumbents. In that case, disaffection is a healthy part of the democratic process. Because citizens have the power to “throw the rascals out,” democracy has a potential for renewal and responsiveness that is its ultimate strength. If dissatisfaction is generalized to the point where citizens lose faith in the entire political class, however, then the chances for democratic renewal are seriously diminished.

The patterns we have described separately, region by region, appear to be common to most Trilateral democracies. When the data for recent decades are assembled, the picture that emerges is stark (see Figure 1 on pp. 14–15). Overall, *there is evidence of some decline in confidence in politicians in 12 out of 13 countries for which systematic data are available.* The convergence of results across Trilateral democracies is striking, because each has experienced its own unique political events over the past quarter-century. Although the decline is not universal,¹⁵ there is a general pattern of spreading public distrust of politicians and government among the citizens of Trilateral democracies. The political

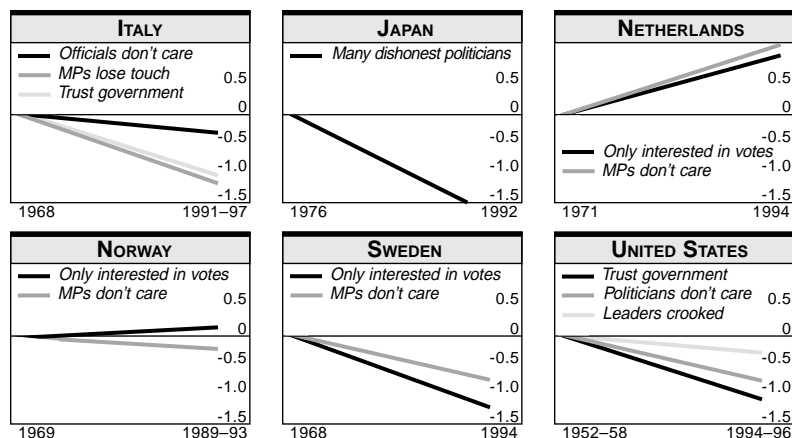
FIGURE 1—CONFIDENCE IN POLITICIANS



process undoubtedly faces strains when an increasing number of people distrust those individuals who are running the institutions of democratic governance.

Political Parties. For more than a century, political parties have played a central role in the theory and practice of democratic government. To be sure, classical philosophers conceived of democracy as a kind of unmediated popular sovereignty in which “the people” rule directly, but they had in mind the context of a small city-state and never imagined that democratic government could function in societies as large and complex as today’s Trilateral nations. This hurdle of scale was overcome by the greatest modern political innovation—representative democracy—which required intermediary institutions to link citizens to their government, to aggregate the increasingly diverse universe of conflicting social and economic interests into coherent public policies, and to ensure the accountability of rulers to the ruled. With the advent of universal suffrage, these functions came to be performed by political parties throughout the democratic world.

Although parties have long been the target of vociferous criticism, without them, the eminent scholar E.E. Schattschneider once asserted,¹⁶ democracy would be unthinkable. One need not be blind to the deficiencies of partisanship nor romanticize the internal workings of party organizations to recognize the importance of parties to representative government. Joseph Schumpeter once defined democracy as “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s votes.”¹⁷ Although Schumpeter did not specifically emphasize the role of parties in this competition, his theory did clarify how parties

FIGURE 1—CONFIDENCE IN POLITICIANS (*cont'd*)

Notes: Table entries are per-annum change coefficients estimated by unstandardized regression coefficients of time on each variable. The original variables are coded so that negative regression coefficients indicate a decrease in trust over time.

Sources: The respective National Election Study series in each nation.

contribute to democracy. Just as firms in a free market are led to innovate and to satisfy consumers by a combination of self-interest and the rules of open competition, party competition provides the linchpin between voters and public policy and the mechanism for turning disparate “special interests” into some version of “the public interest.” Just as brand names allow consumers to choose on the basis of past experience and to penalize shoddy performance, party labels ensure that voters can reward the successful stewardship of public affairs and punish incompetence or dishonesty. Partisan “brand loyalty” gives political leaders the right incentives: They are free to innovate and make difficult decisions that may be painful in the short run, while they remain accountable to their constituents in the long run. Parties, in short, make the political marketplace orderly. Parties offer other advantages as well. They allow the voters to rise above their feelings about individual politicians; party supporters can be dissatisfied with a set of candidates, yet remain committed to the party’s goals and the principle of representative democracy.

Because of the centrality of parties to democracy, people’s feelings of attachment to or identification with political parties are one of the most widely studied of political attitudes. Fine-tuned efforts have been made to measure both affinities toward specific parties and acceptance of the general system of party-based democracy.¹⁸

Signs of waning public attachment to political parties first emerged in several Trilateral democracies during the 1970s.¹⁹ The collapse in citizen engagement with political parties over the subsequent decades is as close to a universal generalization as one can find in political science.

Card-carrying membership has always been less important for American than for European parties, but the proportion of Americans who reported that they engaged in party work at least once during the previous year fell by 56 percent between 1973 and 1993, and the proportion who reported attending a campaign rally or speech fell by 36 percent over the same period. Comparably massive declines in party membership have been registered in most Trilateral countries over the last 25 years.²⁰ As attachments to political parties have eroded, electorates have become more volatile and skeptical. A comprehensive look at this pattern of weakening party ties, or “dealignment,” reveals that popular identification with political parties has fallen in almost all the advanced industrial democracies. *The percent of the public expressing a partisan attachment has declined in 17 of the 19 Trilateral nations for which time-series data are available.* The strength of party attachments was separately measured in 18 nations: All show a downward trend.²¹

Seldom does such a diverse group of nations reveal so consistent a trend. The only major variation is in the timing of the decline. Dealignment in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden has been a long-term and relatively steady process that moved partisanship to a lower baseline level. For example, 65 percent of the Swedish public claimed party ties in 1968, compared to only 48 percent in 1994. In other countries, the change has been more recent. French and Irish partisanship has eroded over the past two decades. German partisanship, which had grown during the early postwar decades, began to weaken in the late 1980s and dropped off markedly in the 1990s. In Canada, the collapse of the Progressive Conservative and New Democratic Parties in the 1993 elections accentuated a similar trend toward dealignment. In Japan and Austria, too, detachment from parties accelerated in the 1990s, in response to a breakdown of political consensus in both nations. Specific variations aside, the overall pattern is consistent and striking. If party attachments represent the most fundamental type of citizen support for representative democracy, as many scholars assert, then their decline in nearly all advanced industrial democracies offers strong and disturbing evidence of the public’s disengagement from political life.

Beyond reflecting dissatisfaction with politicians and current party leaders, weakening partisan ties also signal a growing disenchantment with partisan politics in general. For example, responses to several questions from the American National Election Study indicate a trend of declining faith that parties and elections are responsive to the public’s interests.²² A variety of other evidence points to Americans’ growing disillusionment with political parties as agents of democratic representation.²³ Along with other factors, disenchantment with political parties fueled public demand for major electoral reforms in Japan, Italy, and New Zealand. Across most of the Trilateral democracies, more citizens are now maintaining their independence from political parties

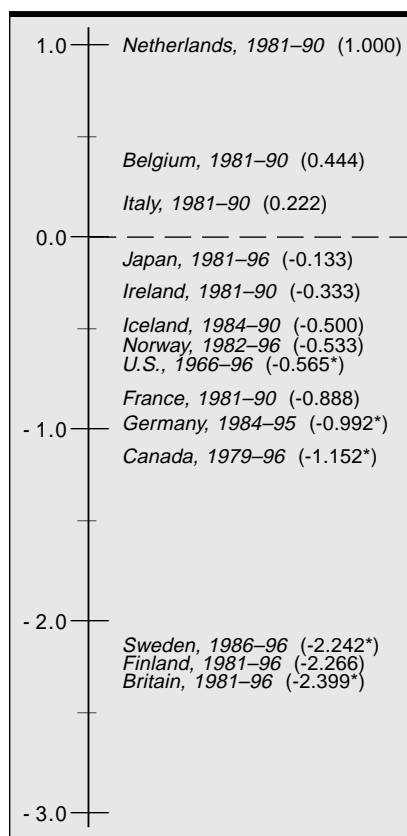
and the institutions of representative democracy that they represent.

Political Institutions. In the Trilateral democracies, citizens' skepticism about politicians and political parties extends to the formal institutions of democratic government. It is one thing for citizens to be skeptical of the president or the prime minister (or even the group of politicians in parliament); it is quite different if this cynicism broadens to include the institutions of the presidency and the legislature.

Because of its abundance of long-running, high-quality public-opinion surveys, the best evidence once again comes from the United States. One question gauges confidence in the officials running the three branches of American government.²⁴ In the mid-1960s, a large proportion of Americans expressed a great deal of confidence in the Supreme Court, the executive branch, and Congress, but that confidence dropped dramatically by the early 1970s, and slid even further for the executive and Congress over the following two decades. Significantly, it is the Supreme Court, the least partisan and political institution, that has best retained the public's confidence. By the mid-1990s, barely a tenth of the American public had a great deal of confidence in the people running the executive branch or Congress—dramatic evidence of Americans' dissatisfaction with government.

Figure 2 presents data on trends in confidence in parliament for 14 Trilateral democracies.²⁵ Parliament is the prime institution of representative democracy, the link between citizens and elites. Thus we focus on public images of parliament as a key institution in the structure of democratic politics.

FIGURE 2—CONFIDENCE IN PARLIAMENT IN 14 TRILATERAL COUNTRIES



Notes: Table entries are the per-annum change in the percentage expressing a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in parliament (*p < 0.05).

Sources: World Value Surveys (WVS) data are from the 1981–83, 1990–94, and 1995–98 surveys; other data are from individual national-survey series.

The time coverage and the extensiveness of the evidence varies considerably across nations, but the overall pattern is quite apparent. *In 11 out of 14 countries, confidence in parliament has declined.* Although in a number of cases the evidence does not rise to the level of statistical significance (largely because of the limited number of time points), in the five countries (Britain, Canada, Germany, Sweden, and the United States) for which the most extensive data are available, the drop in confidence in the national legislature is both pronounced and statistically significant.

Citizens' declining confidence in the institutions of democratic government extends beyond parliament. A separate analysis, using the 1981 and 1990 World Values Surveys, evaluated confidence in the armed services, judiciary, police, and civil service, as well as parliament. Although some institutions have scored gains in public trust over time, the general downward trajectory is clear. On average, confidence in these five institutions decreased by 6 percent over this single decade.²⁶ In fact, only Denmark and Iceland displayed absolute increases in institutional confidence during the 1980s, and those increases were small.

The trends described here are not homogeneous across all the Trilateral countries. The degree and timing of growing distrust of political leaders, dissatisfaction with government performance, and estrangement from established parties vary greatly, depending on national traditions, specific political events, the effectiveness of individual leaders, and so on. Generally speaking, the trends are clearer in the larger countries (and clearest of all in the largest of all) and less visible (or, in a few cases, almost wholly absent) in some of the smallest countries.

Quite apart from any temporary disenchantment with the present government or dissatisfaction with particular leaders, most citizens in the Trilateral world have become more distrustful of politicians, more skeptical about political parties, and significantly less confident in their parliament and other political institutions. Compared to the state of public opinion at the time that CH&W wrote, the political mood in most of our countries today is not just grumpy, but much grumpier.

Why Worry?

Although public concern over these trends is widespread, it is nevertheless reasonable to step back and ask whether we should be worried about the many signs of erosion in popular confidence in government and the institutions of representative democracy. Some observers would reply with a resounding "No," offering three main arguments. The first holds that a critical citizenry signals not illness in the body politic but rather the health of democracy, and that the real challenge is to explain not the long-term decline in confidence, but why it was as high as it was in the 1950s and early 1960s, especially in the United States. A variation on that same view sees changes in values,

driven by prosperity, technology, and other factors, as having created a more critical citizenry that rejects the political status quo and is also forcing new issues such as environmentalism and women's rights onto the political agenda, thus reforming and revitalizing democracy.

A second objection holds that new forms of political participation (such as referenda and "town-hall"-style fora) and an upsurge in certain types of grassroots activism (including social movements that are more broad-based than in the past) have supplanted previous forms of political engagement. A third objection proceeds from a particular perspective on the appropriate relation between government and citizens. The task of government, this view holds, is to give citizens not necessarily what they want, but what they need. Thus sound and appropriate policies are the best measure of governmental performance. Confidence levels are immaterial as long as the public supports the government enough to comply with its laws, pay taxes, and accept conscription.

Although each of these arguments has merit, we see reason to worry in the fact that voters' "report cards" on their representative institutions in the Trilateral democracies have generally become more critical—and often much more critical—in recent decades. Although we do not believe that this sour mood is a precursor of the collapse of Western democracy, a decent respect for our fellow citizens' views compels us to consider why they are increasingly distrustful of, and discontented with, their political institutions. If the decline in public confidence is justified (because of growing corruption, for example), then we might applaud citizens' ire but not its cause, just as we would be glad to have discovered a child's fever without being glad that her temperature was high.

If citizens are less satisfied with their representative institutions, this is a politically relevant and important fact. Yet few would argue that popularity is the sole measure of democratic performance, and most of us would admit that governments often must (or should) take actions that might reduce their popularity in the short run. Opinions differ on whether public satisfaction per se is a relevant measure of democratic performance. Some believe that democracy is not (just) about making citizens happy, and that it is also supposed to facilitate "good government," whether or not citizens are pleased with government actions. Others endorse the more populist view that what is distinctive about democracy is that the ultimate criterion of performance is citizens' collective judgment, so if public confidence declines over the long run, that is *prima facie* (though not irrefutable) evidence that the performance of representative institutions has declined.

A Model for Explaining the Decline

For disaffection in particular countries, explanations have been offered that are studded with proper nouns: Vietnam, Nixon, Craxi, Mulroney,

Thatcher, Recruit, and so on. Such interpretations offer important insights into the national catalysts for democratic distress, but it seems surprising that so many independent democracies just happened to encounter rough water or careless captains simultaneously. Although we do not discount the importance of specific national factors, we seek more generalizable explanations.

Unraveling the question of why confidence in government has declined to varying degrees across the Trilateral world is a complex task. In our view, public satisfaction with representative institutions is a function of the information to which citizens are exposed, the criteria by which the public evaluates government and politics, and the actual performance of those institutions (see Figure 3). Thus, a decline in satisfaction might be due to a change in any of these variables.

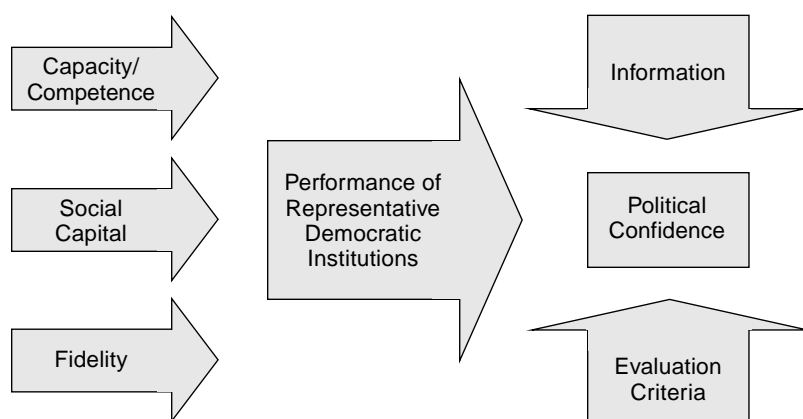
First, the accuracy and comprehensiveness of publicly available *information* about democratic performance might have changed. Logically, this might be due to either deterioration (worse information about good performance) or improvement (better information about bad performance), but the most common interpretation is that voters have over time become better informed about their governments' performance, particularly about leaders' conduct in office (for example, corruption), even though malfeasance per se might not have worsened. Here, the role of the media is clearly central.

Second, the public's *criteria for evaluation* of politics and government might have changed in ways that make it harder for representative institutions to meet those standards. This in turn might be due to either rising or diverging expectations (or both). If public demands on government spiral insatiably upward, satisfaction could fall even if performance remains unchanged. In part, this was the interpretation offered by CH&W. If the heterogeneity of public desires increases, either by polarization along a single dimension or by divergence across multiple dimensions, then it becomes more difficult for government to identify any feasible set of policies that would satisfy its constituents.

Third, the *performance of representative institutions* might have deteriorated. Measuring performance objectively is a challenging task, of course. Because it is reasonably well established in most of the Trilateral countries that cyclical fluctuations in citizens' evaluations of incumbents correlate with macroeconomic indicators, one obvious approach is to measure macroeconomic outcomes (inflation, unemployment, growth, and the like). A growing body of work, however, generally discounts this as the primary explanation for the decline in public confidence in political institutions.²⁷ As Nye and his colleagues²⁸ note with regard to the United States, for example, the largest decline in confidence occurred over the high-growth decade between 1964 and 1974; confidence actually increased during the recession of the early 1980s.

Once these economic measures are set aside, there is little agreement

FIGURE 3—EXPLAINING CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS: A MODEL



over which dimensions of performance are relevant across countries, time, and individual citizens. One obvious measure might be gains or losses in social welfare. One might argue that levels of confidence have remained high in countries in which social-welfare guarantees are secure while they have dropped elsewhere as a result of rollbacks of the welfare state. Yet testing such a hypothesis runs into the problem of how to measure governmental performance on social welfare. If we use government outlays, we run up against the fact that, despite the rhetoric hailing “small government,” governmental transfers (which are heavily skewed toward social programs) as a percentage of GNP have increased strikingly in the Trilateral countries precisely over those decades in which confidence has decreased. Alternatively, to measure results like increased longevity and improved health would fail to take into account the many factors other than government policies (diet and economic prosperity, for example) that produce them. Another problem is choosing a point in time at which policy success or failure can be judged. For example, some people believe that the American war in Vietnam or the process of German reunification constituted massive policy failures that contributed powerfully to declining political confidence; other observers might argue that, in the long run, these policy “failures” represent historic successes.

Thus objective measures of policy performance have obvious limits. When searching for why citizens feel the way they do about their government, their subjective appraisal of governmental performance is what ultimately matters. The fact that public confidence has declined can be taken to mean that governmental performance is less satisfactory than it once was. We consider citizens’ falling confidence in government to be focused specifically on political institutions and to have principally political roots and therefore seek to identify broad explanations for the

deterioration of governmental performance. These can be collected under two rubrics.

The first of these is declines in the *capacity* of political agents to act on behalf of citizens' interests and desires (see Figure 3). Thus we seek to identify forces that may have undermined the ability of national

Some commentators may tell their fellow citizens that the problem is "just in your head" . . . but we are inclined to think that our political systems are not, in fact, performing well.

governments to implement their chosen policies and to respond to citizen demands in a satisfactory way. The principal such force is internationalization, which creates a growing incongruence between the scope of territorial units and the issues raised by interdependence, reducing the output effectiveness of democratic nation-states.

The second broad explanation concerns declines in the *fidelity* with which political agents act on citizens' interests and desires. Within this category fall arguments about failures of political leadership, failures of political judgment on the part of voters, and

deterioration of the civic infrastructure (or social capital) by means of which interests are articulated and aggregated.

A final problem relating to the issue of fidelity arises from the complex relationship among three sets of variables: confidence in government; governmental performance; and civic engagement, social capital,²⁹ and social trust. A key issue is precisely how an erosion of social capital and social trust may affect citizens' confidence in government. Much evidence to date suggests low levels overall of social capital and social trust in any given society do indeed contribute to poor governmental performance, which, in turn, adversely affects all citizens to varying degrees; as a consequence, they will give the government low marks. Metaphorically speaking, no citizen (no matter how high his or her *own* social trust or civic engagement) can escape the rain precipitated by poor governmental performance, perhaps produced in part by the social disaffection or civic disengagement of his or her neighbors.

Over the quarter-century since CH&W issued their report, citizens' confidence in governments, political parties, and political leaders has declined significantly in most of the Trilateral democracies, even though the depth and timing of this decline have varied considerably from country to country. Some commentators may tell their fellow citizens that the problem is "just in your head"—a function of unrealistic expectations rather than deteriorating performance—but we are inclined to think that our political systems are not, in fact, performing well, although perhaps for reasons beyond their immediate control. These criticisms of governments and leaders do not necessarily translate into a "crisis of democracy" that threatens constitutional and representative government.

Nevertheless, the fact that representative democracy per se is not at risk does not imply that all is well with our political systems. Indeed, most of our fellow citizens believe that all is *not* well. Due regard for their views, as well as a prudent concern for the future, suggests that we should explore the sources of this democratic discontent.

NOTES

1. Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 2.

2. Polls do not, in fact, generally confirm the thesis that ordinary citizens' views about the proper role of government have shifted nearly as much as has the climate of elite opinion. Equally important, however, there is little survey evidence that citizens have become more insistent on government action in recent decades.

3. Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Hans-Dieter Klingemann and Dieter Fuchs, eds., *Citizens and the States*, Vol. 1 of *Beliefs in Government*, Kenneth Newton, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Max Kaase and Kenneth Newton, eds., *Beliefs in Government*, Vol. 5 of *Beliefs in Government*, Kenneth Newton, ed.

4. The most comprehensive assessment of the evidence for declining confidence in government in the United States, as well as initial evaluations of alternative explanations, is Joseph S. Nye, Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King, eds., *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

5. Martin Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Joseph S. Nye, Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King, eds., *Why People Don't Trust Government*.

6. Seymour Martin Lipset, "American Democracy in Comparative Perspective," in Robert S. Leiken, ed., *A New Moment in the Americas* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1994); Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap* (New York: Free Press, 1983).

7. Harris Poll, February 1994. Although systematic data on political alienation in America before the advent of regular national surveys in the 1950s are sketchy, some evidence suggests that alienation had declined from the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s. See Robert E. Lane, "The Politics of Consensus in an Age of Affluence," *American Political Science Review* 59 (December 1965): 874–95.

8. Harris Poll, February 1994.

9. Roger Jowell and Richard Topf, "Trust in the Establishment," in Roger Jowell, Sharon Witherspoon, and Lindsay Brook, eds., *British Social Attitudes: The 5th Report* (Brookfield, Vt.: Gower Publishing, 1988). A longer time series asking about the honesty and ethics of members of Parliament is available from British Gallup. In 1982, only 26 percent of the British public gave MPs a low or very low score on this scale, but this increased to 43 percent in 1993. A similar question asked by Canadian Gallup shows an increase in negative sentiments from 39 percent in 1982 to 49 percent in 1992 (Hastings and Hastings, eds., *Index to International Public Opinion* [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994], 312).

10. Ola Listhaug, "The Dynamics of Trust in Politicians," in Hans-Dieter Klingemann and Dieter Fuchs, eds., *Citizens and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

11. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and Renate Koecher, *Allensbacher Jahrbuch fuer Demoskopie* (Allensbach, Germany: Allensbach Institute, 1993), 657.

12. Russell J. Dalton, "Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies," in Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, 63.

13. Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*, 3–9, 161–70.

14. Scott C. Flanagan, Shinsaku Kohei, Ichiro Miyake, Bradley M. Richardson, and Joji Watanuki, *The Japanese Voter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Bradley M. Richardson, *The Political Culture of Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

15. The sharpest deviation from the pattern of declining trust is the Netherlands: The two longest Dutch opinion series show statistically significant improvements between 1971 and 1994. These are the only two statistically significant positive coefficients in the table. We suspect that the Dutch time series begins too late to capture the stable period of Dutch politics before the end of pillarization and the realignment of the party system in the late 1960s (which would be equivalent to U.S. opinion levels before the drop in trust in the late 1960s). For example, in his study of Dutch electoral behavior, Rudy Andeweg maintains that the Provo violence of 1965–66 damaged the legitimacy not just of government authorities but also of authority more generally, and that these patterns continued into the 1970s. Rudy Andeweg, *Dutch Voters Adrift* (Leiden, the Netherlands: University of Leiden, 1982).

16. Elmer Eric Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).

17. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 4th ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), 269.

18. Herbert Weisberg, "A Multidimensional Conceptualization of Party Identification," *Political Behavior* 2 (March 1980): 33–60.

19. Russell J. Dalton, Scott C. Flanagan, and Paul Beck, *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

20. Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995): 65–78; Susan Scarrow, "Parties Without Members? Party Organization in a Changing Electoral Environment," in Russell J. Dalton and Martin Wattenberg, eds., *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

21. "The Decline of Party Identifications," in Russell J. Dalton and Martin Wattenberg, eds., *Parties Without Partisans*.

22. Russell J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House, 1996), 271.

23. Martin Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties*.

24. Robert Blendon, John M. Benson, Richard Morin, Drew E. Altman, Mollyann Brodie, Mario Brossard, and Matt James, "Changing Attitudes in America," in Joseph S. Nye, Philip D. Zelickow, and David C. King, eds., *Why People Con't Trust Government*.

25. Where possible, we use separate national-survey series because these tend to have a longer time span and more frequent measurements. When such data are not available, we track confidence in parliament on the basis of the 1981 and 1990 World Values Surveys.

26. Russell J. Dalton, “Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies” and Ronald Inglehart, “Postmodernization, Authority and Democracy,” in Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*.

27. Joseph S. Nye, Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King, eds., *Why People Don't Trust Government*; Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*.

28. Joseph S. Nye, Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King, eds., *Why People Don't Trust Government*, 10–11.

29. By analogy to physical and human capital, some scholars have introduced the term “social capital” to refer to the norms and networks of civil society that enable citizens and their institutions to perform more productively. Without adequate supplies of social capital—that is, without civic engagement, healthy community institutions, norms of mutual reciprocity, and trust—democracies and market economies may begin to falter.