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Centre  
for the Future  
of Democracy

REPORT

Global Satisfaction  
with Democracy  
2020



UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

**This report was prepared at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and forms part of the work of the new Centre for the Future of Democracy.**

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**The Centre for the Future of Democracy** was launched in January 2020 to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by democratic politics over the coming century.

Based at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, the goal of the Centre is to understand the prospects for democracy in broad historical and international perspective, getting beyond the immediate crisis to identify different possible trajectories for democracy around the world. This means distinguishing what is essential to democracy, what is contingent and what can be changed. That requires taking the long view, drawing on the big picture and expanding our imaginative horizons. This is what the Centre hopes to achieve, and in doing so it will connect with work being done across Cambridge in a wide variety of fields, from computer science and environmental science to history and philosophy.

The Centre's aim is to move away from a fixation on the here and now, and beyond the *who* and *what* of democratic politics – who is going to get elected, what are they going to do? – to look at the *how*. How do democratic decisions get made and how can they be made differently? How can the consent of losers and outsiders be achieved? How can new social divisions be bridged? How can the use of technology be brought under democratic control? And if we can't do these things, how will democracy not merely survive but flourish in the future?

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## 1. Executive Summary

- We use a new dataset combining more than 25 data sources, 3,500 country surveys, and 4 million respondents between 1973 and 2020 asking citizens whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with democracy in their countries.
- Using this combined, pooled dataset, we are able to present a time-series for almost 50 years in Western Europe, and 25 years for the rest of the world.
- We find that dissatisfaction with democracy has risen over time, and is reaching an all-time global high, in particular in developed democracies.

## 2. Key Findings

**Across the globe, democracy is in a state of malaise.** In the mid-1990s, a majority of citizens in countries for which we have time-series data – in North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Australasia – were satisfied with the performance of their democracies. Since then, the share of individuals who are “dissatisfied” with democracy has risen by around +10% points, from 47.9 to 57.5%.

**This is the highest level of global dissatisfaction since the start of the series in 1995.** After a large increase in civic dissatisfaction in the prior decade, 2019 represents the highest level of democratic discontent on record.

**The rise in democratic dissatisfaction has been especially sharp since 2005.** The year that marks the beginning of the so-called “global democratic recession” is also the high point for global satisfaction with democracy, with just 38.7% of citizens dissatisfied in that year. Since then, the proportion of “dissatisfied” citizens has risen by almost one-fifth of the population (+18.8%).

**Many of the world’s most populous democracies – including the United States, Brazil, Nigeria, and Mexico – have led the downward trend.** In the United States, levels of dissatisfaction with democracy have risen by over a third of the population in one generation.

**As a result, many large democracies are at their highest-ever recorded level for democratic dissatisfaction.** These include the United States, Brazil, Mexico, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Colombia, and Australia. Other countries that remain close to their all-time highs include Japan, Spain, and Greece.

**Citizens of developed democracies have also experienced a large increase in democratic dissatisfaction.** While in the 1990s, around two-thirds of the citizens of Europe, North America, Northeast Asia and Australasia felt satisfied with democracy in their countries, today a majority feel dissatisfied.

While it goes beyond the scope of this report to explain the cause of this shift, **we observe that citizens’ levels of dissatisfaction with democracy are largely responsive to objective circumstances and events** – economic shocks, corruption scandals, and policy crises. These have an immediately observable effect upon average levels of civic dissatisfaction.

**However, the picture is not entirely negative. Many small, high-income democracies have moved in the direction of greater civic confidence in their institutions.** In Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, for example, democratic satisfaction is reaching all-time highs. These countries form part of the “island of contentment” – a select group of nations, containing just 2% of the world’s democratic citizenry, in which less than a quarter of the public express discontent with their political system.

**Comparison by region shows a number of other bright spots, above all in Asia.** In democracies in South Asia, Northeast Asia, and above all in Southeast Asia, levels of civic contentment are significantly higher than in other regions. For now, much of Asia has avoided the crisis of democratic faith affecting other parts of the world.

### 3. Introduction – The Democratic Malaise

Across the globe, democracy is in a state of deep malaise. In the West, growing political polarisation, economic frustration, and the rise of populist parties, have eroded the promise of democratic institutions to offer governance that is not only popularly supported, but also stable and effective. Meanwhile, in developing democracies the euphoria of the transition years has faded, leaving endemic challenges of corruption, intergroup conflict, and urban violence that undermine democracy's appeal.

Yet how does our current predicament compare with earlier periods of democratic dissatisfaction – such as the “governability crises” of 1970s' Western Europe, or the emerging market financial crises of the late 1990s? Does the current anxiety represent a punctuated equilibrium – or is it part of a series of cyclical troughs, from which eventual recovery is likely?

This report sheds empirical light on these questions. It does so using a new dataset that comprises data from over four million survey respondents collected during half a century of social science research. For the first time, we are able to provide a truly global answer to the question of democracy's “performance” legitimacy – using data from democracies in all regions of the world.

#### The Research Background

Much of the existing academic research upon trends in satisfaction with democracy has derived from two sources. The first are surveys from the United States, such as Gallup or the National Election Study, and show American satisfaction and trust in government in long-term decline.<sup>1</sup> The second are surveys from Western Europe, notably the Eurobarometer, which began from a significantly lower level but show only unclear fluctuation since.<sup>2</sup> These two data sources

have, in turn, supported two corresponding literatures, the former centred on America's “crisis of trust”, and the latter on Europe's chronic – though, not necessarily worsening – democratic deficit.<sup>3</sup>

While a number of recent studies have begun to take advantage of new data from Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia,<sup>4</sup> until now, a genuinely global perspective on long-term *changes* in citizen evaluation of democratic performance has been lacking. The fragmentation of relevant data across disparate surveys and sources has made it difficult to draw generalisable inferences from any one single dataset.

#### Our Approach

This report is built upon a simple methodological premise: to combine questions on satisfaction with democracy from the widest possible range of available sources, in order to generate a global “mega-dataset” – consisting of more than 3,500 unique country surveys – from which to analyse global trends over time.

The results suggest cause for deep concern. Since the mid-1990s, the proportion of citizens who are “dissatisfied” with the performance of democracy in their countries has risen by almost 10 percentage points globally. The deterioration has been especially deep in high-income, “consolidated” democracies, where the proportion has risen from a third to half of all citizens. Yet also among many emerging democracies – in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East – confidence in the capacity of democratic institutions has eroded. Many countries in these regions are at or near an all-time low, including systemically important democracies such as Brazil, Nigeria, or Mexico.

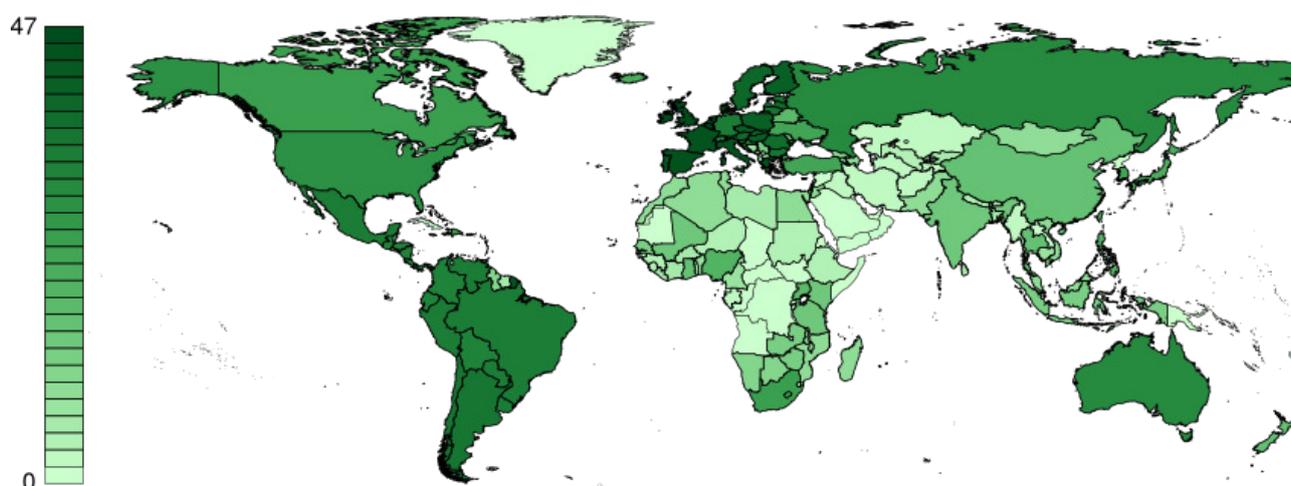
<sup>1</sup> Marc Hetherington (2005) *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism*.

<sup>2</sup> Carolien van Ham, Jacques Thomassen, Kees Aarts and Rudy Andeweg (Eds) (2017) *Myth and Reality of the Legitimacy Crisis: Explaining Trends and Cross-National Differences in Established Democracies*.

<sup>3</sup> For a good overview, see Tom W.G. van der Meer (2017) “Political Trust and the ‘Crisis of Democracy’”, in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Marc F. Plattner and Larry Diamond (Eds.) (2008) *How People View Democracy*.

## 4. The Dataset



**Figure 1:** Countries for which data on satisfaction with democracy exists in the HUMAN Surveys dataset, by number of years of available data. Both democracies and non-democracies are shown in the above graphic; for this report, only data from electoral democracies are included in the analysis.

In recent years, discussions of public faith in democracy frequently have generated more heat than light. In part, this is due to differences between scholars in their choice of survey sources, country coverage, and periods of observation. The wide variety of survey sources now available for comparative analysis – with over 25 different sources identified by this study alone – can generate widely varying impressions of individual country and regional trends.

This report aims to provide a comprehensive answer to questions regarding one measure of democratic legitimacy – satisfaction with democracy – by combining data from almost all available survey sources, using consistent, constant country coverage that is regionally and globally representative, from the earliest possible period to surveys that were fielded in recent months.

The data used in this report represents the views of almost all individuals living in a system of electoral democracy. The surveys have been gathered and standardised by the Human Understanding Measured Across National (HUMAN) Surveys project ([www.humansurveys.org](http://www.humansurveys.org)), with additional data for 2017–2019 added from supplement-

ary survey sources, including prerelease data from the seventh round of the World Values Survey, and individually commissioned surveys for October to December 2019 provided by the YouGov-Cambridge Centre.

### Satisfaction with Democracy

This report examines one indicator of democratic legitimacy – satisfaction with democracy – across the vast majority of public datasets in which such questions have been asked.

It is important to acknowledge upfront what such questions do, and do not, tell us about civic attitudes to democracy. The answers to such questions primarily tell us how well citizens perceive their political system to be *performing*. They offer a weaker basis for inferring support for liberal or democratic values: individuals may be strong believers in liberal democracy and yet dissatisfied with the performance of such institutions in practice – or on the flipside, be satisfied with the institutions under which they are governed, even though such institutions fall well short of accepted democratic standards.<sup>5</sup>

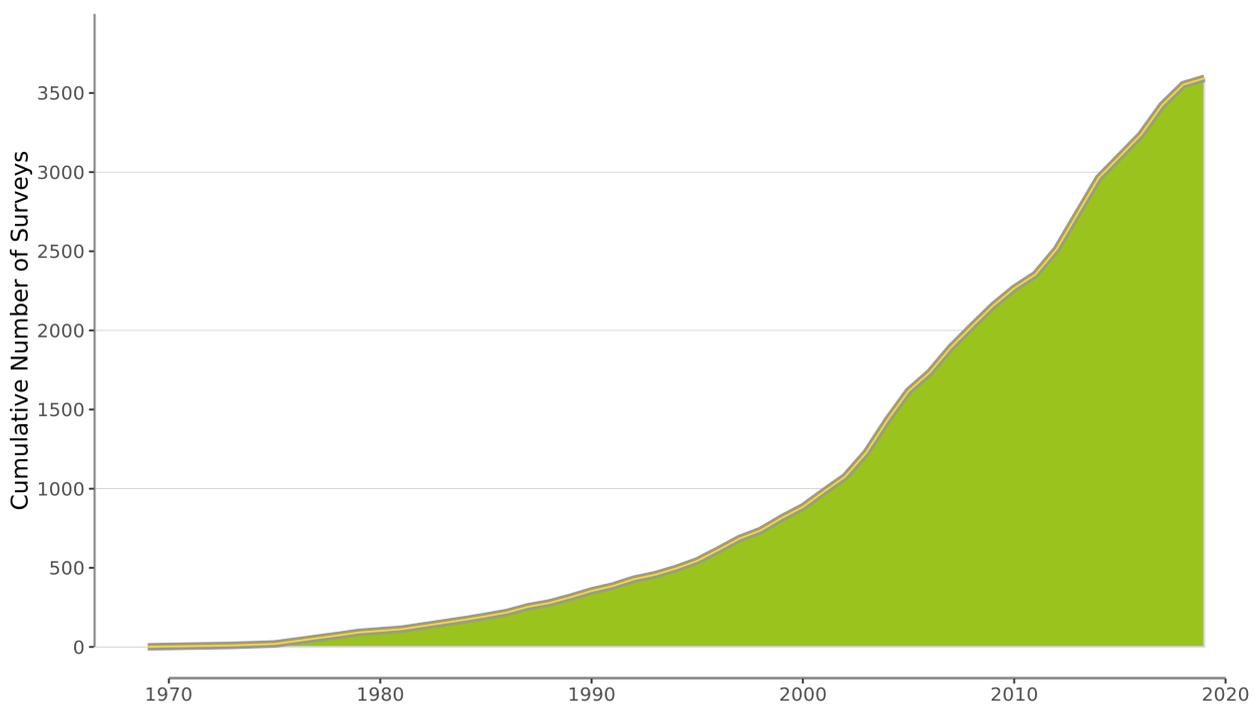
That said, there is value in knowing how,

<sup>5</sup> See Jonas Linde and Joakim Ekman (2003) “Satisfaction with Democracy: A Note on a Frequently Used Indicator in Comparative Politics”. *European Journal of Political Research*, 42: 391–408; and Pippa Norris (2011) “Does Democratic Satisfaction Reflect Regime Performance?” in *How Democracy Works: Political Representation and Policy Congruence in Modern Societies*. Ed. Martin Rosema, Bas Denters, and Kees Arts.

why and when citizens are losing faith in the ability of democracy to deliver. While subjective feelings of satisfaction with democracy may in part reflect higher or lower civic standards, the cross-country evidence makes clear that in countries where political institutions are transparent, responsive, and free of corruption, civic satisfaction with democracy is overwhelmingly high. In Denmark, Switzerland, and Luxembourg, political institutions are held to high standards – and meet those standards.<sup>6</sup> There is no evidence that rising expectations have led to a deterioration in democratic legitimacy in such societies. On the other hand, societies where satisfaction with democracy is at its lowest are uniformly characterised by political instability, corruption scandals, and ingrained societal conflict.

Second, even if democratic satisfaction

and support for democratic values are conceptually separate, they are empirically related. Studies show that individuals who are dissatisfied with democracy are more likely to support populist political parties that eschew liberal democratic norms.<sup>7</sup> At the cross-country level, there is a strong association between democracies in which the public is dissatisfied, and those in which the public express lukewarm support for democratic principles. And as we shall see, many of the countries in the 1990s with the lowest levels of democratic faith – such as Russia, Venezuela, and Belarus – are exactly those which experienced democratic erosion over the following decade, often due to elected strongmen who in office proceeded to undermine civil rights and liberties.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 2:** Cumulative number of surveys gathered in to the dataset, 1973–2020.

<sup>6</sup> Mónica Ferrín, (2016) “An Empirical Assessment of Satisfaction with Democracy” in Mónica Ferrín and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds.), *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy*.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center (2018) “Many Across the Globe Are Dissatisfied With How Democracy Is Working”.

<sup>8</sup> Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk (2019) “Democratic Deconsolidation in Developed Democracies, 1995–2018”, *Harvard Centre for European Studies Open Forum Series*.

## Data Selection and Validity

In order to ensure that our data represents a valid measurement of satisfaction with democracy, the survey questions aggregated in our dataset are subject to strict standards of semantic equivalence. First, they must ask citizens about their degree of satisfaction with democracy in their country; items using similar, yet related terminology are excluded. So too are items asking people their views regarding democracy in general. Second, they must be coded on a response scale that allows for *verifiable* equivalence with other survey response scales (see Appendix Section III, on

Testing for Semantic Equivalence, and Section IV on Sensitivity Analysis).

Having recoded responses into satisfied and dissatisfied and ascertained the percentage for each category, rolling averages are generated by country, while regional averages are generated by merging country surveys to a quarterly or annual data series, and taking the population-weighted average of the most recent observation for all countries in that region over time (see Appendix Section II, on Aggregation Methodology).

Survey	Data Points	Countries	Years
Afrobarometer	135	36	1999–2015
American National Election Studies	7	1	1996–2016
AmericasBarometer	169	33	2004–2016
Arab Transformations Project	6	6	2013–2014
Asia Barometer	41	25	2003–2007
Asian Barometer Survey	51	20	2001–2016
Australian Election Study	9	1	1996–2016
Australian National Political Attitudes Surveys	2	1	1969–1979
Australian Survey of Social Attitudes	3	1	2005–2015
Comparative Study of Electoral Systems	133	54	1996–2018
Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe	25	14	1990–2001
EU Neighbourhood Barometer	94	16	2012–2014
Eurobarometer: Applicant and Candidate Countries	52	13	2002–2004
Eurobarometer: Central and Eastern	10	10	1997
Eurobarometer: Standard and Special	1471	34	1973–2019
European Social Survey	194	35	2002–2017
European Values Study	77	45	1999–2018
Pew Global Attitudes and Trends	75	50	2007–2018
International Social Survey Programme	189	48	1995–2016
Latinobarómetro	355	19	1995–2017
New Europe Barometer	30	13	1992–2005
New Zealand Election Study	6	1	1996–2017
South African Social Attitudes Survey	11	1	2003–2013
Voice of the People Series	121	69	2005–2007
World Values Survey	84	66	1996–2019
YouGov Surveys	12	10	2019

**Table 1:** Data sources used in this study, showing number of survey observations, countries covered, and years of available data.

### **The HUMAN Surveys Project**

[www.humansurveys.org](http://www.humansurveys.org)

The Human Understanding Measured Across National (HUMAN) Surveys project combines multiple sources of freely available and nationally representative public opinion surveys. Available surveys have traditionally been difficult and time-consuming to compare because the same variables have different names and values across different sources. HUMAN Surveys uses scripts to format selected variables, merge datasets, and harmonise target variables – including satisfaction with democracy, one of the most frequently-included items in comparative social research.

The scripts work by creating “data warehouses” for micro-level individual responses, as well as macro-level aggregated country-survey and country-year scores. The respondent dataset currently includes ten million individuals from 169 countries, combining data from over thirty sources, and spanning a period from 1948 to the present. Though this report only includes items on satisfaction with democracy, current target variables also include social trust, attitudes towards democracy and elections, and confidence in political institutions.

There are many benefits to using merged multi-survey public opinion datasets. As this report illustrates, merged data enables unprecedented geographical and temporal coverage, allowing for a better understanding of trends across regions of the world. HUMAN Surveys saves time in managing large amounts of public opinion data, allowing scholars to focus more attention on key research questions. The scripting framework is designed to facilitate additional data to eventually include all variables across all publicly-accessible surveys.

## The Presentation of Data in this Report

The purpose of this report is primarily descriptive – to lay out in as clear, uncontroversial, and systematic means as possible – fundamental trends in global public opinion. For that reason, certain standards in visual communication that are adhered to in the presentation of data in this report.

**1. First, all data for regional or global averages are averaged based on population-weighting.** This ensures that figures reflect an estimated average for the pool of all individuals in the region under consideration, and are not disproportionately influenced by trends in small- or micro-states (see inset box, “The Importance of Population Weighting”).

**2. Second, we always use a constant-country sample when presenting aggregated data.**<sup>9</sup> This is to ensure that changes on charts are not due to countries dropping in and out of the dataset, but are only due to changes in actual collected data. We ensure this by only including country cases which are covered by survey data at the start of the observation period and the end, and “rolling over” survey results in periods in which no new survey data was collected – in effect, using the “most recent” survey observation for each country. Fortunately, because the dataset includes such a vast number of observations, for many regions – East and West Europe, Latin America, North America, and Northeast Asia – there are few countries that lack consistent data, and many countries with multiple observations per year.<sup>10</sup>

**3. Third, when presenting regional averages at the start of each section, rolling averages are used in order to smooth between years.** This is done for the regional

averages to smooth over cases where a “rogue poll” in a large country can cause a sudden yet temporary shift in the weighted mean. It is more important for regions where survey data may be collected on a less than annual basis (e.g. Southeast Asia or the Middle East). On the other hand, in cases where the data are of sufficiently high quality and frequency we also present the raw (non-smoothed) series on a quarterly basis – e.g. for the global series in Figure 3 and for Western Europe in Figure 17.

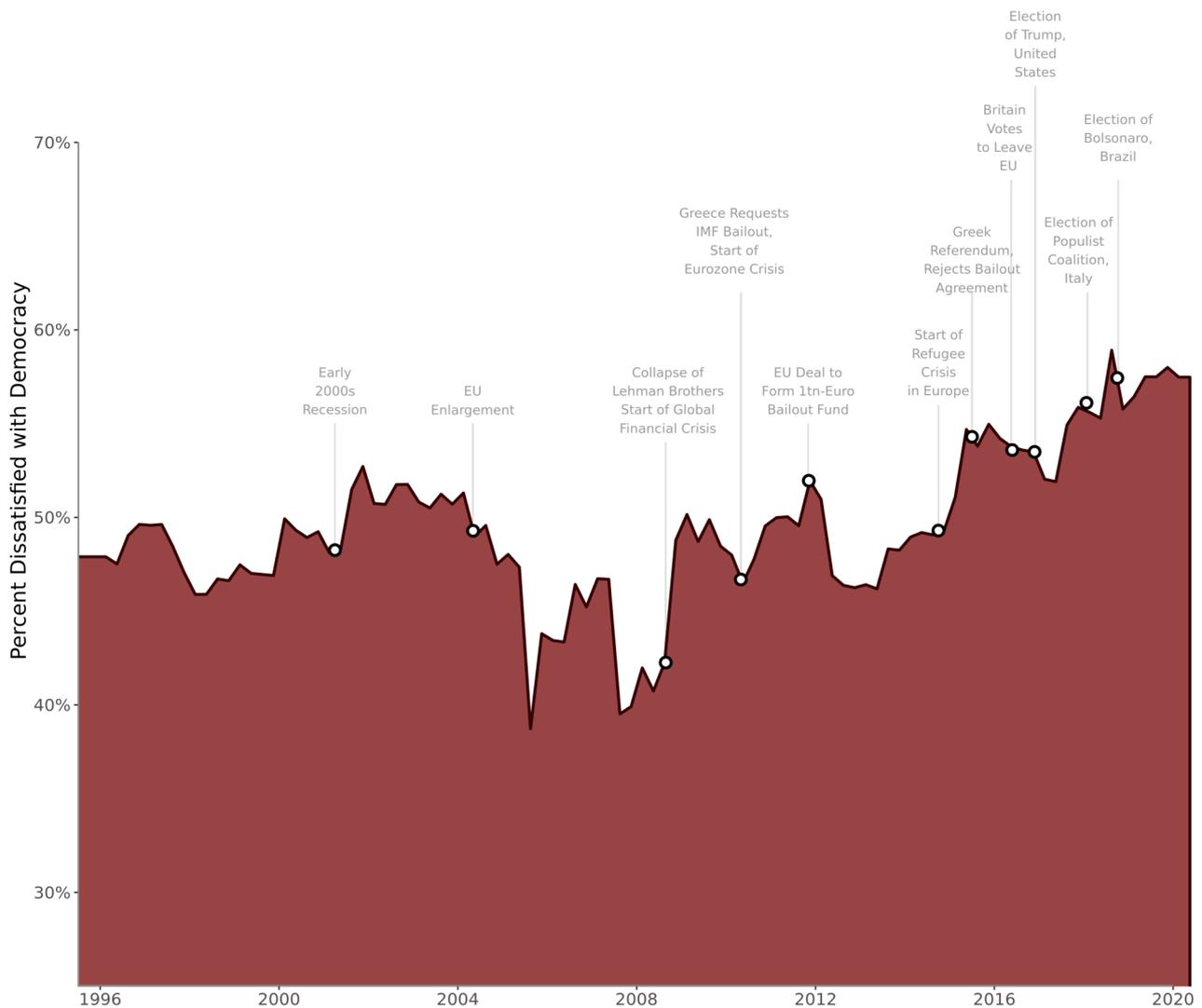
**4. Fourth, when presenting regional averages, we show the full possible range of the data on the y-axis (from 0 to 100% of citizens who are estimated to be dissatisfied with democracy), but then highlight the “relevant range” of the data within which most variation across the world can be found (between 25% and 75%).** While it is possible to exaggerate change by narrowing scales, it is also possible to understate change by widening scales beyond a substantively meaningful degree of variation. We therefore highlight the area that corresponds to variation in political outcomes in the real world. In the 25% to 75% range, four-fifths of countries can be found: this is the range that separates Sweden and New Zealand, at one end, and Venezuela and Greece, at the other.

**5. Fifth, when presenting country averages over time, we show all of the individual polling results for that country, together with a rolling average line between them.** Where possible we display “raw” individual polling in countries, to allow the reader to infer the reliability of rolling averages and means.

<sup>9</sup> The one exception to this principle is Figure 16, showing average levels of dissatisfaction in the European Union. This is simply because the country membership of the European Union itself changes over time: an accurate representation of public opinion within the European Union requires country representation to alter in line with the bloc’s membership. However, changes in country membership are clearly indicated underneath this chart, and Figure 17 presents a second figure for Europe based solely on the Western European data for countries surveyed since the 1980s, and for which country sample is constant following the entry of Spain and Portugal in 1985 (plus the incorporation of Eastern Germany in to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1991).

<sup>10</sup> In the United Kingdom, for example, we now have an observation rate averaging four surveys a year for the last decade, and a similar level among other major European democracies. But also in many developing democracies, we now have multiple annual observations over the same period – two surveys per year over the last decade in Brazil, Mexico and South Africa, for example, and at least once per year in Nigeria.

## 5. The Global Picture



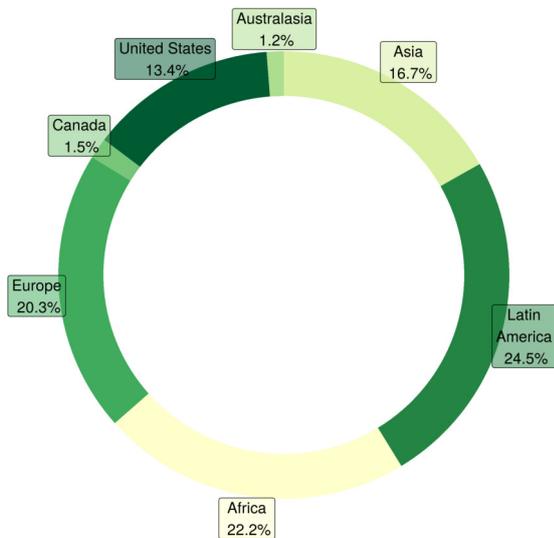
**Figure 3:** Rising dissatisfaction with democracy across the world, in democracies representing 2.43 billion individuals across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America, East Asia, and Australasia. Based on 3,218 separate individual country surveys, classified by date of fieldwork and grouped on a quarterly annual basis, with the total averaged on a population-weighted basis. A constant country sample is maintained in all periods by rolling forward observations in country quarters lacking new data, to prevent sample bias from affecting the changes.

Across the world, satisfaction with democracy has fallen, and dissatisfaction risen, over the past quarter-century. In the mid-1990s, citizens in a majority of countries for which we have data felt satisfied with the performance of democracy in their countries. Barring a brief dip following the Asian and Latin American financial crises of the late 1990s, this remained broadly the case until 2015, when a majority of citizens turned negative in their evaluation of democratic performance.

Since then, dissatisfaction has continued to grow.

Overall, we estimate that the number of individuals who are “dissatisfied” with the condition of democracy in their countries has risen by 9.7 percentage points, from 47.9 to 57.5%. This observation is based on a constant-country, population-weighted sample of 77 democracies for which data exists from the mid-1990s to today. This represents 2.43bn individuals across the span of Europe,

Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, North America, East Asia, and Australasia.



**Figure 4:** *Weighting of regions in the world aggregate starting in 1995, based on countries available for the period under observation. Note that India, for which our survey data begins only in 2002, is not included in this sample.*

Naturally, there are large differences between regions. In some parts of the world, in particular in North America, Southern Europe, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa, the fall has been acute. In other regions, such as Northeast Asia, there are no clear positive or negative trends over the study period. And in other parts of the world – notably Southeast Asia, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe – there is even a silver lining: satisfaction with democracy has been rising, rather than falling, in recent years.

### Explaining Change

What, then, can explain the shifts in public opinion that we observe in Figure 3? Why have people, in general, become more dissatisfied with the democracies in which they live? These questions are already the subject of a vast research literature; yet the annotation of the quarter by quarter shifts give us some initial basis for inference.

Once survey data on satisfaction with democracy are aggregated to a quarterly annual series, it is clear that specific economic and political events – the financial

crisis of 2008, the eurozone crisis beginning in 2009, the European refugee crisis of 2015 – have had a profound and immediate effect on public opinion. Following the onset of the global financial crisis and the collapse of Lehman Brothers in October 2008, for example, global dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy jumped by around 6.5 percentage points. Much of this increase, moreover, appears to have been durable. Conversely, signs of democratic governments working together to resolve policy crises appear to have a positive effect. In the wake of the European Council’s agreement to form a European Stability Mechanism, and the resultant waning of the sovereign debt crisis, dissatisfaction with democracy fell by 10 percentage points in Western Europe.

Further trends from individual countries – shown in the “country in focus” sections of this report – provide further country-specific cases. In the United Kingdom, for example, dissatisfaction with democracy has soared in the period of the “Brexit crisis”, approximately from the aftermath of the 2017 General Election until the most recent surveys in November of last year. And in Brazil, the series of scandals exposed by the “Lava Jato” corruption probe has seen public dissatisfaction reach record highs.

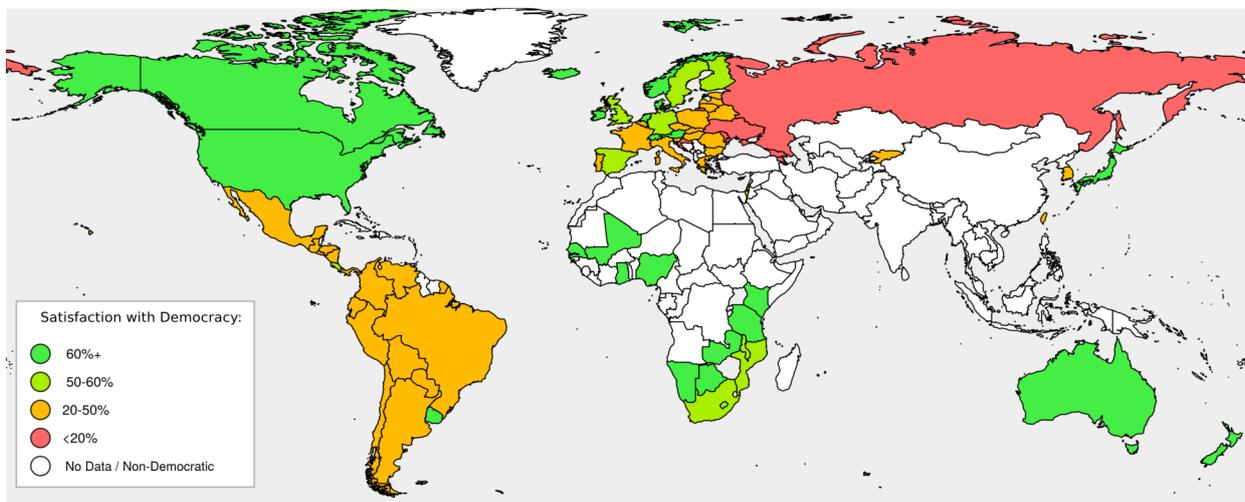
This implies that citizens are ultimately rational in their assessment of democratic governance, updating their views in response to the flow of information. A constant series of negative events will push baseline evaluations of democratic performance lower, while a stream of positive events will pull that evaluation back up. If citizen views of democracy have deteriorated in recent decades, then there is at least one simple explanation: democratic governments simply have not been seen to provide effective policy solutions to pressing societal problems. The more visibly democratic governments appear to be failing to address problems of public accountability, economic governance, and transnational dilemmas such as migration or climate change, the greater the degree to which citizens perceive – with some justification – that their institutions are not delivering results.

How do these differences correspond with political changes in the world over time? Following the rapid advance of democracy around the world in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the period since 2005 has been characterised as a “democratic recession” in which democratic institutions around the world have faced setbacks ranging from military coups, to domestic crises, to the election of populist or authoritarian leaders willing to use their office to erode the independence of parliament, courts and civil society.<sup>11</sup> And we find that many of those countries which have experi-

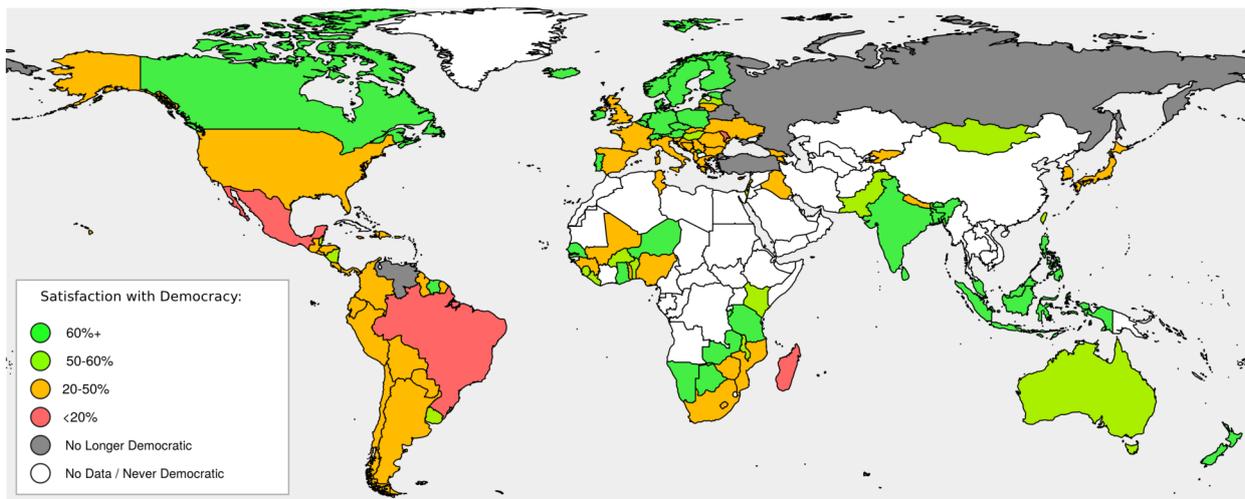
enced democratic backsliding since the 1990s – such as Russia, Venezuela, and Belarus – were those most susceptible to doing so (Figure 5).

Meanwhile, in many countries that have retained free and fair elections, there is a sense, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, that “the performance of democracies around the world has been deficient in recent years”,<sup>12</sup> a sense reflected by the growing despondency visible across struggling democracies in the Americas, Africa, and Southern Europe.

*Satisfaction with Democracy in the 1990s.*



*Satisfaction with Democracy Today.*



**Figure 5:** Satisfaction with democracy across the world in the mid- to late-1990s, and today (average of most recent three surveys).

<sup>11</sup> Larry Diamond (2015) “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession”. *Journal of Democracy*.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Fukuyama (2015) “Why Is Democracy Performing So Poorly?”, *Journal of Democracy*.

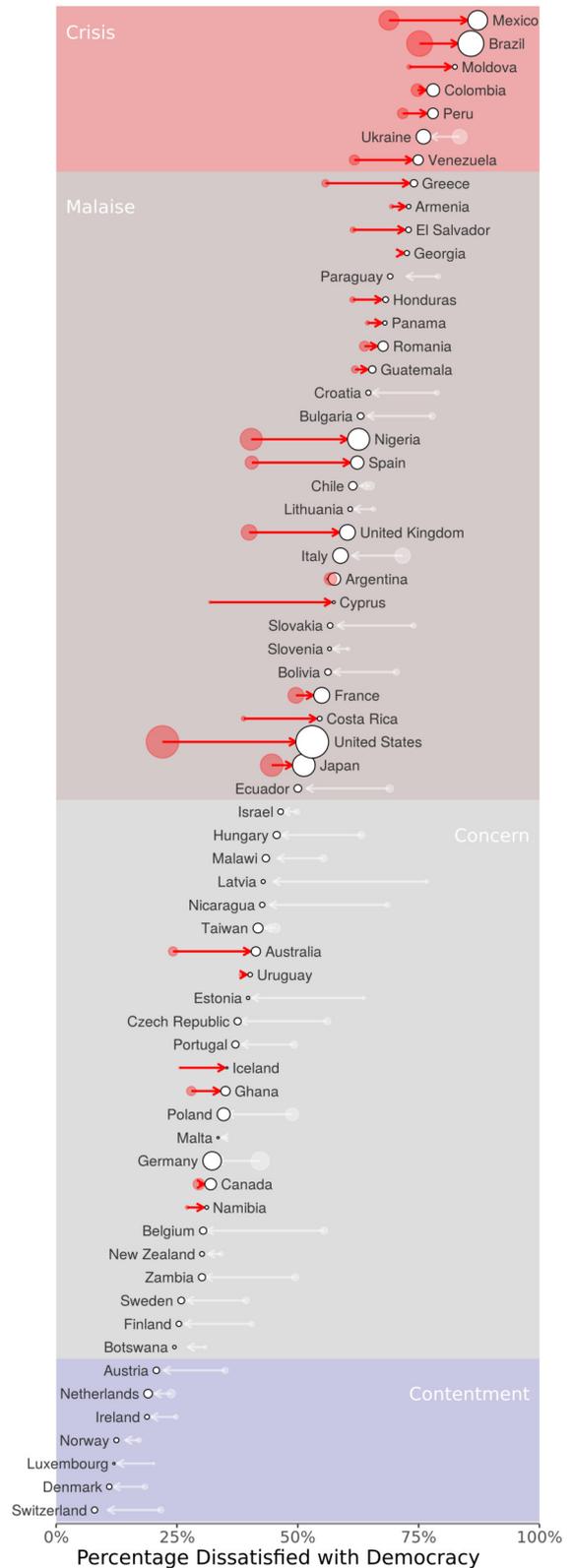
We can also examine these differences over time by country. Figure 6 shows the change by country in satisfaction with democracy from the mid-1990s to the most recent set of observations, and allows us to distinguish four broad groups.

The first zone is that of democratic contentment: where more than three quarters of citizens are satisfied with their democracy. These cases, which include Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark and Luxembourg, might be considered the world’s “island” of democratic stability – some 2% of the world’s democratic citizenry, or 46 million people, who have thus far avoided the malaise elsewhere.

The second group can be labelled as “cases of concern”, where more than a quarter, yet less than half, of the population are dissatisfied with the country’s institutions. This is a much larger subset of countries, containing 393 million people, and includes many of the new democracies of central Europe, along with Germany, Canada and Australia. However many of these societies, in particular in eastern Europe, have also seen democratic satisfaction rise in recent decades.

Next, by far the largest group by population – accounting for 1.09 billion people – are the democracies in “malaise”: countries where a majority (though less than three-quarters) feel dissatisfied with democratic performance. It is here that we find many of the large democracies of the world – the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, Spain and France. With the exception of France, these are all new entrants to this category, having formerly possessed majorities that were satisfied with their democratic institutions.

Finally, there are 377 million people living in democracies that face a genuine legitimacy “crisis”, insofar as for every citizen who is satisfied with how the democratic system is working, there are three who have lost faith in the process. These countries include Mexico, Brazil, and Ukraine. This is the subset of countries for which the term “crisis of democracy” may be considered neutral and descriptive.



**Figure 6:** Change in percentage who are dissatisfied with democracy, from mid-1990s (average of surveys) to latest observation (average of the three most recent surveys). Points proportionate to country population. While most large democracies have seen rising rate of discontentment, a number of small democracies have improved, notably in Scandinavia and post-communist Europe.

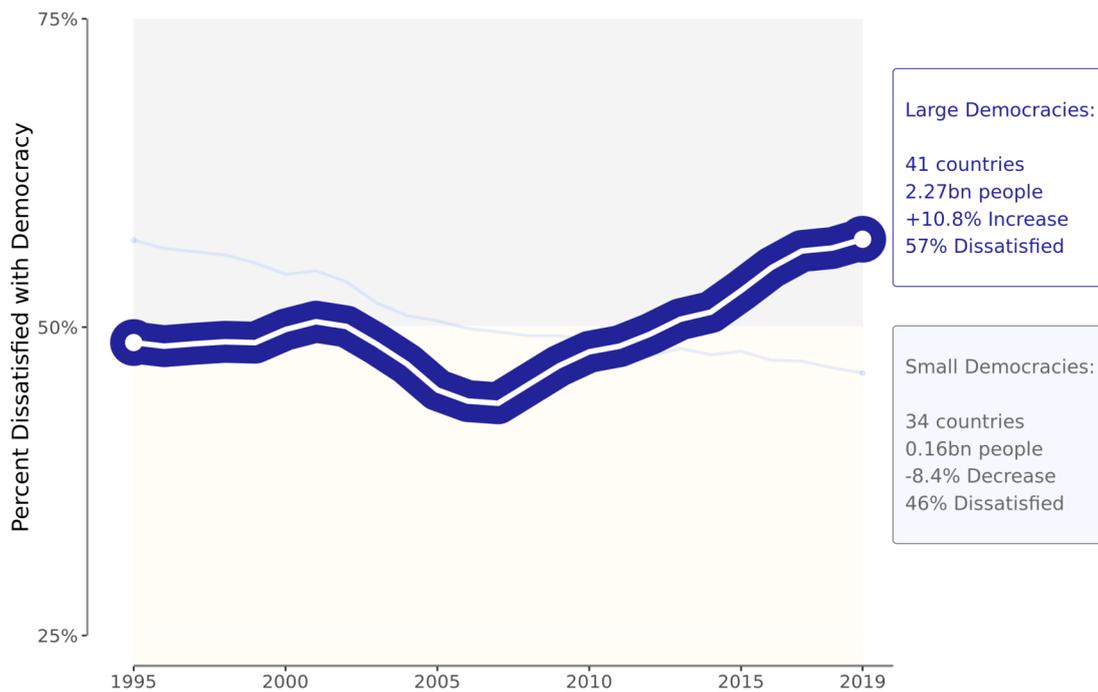
### Methodological Note

#### *The Importance of Population-Weighting*

All of the regional averages shown in this report are population-weighted averages of the countries they contain. This ensures that the reported levels of democratic satisfaction or dissatisfaction are representative of the total population within that region. Otherwise, using an equal-weighted average of the countries in a region, we arrive at extreme distortions. Each citizen of Luxembourg, for example, with a population of 0.62m, would count for 134 citizens of Germany, with its population of 83m.

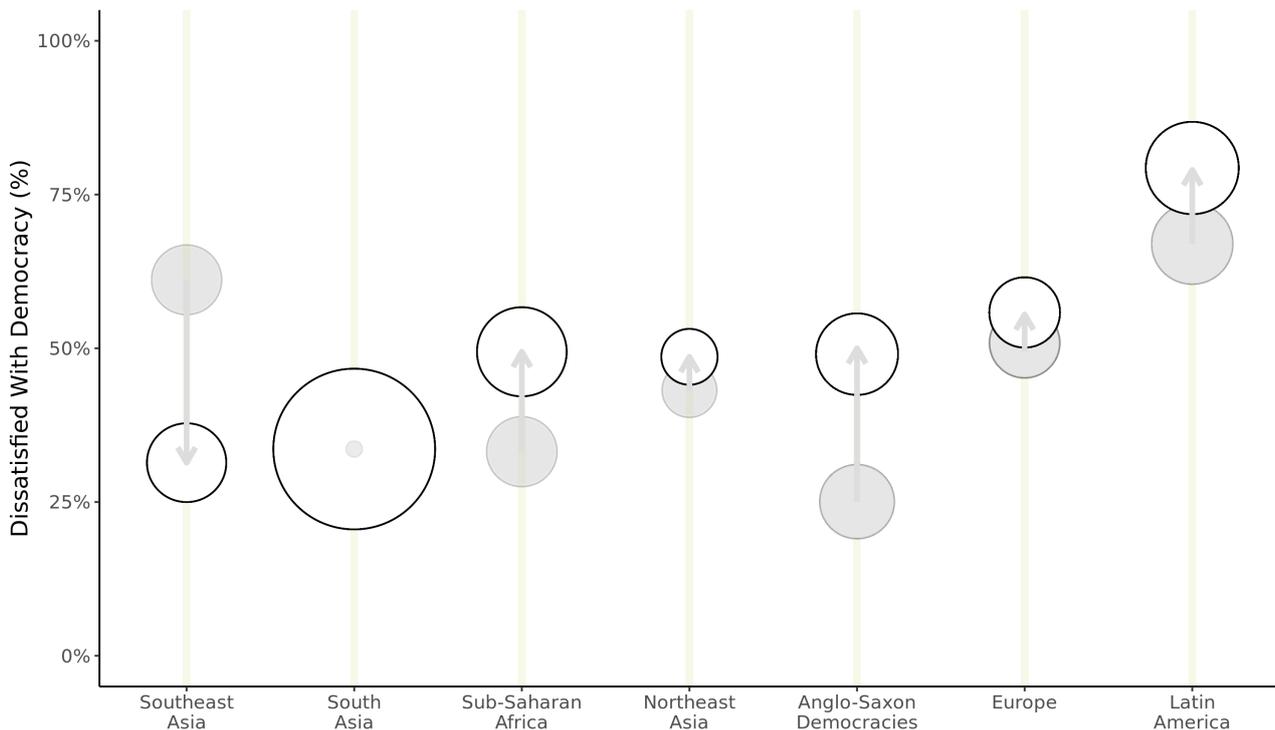
By equal-weighting countries, we under-weight people.

Failure to weight by population can therefore create a highly misleading impression of regional and global trends. As the figure below illustrates, the trend among small countries is opposite to that found in the world as a whole: yet it reflects the political reality of an extremely small minority of individuals, predominantly concentrated in small, wealthy, high-income countries.



**Figure 7:** Changes in levels of democratic dissatisfaction within large democracies (population above 10m) and small democracies (population below 10m). The thickness of the lines is relative to the total population of each group. While each grouping contains a similar number of countries – 34 vs. 41 – large democracies here contain 93% of the total population of the two groups.

## 6. Regional Trends and Comparisons



**Figure 8:** Change over time in democratic dissatisfaction by region from mid-1990s to latest set of observations. For Southeast Asia, changes are only shown since 2001; for South Asia, since 2002. Regional points relative to size of region’s population. Dissatisfaction has risen in every region except in South Asia, where it has remained stable, and Southeast Asia, where it has fallen.

Until recent decades, the vast majority of research on political attitudes was based on data from countries that are, as the acronym goes, “weird” – that is to say, western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic. Yet the phenomenal advance in collaborative, global survey projects – starting with the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Programme in the 1980s, moving to the Global Barometer projects in the 1990s, and finally more recent initiatives such as the Gallup World Poll, Pew Global Attitudes Survey, and the YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project – makes it possible to conduct truly global comparative research.

One of the key findings of such research, not surprisingly, is that regions differ. Observations of trends occurring in one region, are not always representative of the global pic-

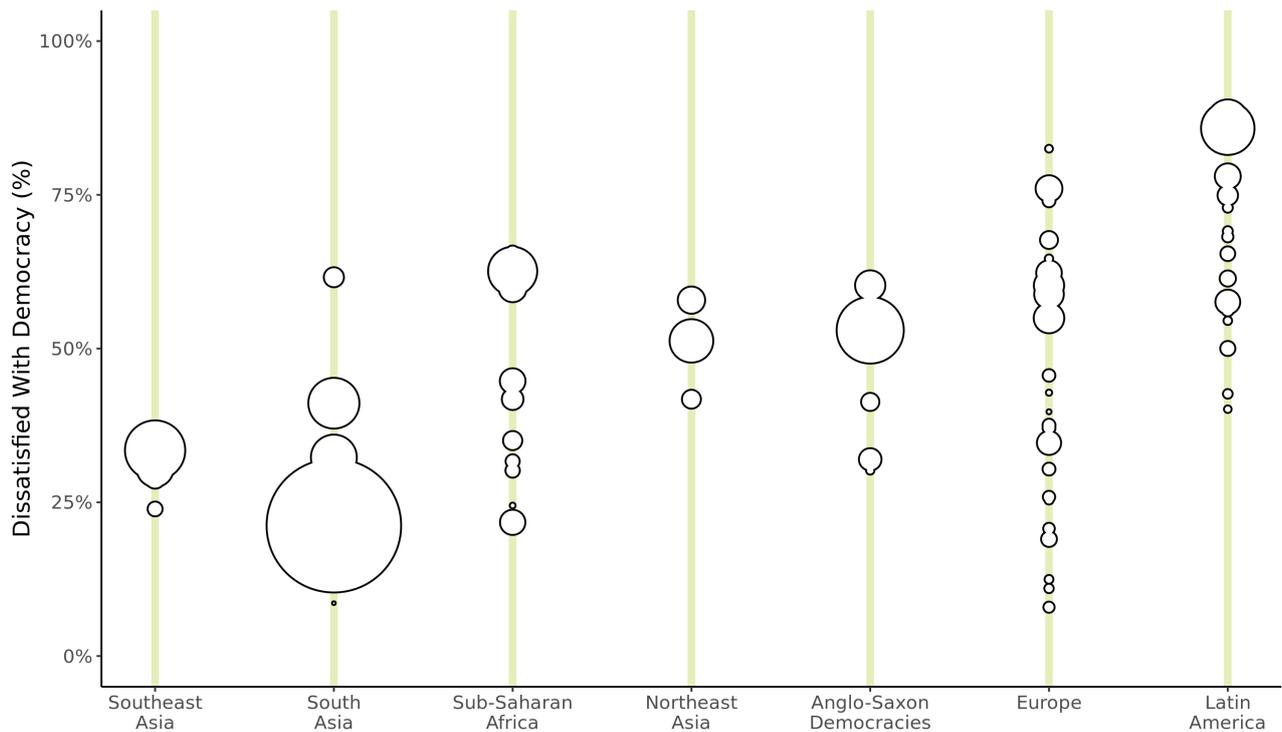
ture. Moreover, rarely is data simply present or missing at random: often it is the countries with the best institutions (including social science research institutions) that have provided the most data.<sup>13</sup> In the rest of this report, therefore, we move beyond the global aggregates in order to examine each region on an individual basis. What is the pattern in each major cluster of world democracies? And what specific factors could, in principle, help to understand the trends that we observe?

### The Overall Picture

Figure 8 shows change over the past generation in seven major regions: Europe, Latin America, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the “Anglo-Saxon” democra-

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine and Ara Norenzayan (2010) “The Weirdest People in the World?”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*.

<sup>14</sup> Two additional regions, the Caribbean and the Middle East, are excluded due to low population – in the former case due to low population in absolute terms, and in the latter case as the population of the democratic Middle East is so low.



**Figure 9:** *Distribution of democratic dissatisfaction by region (latest data), showing how dissatisfaction varies among countries within each geographic area. Country points relative to size of country population. In some regions, levels of dissatisfaction are similar among countries: for example in Northeast Asia, around 50%, or in Southeast Asia, at just 25%. Yet other regions contain high variation – in particular Europe, which contains some of the highest and some of the lowest levels of dissatisfaction in the world.*

cies (North America, Australasia and the United Kingdom), and Northeast Asia.<sup>14</sup> Most regions are moving toward greater dissatisfaction with democracy, though, not all. In South Asia, the data appear flat since the first observations in our dataset (2002), while in Southeast Asia, public satisfaction with democracy has improved a great deal since 2001, the year of our first survey observation for Indonesia. The overall ranking of regions has also changed markedly over time: in the 1990s, the Anglo-Saxon countries were the most satisfied with democracy and Southeast Asia the least so, whereas today, their positions are almost reversed. Finally, whereas Latin America was almost alone in the 1990s for having a majority of its citizens dissatisfied with the democratic process, now other regions are catching up.

### Variation Within Regions

Figure 9 also shows the variation within each region by country. Broadly speaking, countries within each region tend to cluster together. One significant exception, however, is Europe – which contains both the world’s most satisfied, but also many of its least satisfied democracies. This is due to a growing divide between northern and southern Europe, which we detail and explore further in the Europe section of this report. Elsewhere in the world, there are clearer regional patterns: Latin America overwhelmingly consists of democracies where citizens are dissatisfied with their institutions, while South and Southeast Asia contain democracies in which civic satisfaction is robust.

## Regional Convergence

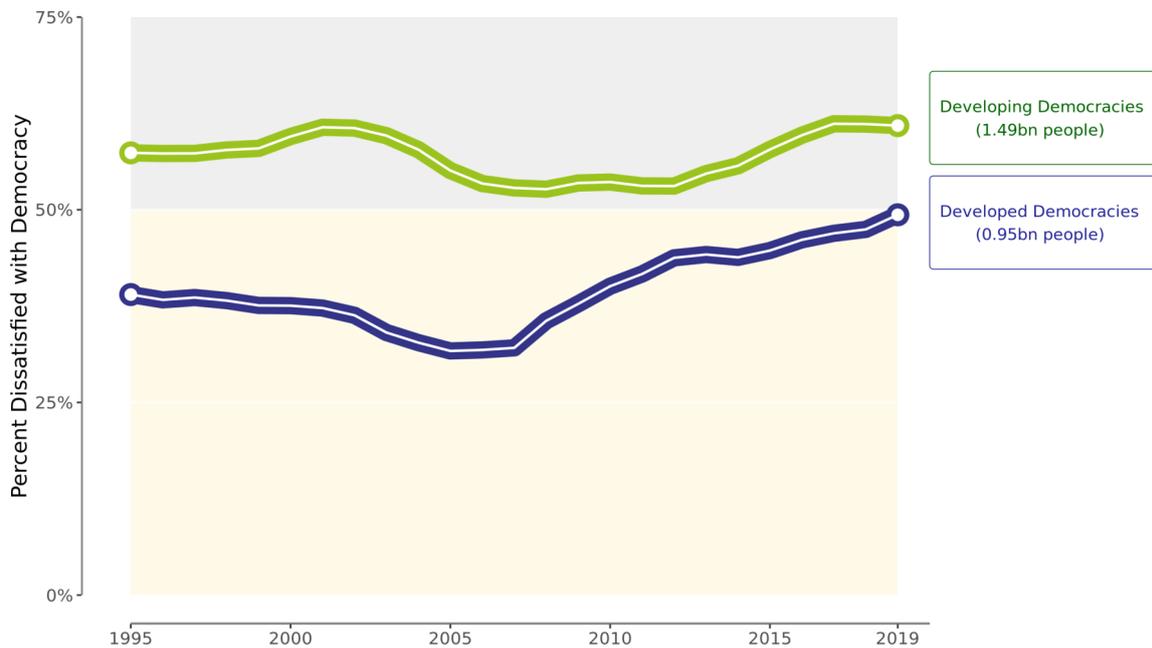
### *Developed and Developing Democracies*

While dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy exists across both developed and developing democracies, there are important differences between the two. In developing democracies in Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe, levels of discontent are high – with more than half of respondents typically dissatisfied – yet with only a slight average increase in the last quarter century.

In developed democracies, by contrast, public satisfaction has eroded since the 1990s, with levels of discontent rising from a third to half of all respondents. To

the extent that the performance legitimacy of democratic institutions is a feature of democratic consolidation, this implies that some countries that were previously thought to be consolidated, such as Greece, Chile, or even the United States, may have partly “deconsolidated” in recent years.

As expected during the early post-Cold War years, in this respect developed and developing democracies have converged. However, they have done so more in the direction of the latter than in the direction of the former.



**Figure 10:** Changes in levels of democratic dissatisfaction among developed and developing democracies, since the mid-1990s. Consistent country sample.

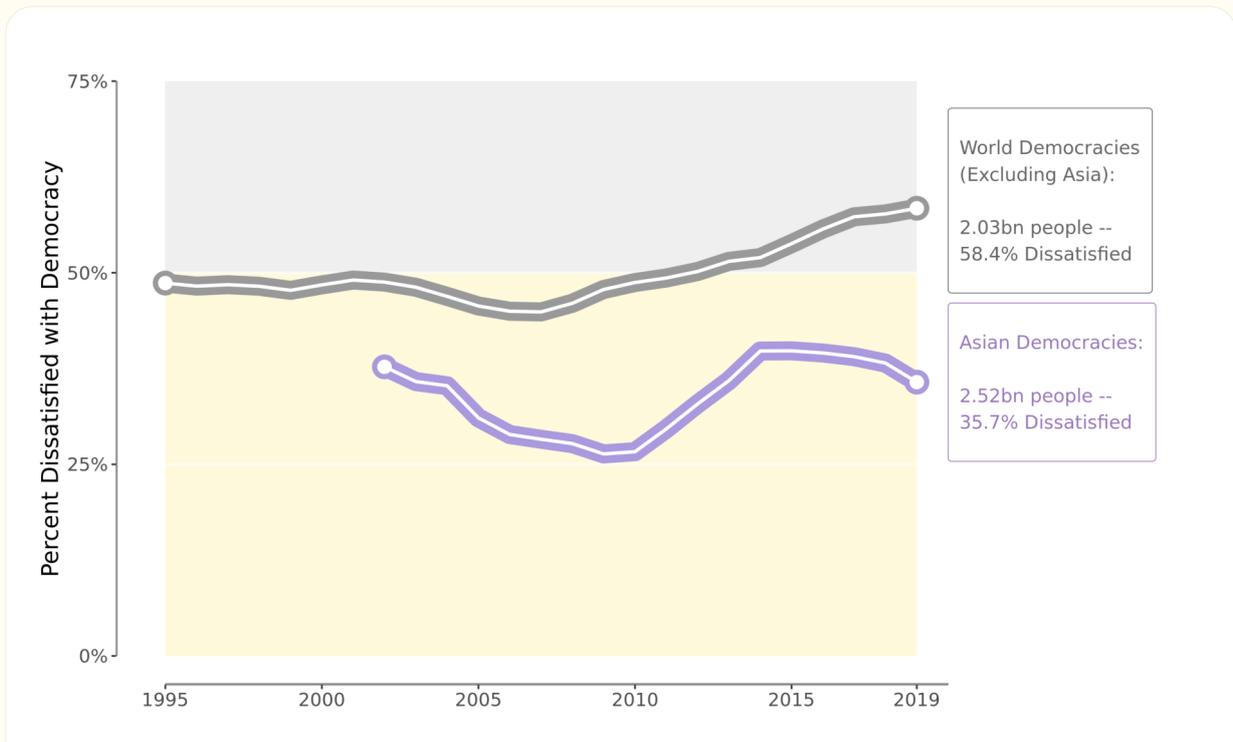
## Regional Divergence

### *The Asian Exception*

While satisfaction with democratic performance has declined across the world over the past generation, one region stands as a notable exception: Asia. Whether among the emerging democracies of Southeast Asia, the developed democracies of northeast Asia, or in the world’s longest-established major developing democracy – India – satisfaction with democratic governance in the East seems higher than in other parts of the world.

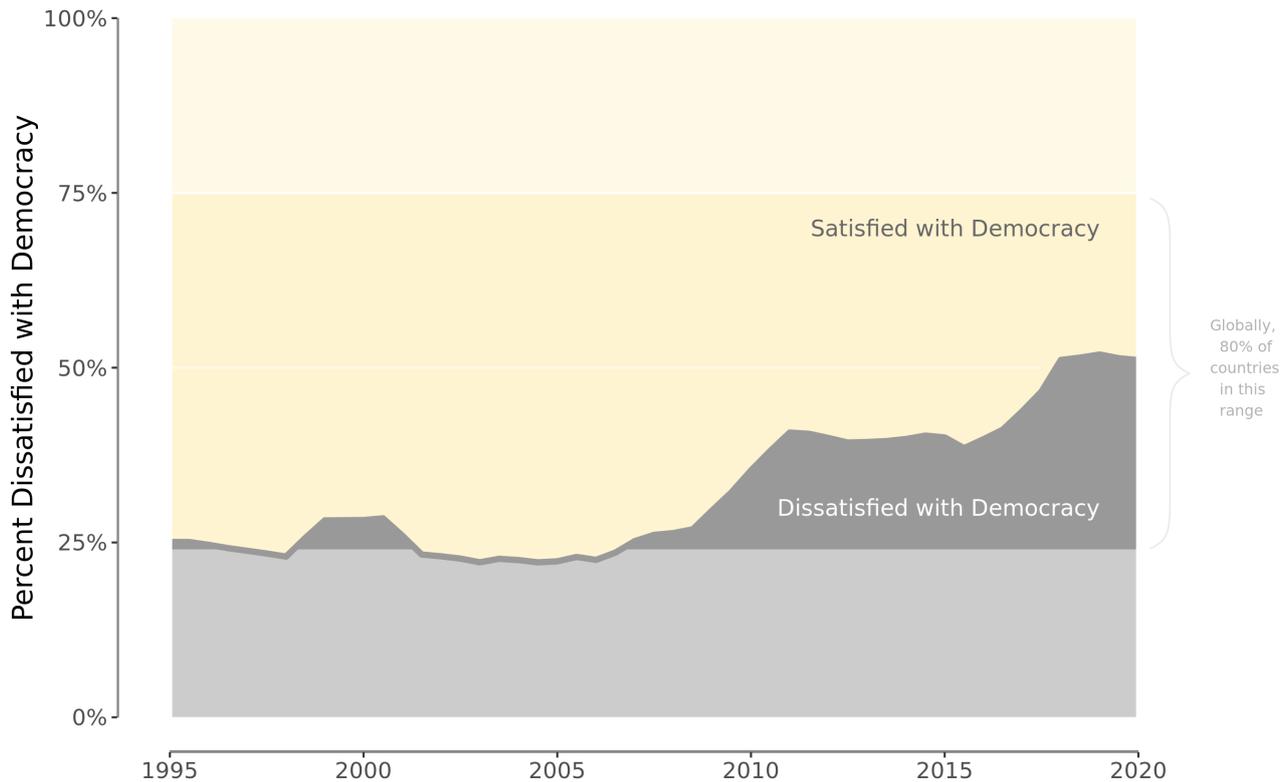
On average almost two-thirds of Asians

are satisfied with the performance of democracy in their countries, compared to just two-fifths of individuals elsewhere. Not only has this gap existed since the start of widespread surveys across South and Southeast Asia in the early 2000s, but it has widened since. The observation of democratic contentment in Asia, together with the rise of Asia in general, offer the prospect of a radically different interpretation of democratic prospects and legitimacy in the twenty-first century.



**Figure 11:** Changes in levels of democratic dissatisfaction among democracies in Asia, and democracies outside of Asia.

## The Anglo-Saxon Countries – the End of Exceptionalism?



**Figure 12:** Satisfaction with Democracy in the “Anglo-Saxon” Countries: the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

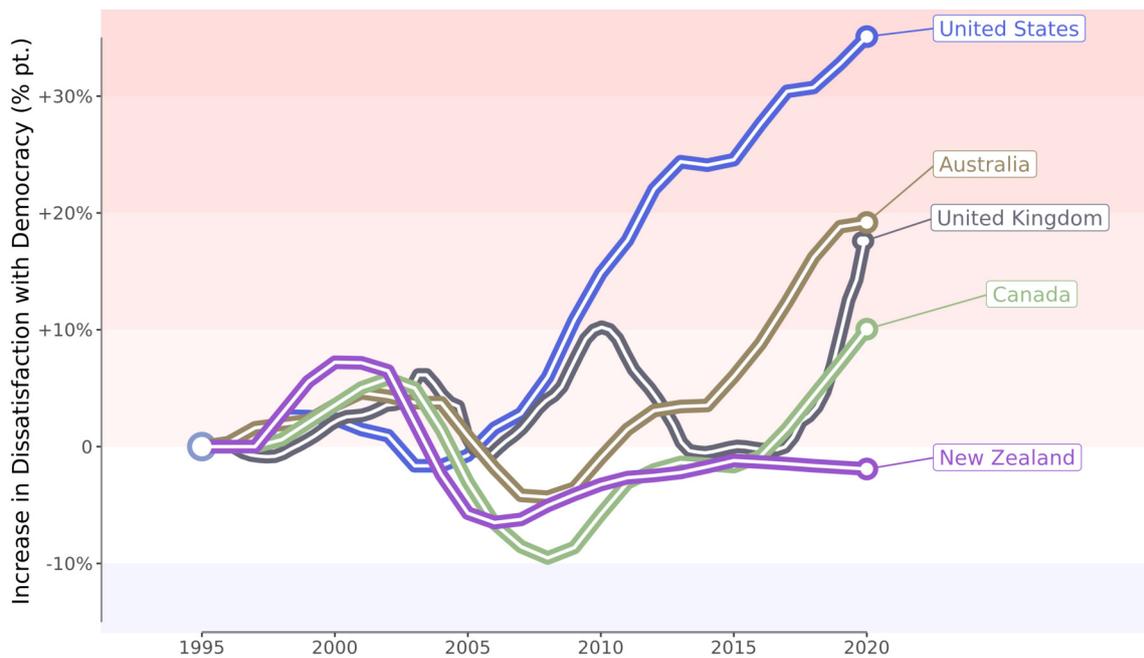
In recent years, there has been an especially acute crisis of democratic faith in the “Anglo-Saxon” democracies – the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Overall, the proportion of citizens who are “dissatisfied” with the performance of democracy in these countries has doubled since the 1990s, from a quarter, to half of all individuals.

Though much of this increase is accounted for by the United States, public levels of confidence have also slipped in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. While the proportion of Americans who are dissatisfied with democracy has increased by over one-third of the population (+34 percentage points) since the mid-1990s, this amount has also risen by one-fifth of the population in Australia (+19 percentage points) and Britain (+18 percentage points), and by almost a

tenth of Canadians (Figure 13).

What can explain this synchronised downturn in public sentiment across high-income, English-speaking democracies? First, given the concurrence of the shift with the timing of the global financial crisis, economic factors may play an important role. Yet this explanation, while a part of the story, would struggle to explain why Australia, which largely avoided an economic downturn after 2008, appears as negatively affected as Britain and the United States. An alternative though related view is that the financialisation of the U.S., British, Canadian, and Australian economies has led to this outcome by exacerbating spatial inequality between a handful of successful, globally-integrated cosmopolitan cities – New York, London, Toronto, or Sydney – and the rest of their societies. Evidence suggests that rising in-

<sup>15</sup> Sung Min Han and Eric C.C. Chang, (2016) “Economic Inequality, Winner-Loser gap, and Satisfaction with Democracy”, *Electoral Studies*, 44: 85–97.



**Figure 13:** Change in satisfaction with democracy since 1995 in the Anglo-Saxon democracies, from baseline level.

come inequality also decreases satisfaction with democracy,<sup>15</sup> and the effect may be especially strong where entire regions of a country feel left behind – and whose needs have been ignored by political parties due to the prevalence of either gerrymandered or “safe” seats.<sup>16</sup> This sense of exclusion and frustration with political elites is only made stronger when the other effect of income inequality is to skew influence over the political system, providing increased resources for lobbyists and rendering politicians more dependent upon securing donor campaign contributions.

A second literature that is pertinent to explaining the trajectory of the Anglo-Saxon democracies suggests that satisfaction with democracy is lower in majoritarian “winner-takes-all” systems than in consensus-based, proportionally representative democracies,<sup>17</sup> and this could explain why New Zealand – the lone member of this group with elections by proportional representation – appears to have avoided a trajectory of soaring public

discontent (Figure 13).

This still leaves the question, of course, as to why discontent in majoritarian democracies has been on the rise, rather than simply higher on average. One intriguing hypothesis is that there may be an interaction between the confrontational, two-party model of Anglo-Saxon politics, and the effect of social media in siloing society into opposing “tribes”.<sup>18</sup> Rising political polarisation between Democrats and Republicans in the United States is one example, though a clearer demonstration is the manner in which Britain’s referendum on whether to remain in or leave the European Union subsequently split society into the hitherto unknown categories of “Leavers” vs. “Remainers”. Combined with social media, the winner-takes-all nature of political competition in Anglo-Saxon democracies contributes to polarisation, which in turn makes citizens less willing to compromise or accept the legitimacy of a rival’s electoral mandate.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Ezrow and Georgios Xezonakis (2011) “Citizen Satisfaction with Democracy and Parties’ Policy Offerings: A Cross-National Analysis of Twelve European Party Systems, 1976–2003”, *Comparative Political Studies*.

<sup>17</sup> Kees Aarts and Jacques Thomassen, (2008) “Satisfaction with Democracy: Do Institutions Matter?”, *Electoral Studies*, 27, 5–18.

<sup>18</sup> Andrea Ceron and Vincenzo Memoli (2016) “Flames and Debates: Do Social Media Affect Satisfaction with Democracy?” *Social Indicators Research*.

## Country in Focus

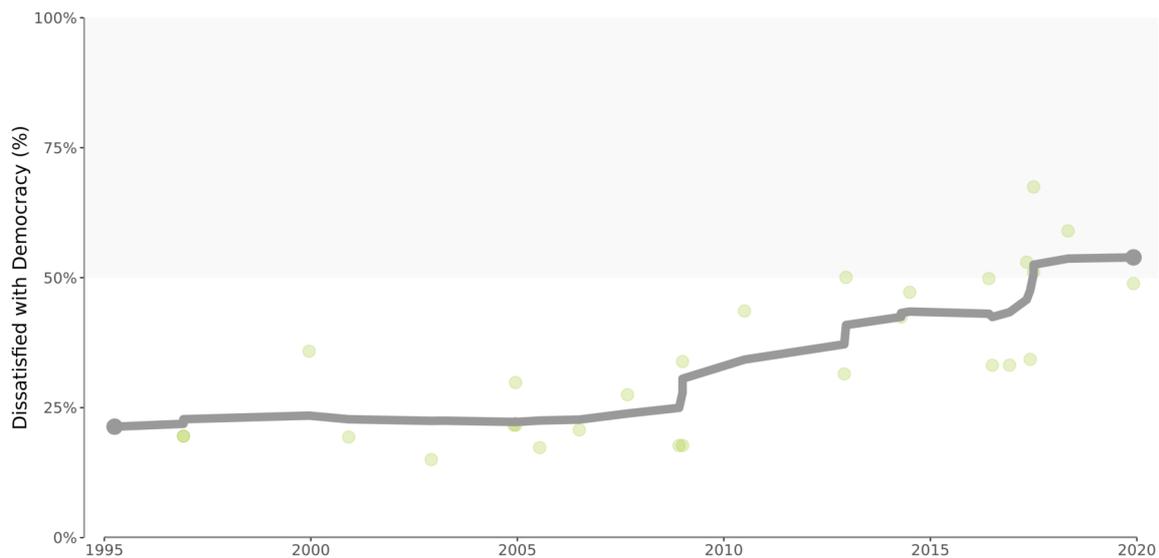
### *The United States*

In few countries has the decline in satisfaction with democratic performance been as dramatic or as unexpected as in the United States. For much of its modern history, America has viewed itself as a “shining city on a hill” – a model democracy, and one that can serve as an example unto others that wish to emulate its success. Survey data shows that the American public largely cohered with such a viewpoint, with more than three-quarters of U.S. respondents regularly expressing their “satisfaction” with the state of democracy in America.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, however, that has begun to change, with Americans’ evaluation of the functioning of their political system continuing to deteriorate year on year. Rising political polarisation, government shutdowns, the widespread use of public office for private gain, a costly war in Iraq, and growing spatial and inter-generational inequality have all weighed

against Americans’ view of the ability of their democracy to deliver. Now, for the first time on record, polls show a majority of Americans dissatisfied with their system of government – a system of which they were once famously proud.

Such levels of democratic dissatisfaction would not be unusual elsewhere. But for the United States, it marks an “end of exceptionalism” – a profound shift in America’s view of itself, and therefore, of its place in the world. It is a reflection of just how remarkable this shift in sentiment has been that a presidential candidate – Donald J. Trump – could arrive at the White House after a presidential campaign that denounced American political institutions as corrupt, and promised to step back from promoting democracy abroad in favour of putting “America First”, treating all countries transactionally based on a spirit of realism, regardless of their adherence to or deviation from democratic norms.



**Figure 14:** Rising dissatisfaction with democracy in the United States from the mid-1990s to the present day. Shown here are individual survey observations, plus their rolling average.

## Country in Focus

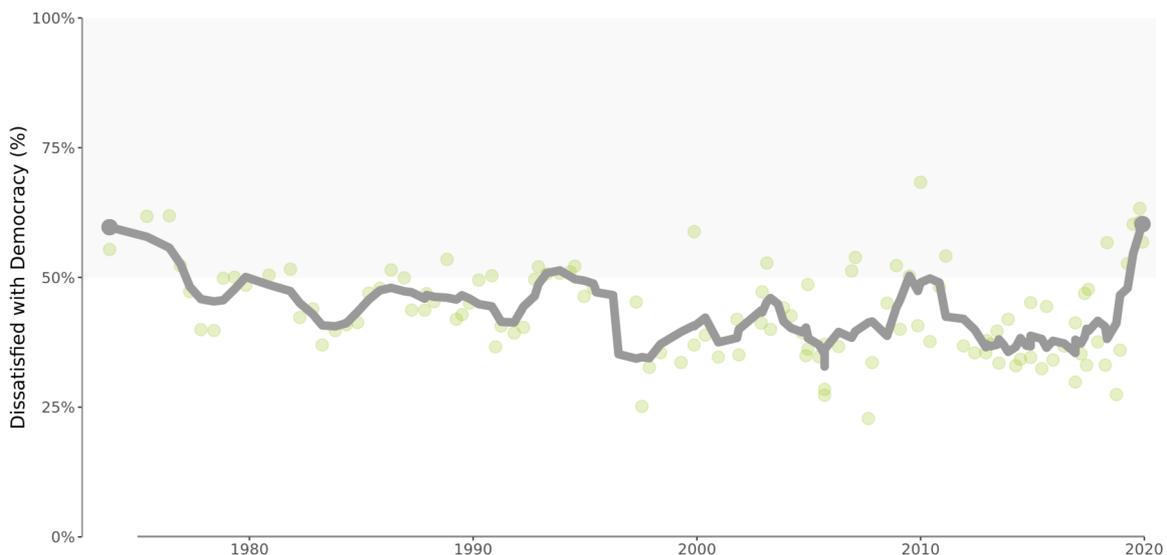
*The United Kingdom*

The United Kingdom has one of the richest datasets on satisfaction with democracy, starting with the first surveys completed in the early 1970s by Eurobarometer, and supplemented by more recent surveys completed by survey organisations including Gallup, Pew, and YouGov.

For thirty years from the 1970s to the early twenty-first century, average levels of satisfaction with democracy in the U.K. were, in fact, rising. The 1970s marked a moment of deep crisis for Britain, with general strikes, power cuts, periods of minority government, an embarrassing IMF bailout, and the start of “the troubles” in Northern Ireland. By the end of the 1990s, when Tony Blair’s government had brokered the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland, devolved power to Scotland and Wales, and rebranded the country as a “cool Britannia” that could reconcile Margaret Thatcher’s

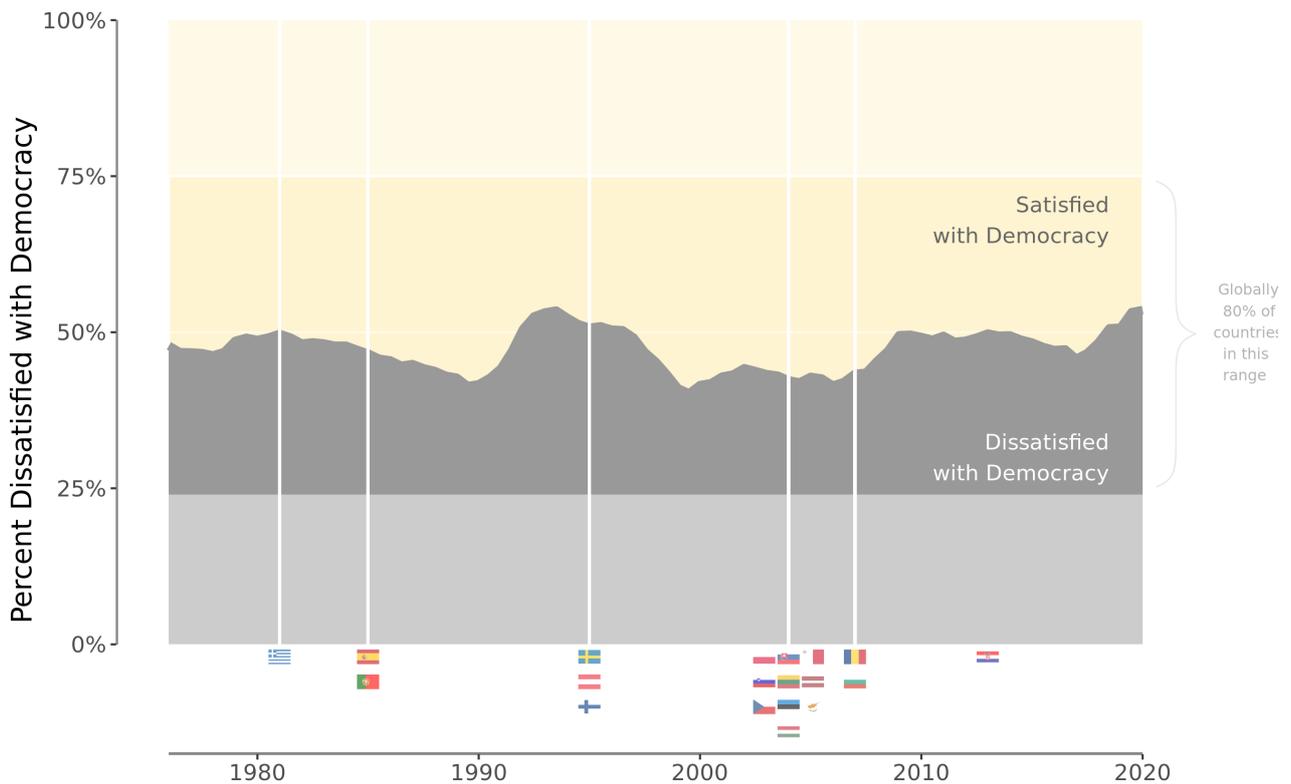
market reforms with increased social investment in health and education, it had seemed that “things” – to borrow New Labour’s own political mantra – “could only get better”. And indeed, had done so.

In retrospect, this period represented a high point for satisfaction in Britain’s democratic institutions which would never be reattained. Following brief dips after the Iraq War and the parliamentary expenses scandal, satisfaction with democracy has plunged during the “Brexit” stalemate of 2016-19. The sudden onset of Britain’s recent legitimacy crisis holds out the hope that a recovery may follow as swiftly as the breakdown. Yet this will depend upon how the United Kingdom finally negotiates its way out of the Brexit impasse, and moves beyond the divisions sowed by the 2016 referendum.



**Figure 15:** *Dissatisfaction with democracy in the United Kingdom from the mid-1970s to the present day. Shown here are individual survey observations, plus their rolling average. For much of this period, a majority of respondents have expressed contentment with the outcome of the British political process. However, in 2019, for the first time since the mid-1970s, more than half of British respondents were dissatisfied with democracy in the UK.*

## Europe – Complacency and Internal Divergence



**Figure 16:** Satisfaction with democracy in European Union member states, 1975-2020. Addition of countries to the EEC/EC/EU shown by country flags.

Overall, satisfaction with democracy in Europe has fluctuated in cycles over the past half century. We are now at a third peak in relative dissatisfaction, with the first during the “governability crises” of the 1970s, the second following the 1990s recession and the final phase beginning in 2009 with the eurozone crisis. Interspersed with these episodes, there have been periods of relative civic contentment – for a few years following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and for the first decade following the launch of the euro.

Previous episodes were experienced as genuine crises at the time, capable of disrupting democratic stability within individual European countries. The Trilateral Commission report of 1975 warned of a threat to democratic institutions in Italy, the United Kingdom, West Germany, and France, as strikes, riots, and terrorism became common-

place, and support for the communist Left grew.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, though democratic ideals emerged unassailable from the end of the Cold War, democratic institutions seemed less robust: in 1992 the Italian party system imploded following corruption scandals, and the collapse of the communist parties was followed by the growth of the extreme right in countries such as France, Austria, and the Netherlands.

So why then, does Europe’s current malaise “feel” worse than past episodes? The first difference, perhaps, is one of duration: The period from 1992 to 1994 may have contained the ERM crisis, the collapse of the Italian party system, and the 1990s recession, yet was a blip between two periods of relative optimism and euphoria (Figure 17).

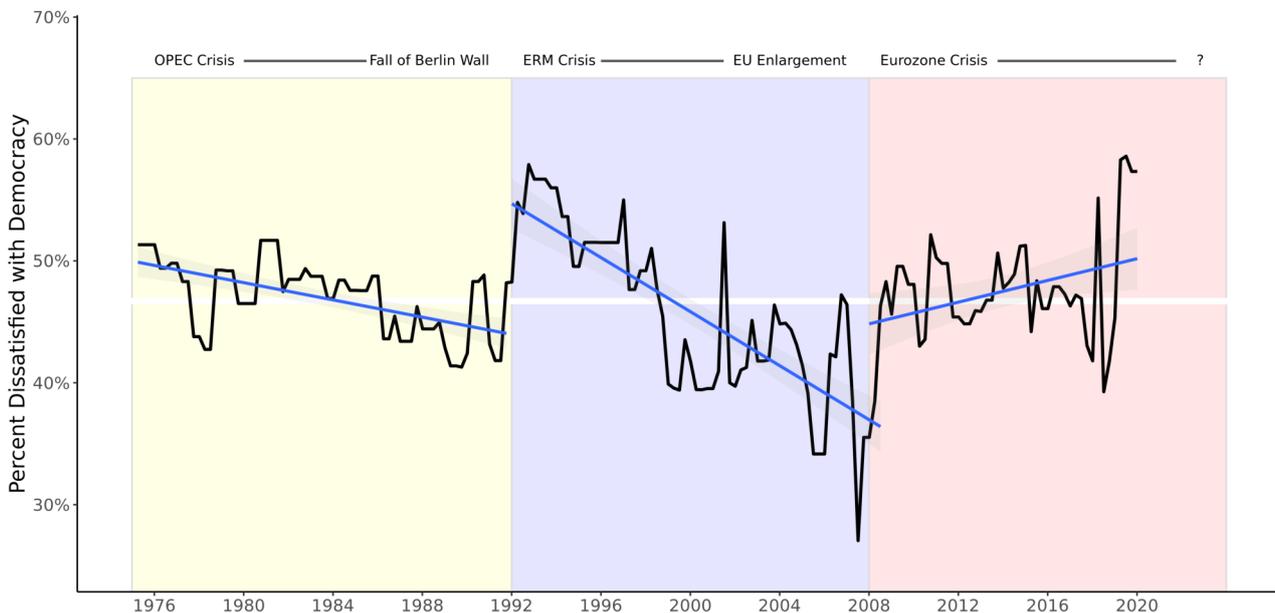
Secondly, there is the fact of divergence: Europe’s average level of satisfaction masks

<sup>19</sup> Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington and Joji Watanuki (1975) “The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission”.

a large and growing divide within the continent, between a “zone of despair” across France and southern Europe, and a “zone of complacency” across western Germany, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands. Because the former group began from a lower baseline, the result is a wide and growing “satisfaction gap” – much in evidence from the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, where anti-system parties swept seats across France, Italy, Spain, and Greece, yet were less successful in northern Europe.

The length of the current malaise also explains why this time it has led to a wave of populism, a wave that began some five years after the onset of the eurozone sovereign debt crisis. At first, European publics were prepared to give established parties a chance to address the continent’s mounting economic and migration challenges. For a number of years in Greece, successive governments followed the strictures of the IMF bailout package, while in Italy, Silvio Berlusconi resigned to make way for a technocratic govern-

ment. In the United Kingdom, deep austerity policies were initially supported by the electorate, while in France, François Hollande campaigned on a platform of increased taxes and reduced public spending. By the end of the decade, however, electorates had lost patience. A left-populist government in Greece won (then ignored) a referendum rejecting the terms of the country’s bailout agreement, the Cameron government collapsed after losing a referendum to remain in the European Union, and Italy’s technocrats were swept from office by a populist coalition of left and right. Whether and when Europe can escape its longest period of institutional dissatisfaction on record, will depend in large part upon the capacity of governments to escape its underlying pressures – economic stagnation,<sup>20</sup> regional inequality within and between countries,<sup>21</sup> demographic anxieties, and imbalances of power between nation states in the post-Lisbon Treaty European Union.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 17:** Dissatisfaction with democracy in Western Europe, divided into three phases: 1974–1992; 1992–2008; 2008–today. Population-weighted, constant country sample barring additions of: (i) Greece (data series begins in 1980), (ii) Spain and Portugal (data series begin in 1985), (iii) Eastern Germany (from 1990, included in the Federal Republic of Germany). Europe has experienced legitimacy crises in the past; yet in episodes of 4–6 years, rather than a decade-long malaise.

<sup>20</sup> Klaus Armingeon and Kai Guthmann (2013) “Democracy in crisis? The declining support for national democracy in European countries, 2007–2011”, *European Journal of Political Research*.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis Dijkstra, Hugo Poelman and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose (2019), “The geography of EU discontent”, *Regional Studies*; Roberto Stefan Foa and Jonathan Wiltom (2019) “The West Has a Resentment Epidemic”, *Foreign Policy*.

<sup>22</sup> Sonia Alonso and Rubén Ruiz-Rufino, (2018) “The costs of responsibility for the political establishment of the Eurozone (1999–2015)”, *Party Politics*.

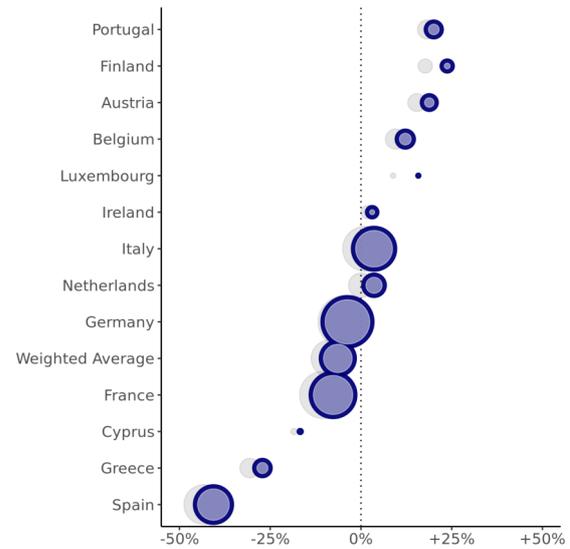
### Divergence within the Eurozone

Is democratic dissatisfaction in Europe simply a cyclical economic effect, or does it reflect a deeper sense of discontent with how institutions are performing?

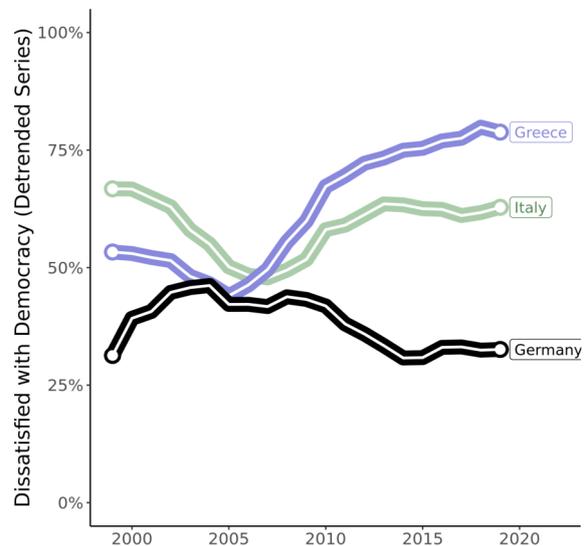
In order to shed light on this question, we produced a second version of our dataset that was “detrended” to remove the cyclical effect of economic growth upon democratic satisfaction. This is detailed in section V of the Appendix, but in short, we estimated the portion of the change in satisfaction with democracy that covaries with recent economic performance, and adjusted the survey results to reflect what might have happened “as if” the level of GDP growth had remained constant.

After detrending the growth rate effect from European data, divergence within the eurozone since the launch of the single currency reduces – but only moderately. In many countries, though notably in France and Spain, popular discontent has continued growing throughout the period of economic recovery. To the extent that economic factors matter, they are likely to be mediated by factors that display less of a clear cyclical pattern, such as wages or regional inequality.

Meanwhile, how does the evolution of dissatisfaction appear over time? During the first decade following the euro’s launch, growth-detrended satisfaction with democracy in southern Europe was marginally lower than in northern Europe (Figure 19). However, this gap widens significantly in the decade following the sovereign debt crisis of 2009–11. It is likely that, beyond personal feelings of economic dissatisfaction, the crisis has brought forward a broader sense of political discontent that is tied to economic sovereignty, national pride, and anger over the use of public resources.



**Figure 18:** Change in satisfaction with democracy since launch of the euro, across member countries: raw (faded) and growth-adjusted (blue) figures. Points are proportional in area to country population. Sluggish economic growth has depressed satisfaction with democracy in most eurozone countries, but cannot explain divergence between regions.



**Figure 19:** Change in satisfaction with democracy since launch of the euro, 5-year rolling averages after detrending for short-term economic effects.

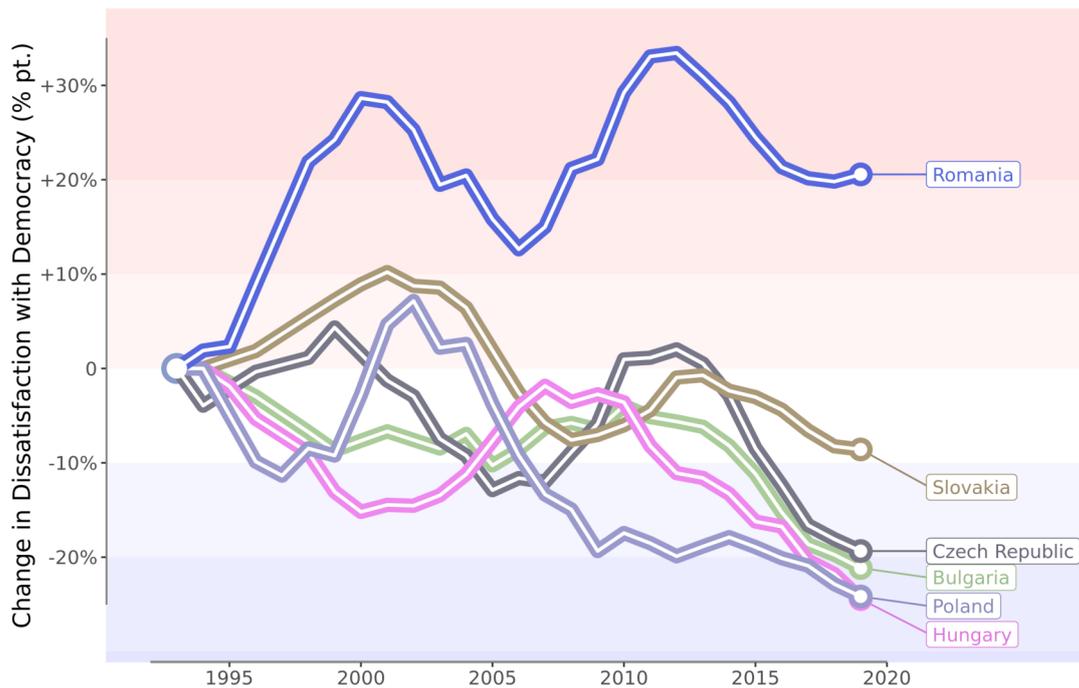
## Optimism in the East, Gloom in the West

If Western Europe is disillusioned, the former communist countries of the Eastern Bloc, many of which joined the European Union in 2004 and 2007, are experiencing a steady consolidation of faith in their new political institutions.<sup>25</sup> Admittedly, these countries began from a very low base, with only a small minority of respondents – between a fifth and a third – expressing “satisfaction” during the economic transition years of the 1990s.

While the combination of economic recovery and European Union accession might appear the most plausible explanations for rising democratic contentment, in fact, these show very little relation to trends in the data. By 2010, only Poland had seen a substantial recovery in political contentment, with other countries barely up from their 1990s levels (Figure 20). Only since the onset of the global financial crisis has satisfaction with democ-

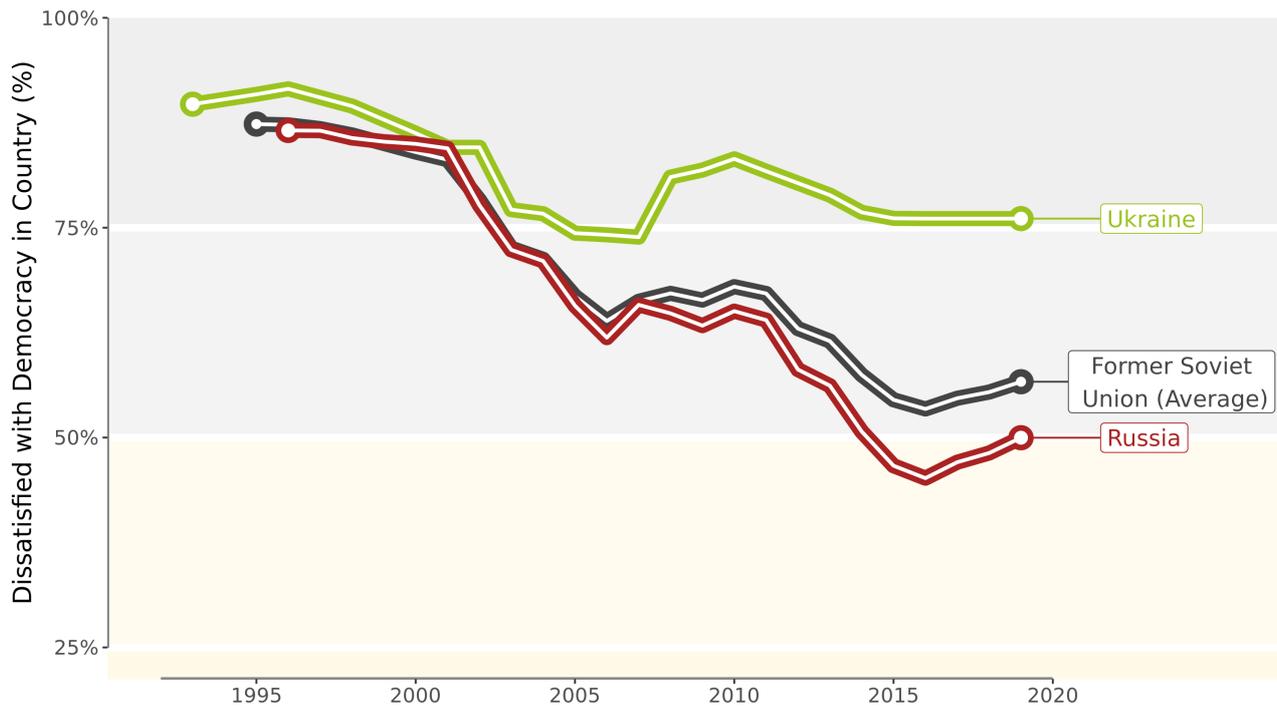
racy in postcommunist Europe improved in a uniform fashion – a period that is well after the completion of the accession process, and during which economic growth has slowed across the region, in line with the rest of the continent.

It is also a period that in most countries displayed in the figure below – notably Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic – the first generation of liberal postcommunist elites has been swept aside by the election to high office of populist politicians and parties, often on a platform of nationalism, social welfare, and anti-immigration. The concurrence of populism and democratic satisfaction reminds us, perhaps, that satisfaction with democracy is not the same as a belief in liberal principles or values – but is as much due to congruence between popular sentiment and the attitudes expressed by the political class, whatever those sentiments may be.



**Figure 20:** Evidence of democratic consolidation in post-communist Europe? With the notable exception of Romania, the major new democracies of central and eastern Europe have seen a gradual strengthening of civic confidence in their political institutions since the “dual transition” to democracy and the market economy in the 1990s. Notably, central Europe is one of the few regions to have witnessed an increase in satisfaction with democracy since the global financial crisis. Rolling averages are displayed.

<sup>25</sup> Christian Haerpfer and Kseniya Kizilova (2015) “Support for Democracy in Post-communist Europe and Post-Soviet Eurasia” in *The Civic Culture Transformed*; Roberto Stefan Foa and Grzegorz Ekiert (2017) “The Weakness of Postcommunist Civil Society Reassessed,” *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 56(2).



**Figure 21:** Declining dissatisfaction with democracy in the Former Soviet Union countries for which time-series data are available. The Former Soviet Union average includes Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova; but excludes the EU accession countries (the Baltic states).

### Further East: The Former Soviet Union

Beyond the European Union, time-series data on satisfaction with democracy is available for a number of former Soviet republics, including the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova.

The story of democratic transition in the post-Soviet space is more chequered than among the EU accession states. While most former Soviet states attempted some form of democratisation in the 1990s, in a number of cases they relapsed toward authoritarian rule – relatively rapidly in Kazakhstan and Belarus, somewhat more slowly in Russia – while those countries which maintained genuinely competitive elections have struggled with economic stagnation, corruption, and civil strife.

Public opinion across the post-Soviet space shows democracy to be struggling, and authoritarianism resurgent. Among the region’s remaining democracies – in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine – satisfaction with democracy in the last two decades has

stagnated or declined from an extremely low level, with 3 in every 4 citizens expressing discontent with the democratic system as they currently experience it.

Meanwhile in Russia and Belarus, regular data on civic satisfaction with “democracy” continues to be collected – as it has been since the mid-1990s – in spite of the increasingly autocratic governance of these countries. In general, such surveys show a continuing recovery of confidence in the political system. Figure 21 shows this trend in Russia, for example, compared to the population-weighted average among non-EU, post-Soviet nations. The contrast between democratic and authoritarian polities in the post-Soviet space indicates an important point: citizens evaluate the performance of their polity not only by its adherence to liberal-democratic norms, but also for its ability to offer valued outputs such as political and social stability, economic growth, and a sense of collective purpose and pride. To the extent that emerging democracies fail to do this, the legitimacy of the democratic system itself may be eroded.

## Country in Focus

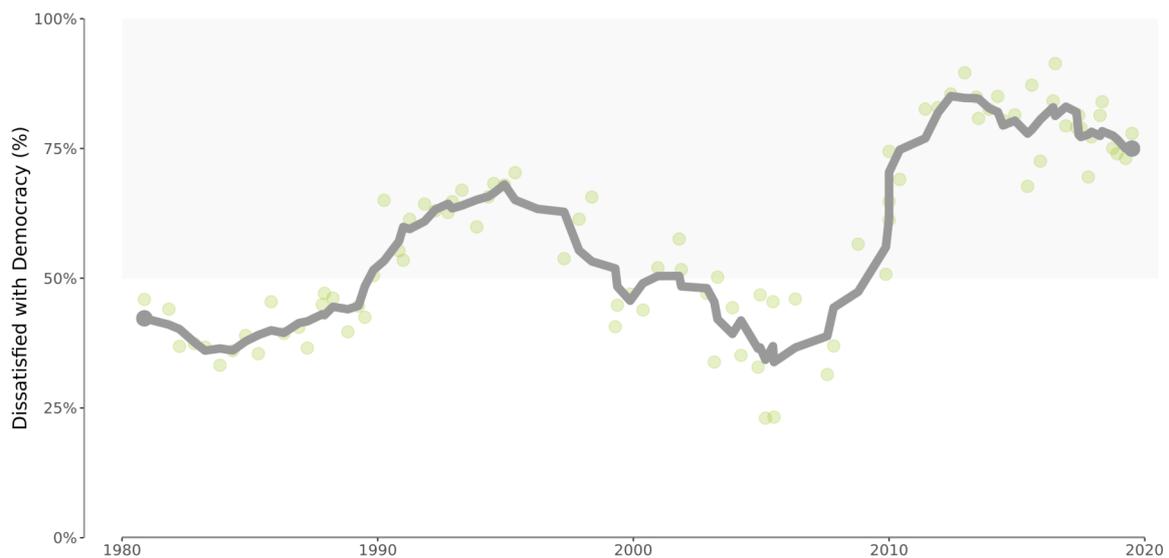
*Greece*

Greece joined the European Union on the 1st of January, 1981, and began fielding Eurobarometer surveys the previous year. As a result there is consistent data on democratic attitudes for 40 years – from the initial years following the country’s return to democracy in 1975 to the period of the eurozone crisis that began in 2009.

By the early years of the twenty-first century, with two-third of citizens satisfied with the political system, it appeared as if Greece had finally achieved democratic “consolidation” – a condition that politi-

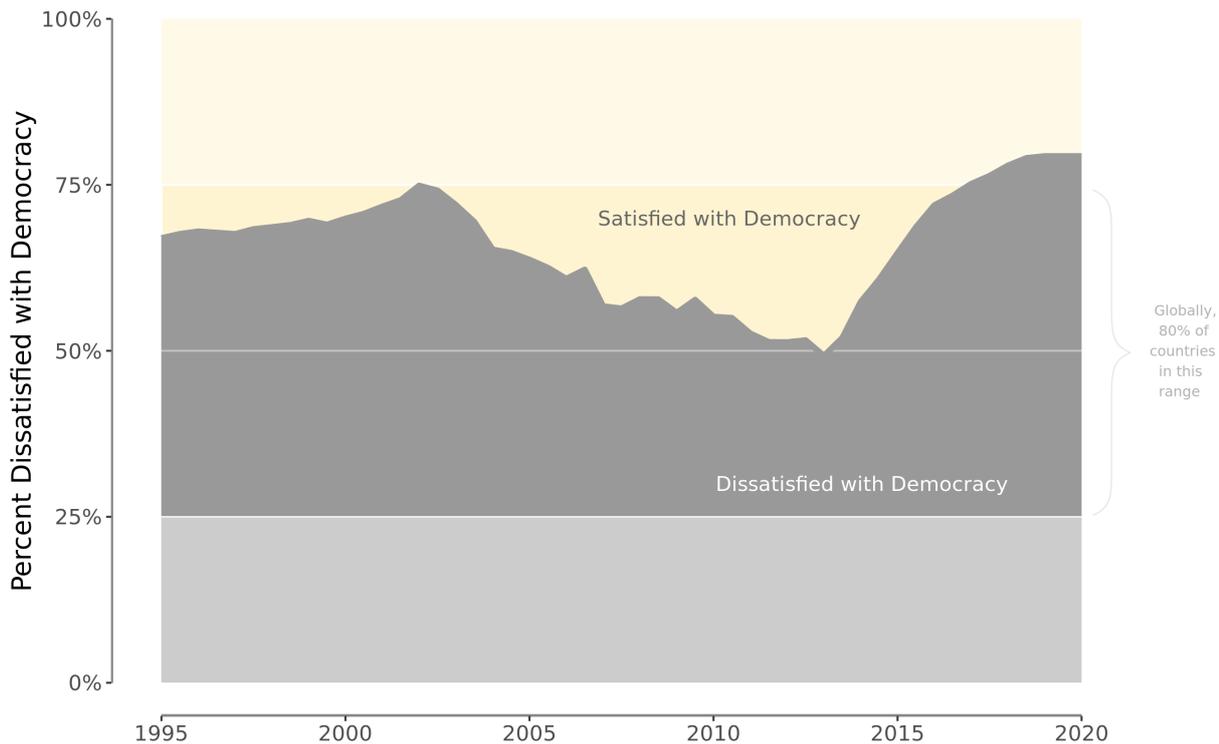
cal scientists define as one in which democratic legitimacy is assured, and alternatives to democratic governance have become unthinkable.

However, the sovereign debt crisis has shown the fragility of this condition. Several years in to the eurozone debt crisis, Greece saw the revival of an openly “fascist” political party, in the form of Golden Dawn, and the electoral victory of a left-populist government prepared to challenge the independence of the media and the courts.



**Figure 22:** *Dissatisfaction with democracy in Greece, from 1980 to the present day. Public opinion in Greece has fluctuated in cycles, with only brief periods – under the Andreas Papandreou government of 1981–1989, and then again in the 2000s – when a majority of the public approved of how democracy was performing. Since the onset of the sovereign debt crisis, discontent has reached a record high, with 4 out of 5 Greeks expressing dissatisfaction. In recent years, however, this level is starting to fall back once more.*

## Latin America – the Cycle of Instability



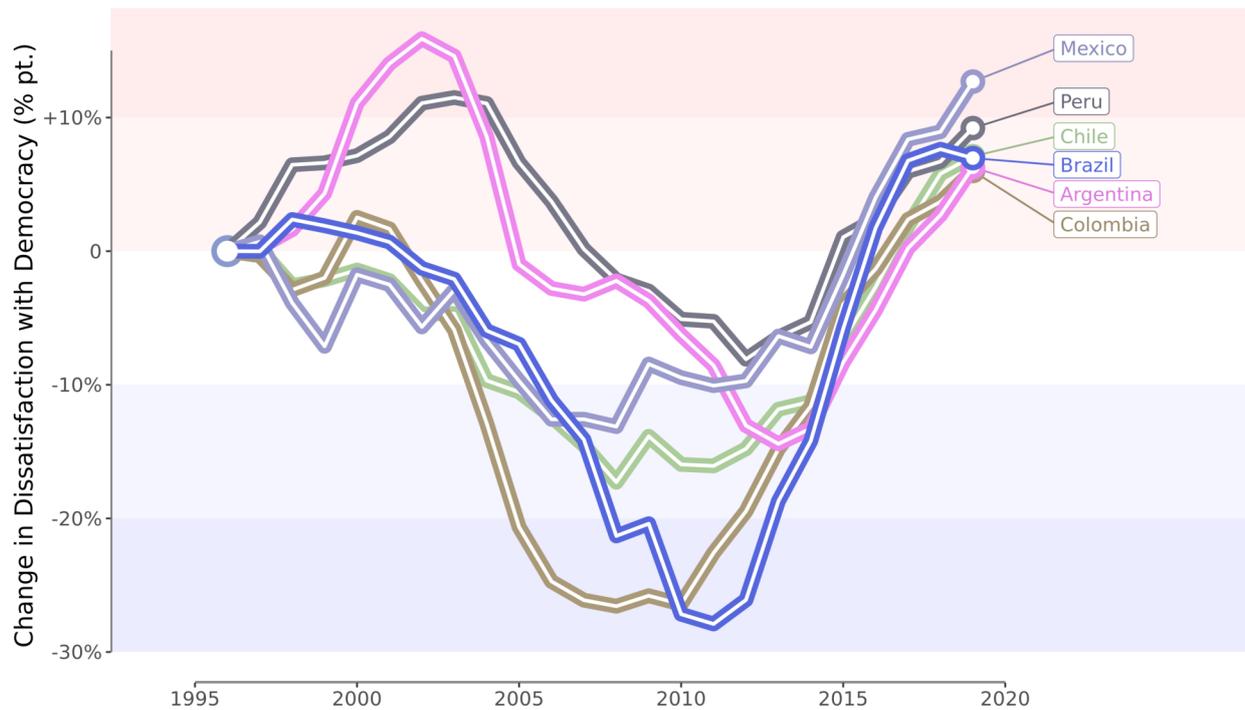
**Figure 23:** *Satisfaction with Democracy in Latin America. Population-weighted average of Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Paraguay, Ecuador, El Salvador, Peru, Panama, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras.*

In no other region of the world has the prospect of democratic consolidation appeared as elusive as it has in Latin America. In the nineteenth century, countries in the region were among the pioneers of representative government, with competitive elections occurring in Chile, Colombia, and Peru, among other cases. Yet for more than a century since, democratic institutions have been wracked by cyclical crises, culminating in military coups, civil wars, revolutionary populism, and single-party dictatorships. In every period when democratic institutions appeared to be taking root once more – in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s – another period has followed in which their legitimacy has eroded and the cycle has repeated anew.

We are currently in the midst of precisely such a “reverse wave.” More than 3 in every 4 citizens across the region register discontent with the performance of democracy – the highest level since the start of public opinion surveys. Concurrent with this legiti-

macy crisis, we have also seen the steady erosion of democratic institutions in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, the recent election of populist leaders in Mexico and Brazil, and widespread violent protests and riots in Colombia and Chile.

This has proven a sharp reversal following the period of relative optimism that prevailed in the first decade of the twenty-first century. At that time, a series of leaders – from President Lula in Brazil, to Michele Bachelet in Chile, and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner in Argentina – were elected to office as part of a “pink wave” of social-democratic politicians, promising to use the proceeds of a commodities boom to invest in overcoming entrenched inequalities. Coming just two decades after Latin America’s rapid transition to liberal democracy – as recently as the late 1970s, 17 out of 20 Latin American nations had been ruled by dictators – it seemed as if Latin America was following the social democratic path of Spain, Italy, and Portugal.



**Figure 24:** *From recovery to reversal – the cycle of instability.* Major democracies in Latin America experienced euphoric recovery from the financial crisis of the late 1990s, with democratic satisfaction rising by up to 30 percentage points. Yet in the last decade, the region has plunged into an even worse legitimacy crisis.

What has since gone wrong in Latin America, and why has the region failed – yet again – to achieve democratic stability? In many respects, the promise of the pink wave proved unsustainable because even its more moderate members – for example, president Lula in Brazil or Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner in Argentina – remained trapped in the populist tradition of clientelism and procyclical spending, leaving countries with limited space for borrowing once the commodity cycle turned. Meanwhile, whereas European social democracies combine universal public services with institutions and policies that support private sector growth and investment, in Latin America a deteriorating business environment has hobbled the means of rekindling economic growth. Nearly every major economy fell in its ranking on the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Index in the decade to 2018.

Yet the failures of Latin American democracies are not those of one decade or one set of leaders but rather, issues that are chronic

and structural. Corruption is endemic, and has deteriorated in recent decades according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index. Violent crime is out of control, as countries from Mexico to Brazil report homicide rates that are double or triple the level from two decades prior. And social injustices persist due to stubbornly high inequality, regressive tax rates, and informal labour markets that exclude the poor from basic legal protections and services.

All of this has contributed to Latin America’s current “year of rage”, with violent protests from Buenos Aires to Bogotá, and Santiago to San Juan, Puerto Rico. While it is possible that record high levels of dissatisfaction and resultant civic protest could lead to democratic renewal, other survey measures paint a less optimistic interpretation: support for democracy over other forms of government fell below half of survey respondents in 2018, while the proportion who believe that high levels of crime and corruption justify a military coup reached 37%.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Latinobarometro (2018) *Informe Latinobarometro 2018*, <http://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>, and Mollie J. Cohen, Noam Lupu, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister (2017) “The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2016/17”.

## Country in Focus

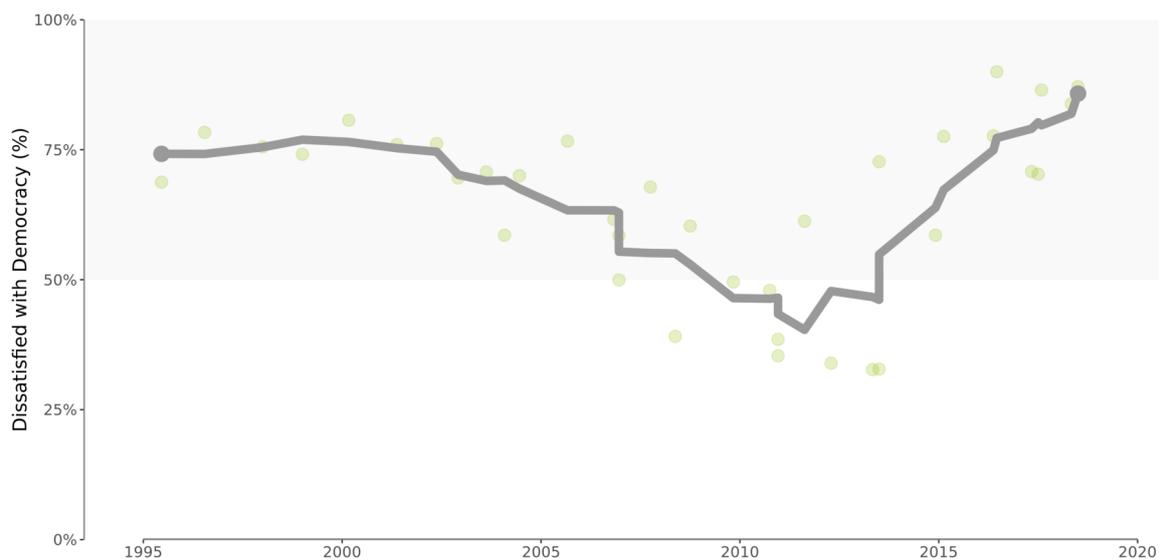
*Brazil*

In 1985, Brazil returned to democratic rule following two decades of military dictatorship. However, for much of the period since, the country's institutions have struggled to gain credibility, with persistent corruption, urban poverty, and rising criminal violence marring the impression that democracy can deliver.

A brief exception to this malaise occurred during the first decade of the twenty-first century, under the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva from 2003 to 2010. Enjoying the fruits of a global commodities boom, the Lula administration invested in programmes to relieve widespread poverty and reduce inequality, while maintaining a commitment to reduce inflation, hold down public debt, and attract foreign direct investment. By the time that Brazil was awarded the right in 2007 to hold FIFA World Cup tournament, it appeared that de Gaulle's eternal "country of the future" had finally arrived – if not exactly in the future,

then at least in the democratic present day. For the first time on record, on average a majority of Brazilians expressed satisfaction with their political system – a feeling of contentment that was to last until the tournament itself was hosted in 2014.

In retrospect, however, this was only a hiatus between two periods of instability – one marked by the aftermath of the emerging markets financial crisis of the late 1990s, and another that began with the *Lava Jato* ("car wash") investigations which exposed widespread clientelism and nepotism graft on the underbelly of the Brazilian political system. With the former Brazilian President Lula da Silva in jail, in late 2018 rightwing populist candidate Jair Bolsonaro won the presidency on a platform that included support for vigilantism against petty and organised crime, and nostalgia for the country's former military dictatorship. For Brazil, it seems, the future has been deferred once more.

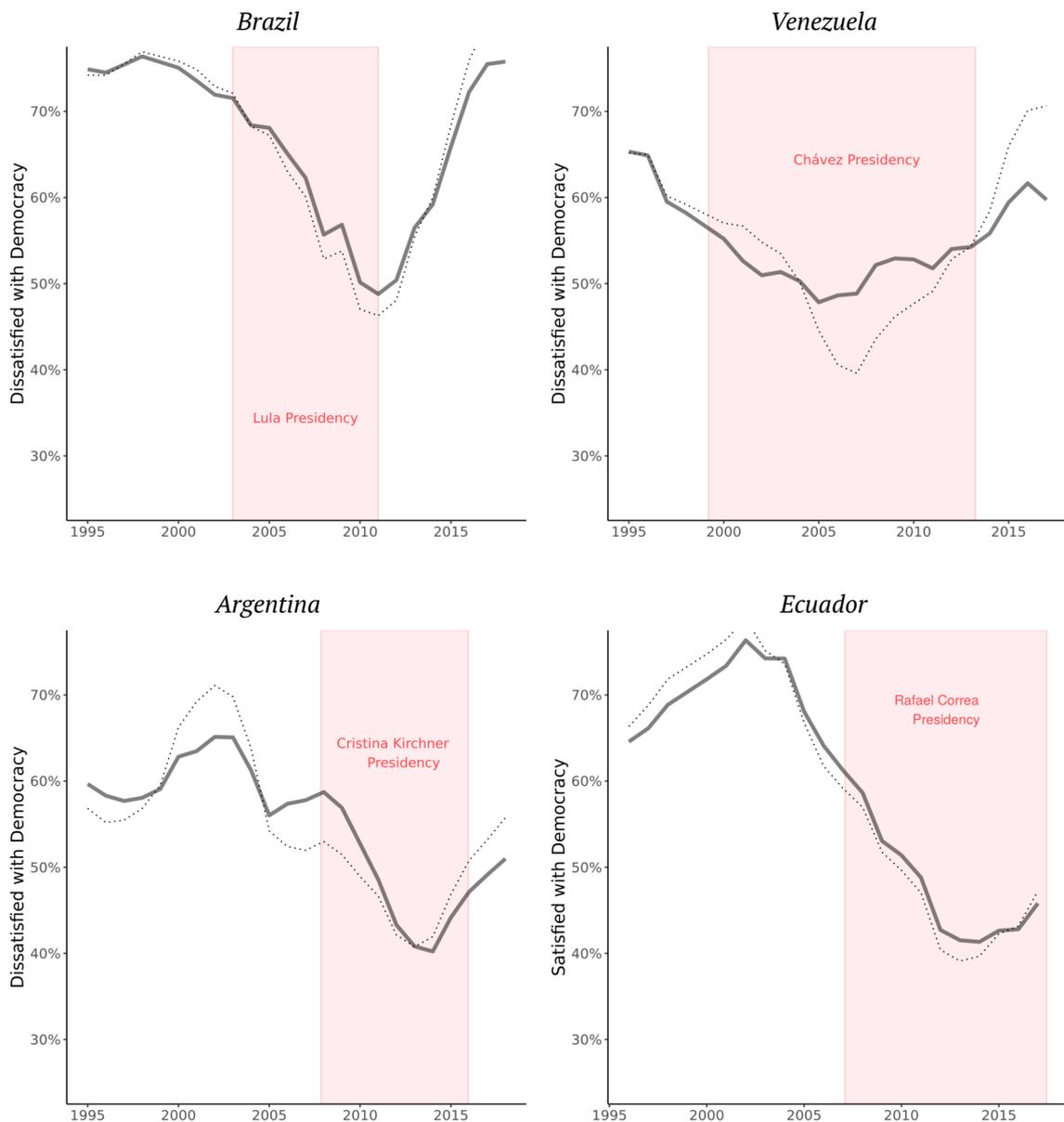


**Figure 25:** Dissatisfaction with democracy in Brazil from the mid-1990s to the present day.

### Latin America: The Pink Tide Goes Out

How much of Latin America’s swelling political discontent is tied to cyclical economic reversal, and how much to deeper institutional factors? We have examined this using a growth-detrended version of the satisfaction with democracy data, which strips out the effect of recent economic growth (see Appendix section V).

During the “pink tide”, dissatisfaction fell substantially in country after country. Very little of this drop was explained by economic growth per se, except in Venezuela where “growth-detrended” dissatisfaction with democracy remained around 50% even at the height of the Chávez years.



**Figure 26:** Raw and detrended data series in Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, and Ecuador. Detrended 5-year rolling averages in black lines; raw series in dotted lines.

## Country in Focus

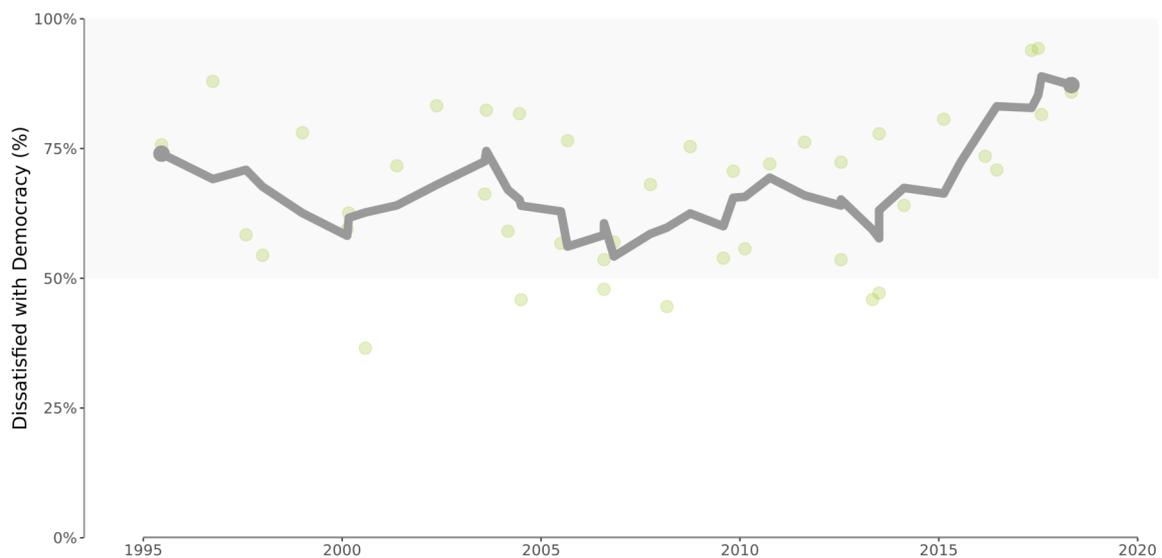
*Mexico*

After Brazil, Mexico is Latin America's second-largest democracy, as well as the sixth-largest democracy in the world. Yet unlike most Latin American nations, which transitioned to democracy very rapidly in the 1980s following the collapse of military juntas, Mexico experienced a more gradual democratisation. The dominant *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) governed the country uninterrupted and largely unchallenged for sixty years from 1929, though began to face opposition from splinter parties in the 1980s. The PRI responded to initial challenges with widespread electoral fraud, yet in 1994, allowed international observers to monitor the election for the first time. In 2000, the first peaceful handover of power occurred as the PRI was defeated by opposition candidate Vicente Fox.

At no point during this transition, however, has a consistent majority of the Mexican public expressed confidence in the

democratic process. In large part, this is due to endemic problems of drug violence, organised crime, political corruption, and the frequent assassination of journalists and human rights activists. Added to these factors, sluggish economic growth since the 1980s has failed to lift a sufficient number of individuals from poverty, and inequality, both within cities and between the capital Mexico City and the poorer regions of the south, remains structurally embedded.

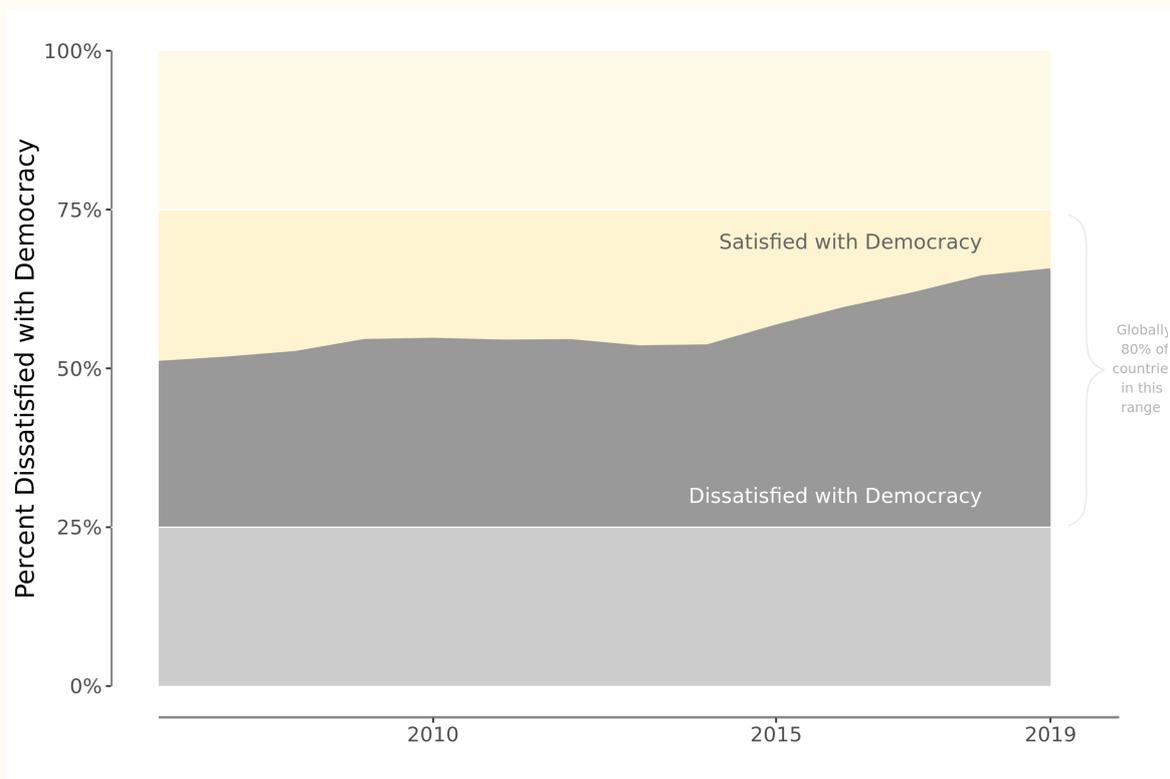
In 2018, amidst widespread political anger and discontent, Andrés Manuel López Obrador was elected President on a left-populist platform. For now, it remains to be seen whether he will end up more of a Mexican Lula da Silva – capable of marrying social justice and economic stability – or something closer to Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, whose decade of mismanagement has plunged the country in to its deepest ever economic, political, and social crisis.



**Figure 27:** *Dissatisfaction with democracy in Mexico from the mid-1990s to the present day. At no point has a clear majority of the Mexican public felt satisfied with the country's democratic institutions, though in recent years discontent has reached a record high.*

Region in Focus

*The Caribbean Region – Lost at Sea?*



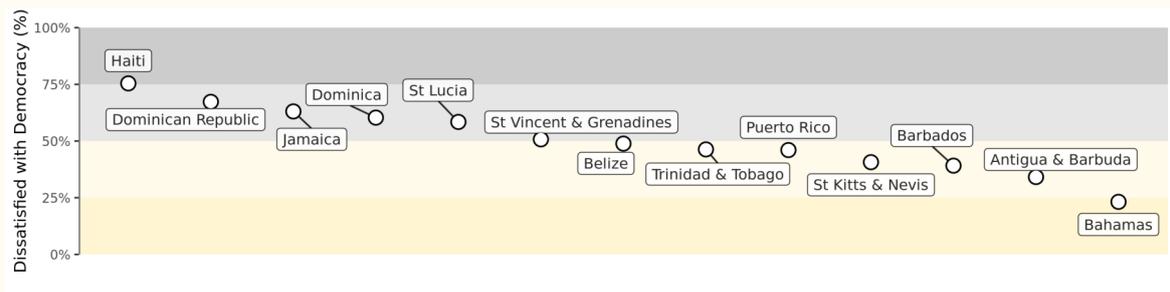
**Figure 28:** Satisfaction with Democracy in the Caribbean. Key countries by population include Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

The Caribbean region has a strong tradition of liberal democratic politics: since independence in the 1960s, ten of its twelve Anglophone countries have held consistently free and fair elections, as has Spanish-speaking Puerto Rico. Another Hispanophone country (the Dominican Republic) returned to democracy in the 1970s, years before comparable states in Latin America.

However, rising levels of narcotics traffick-

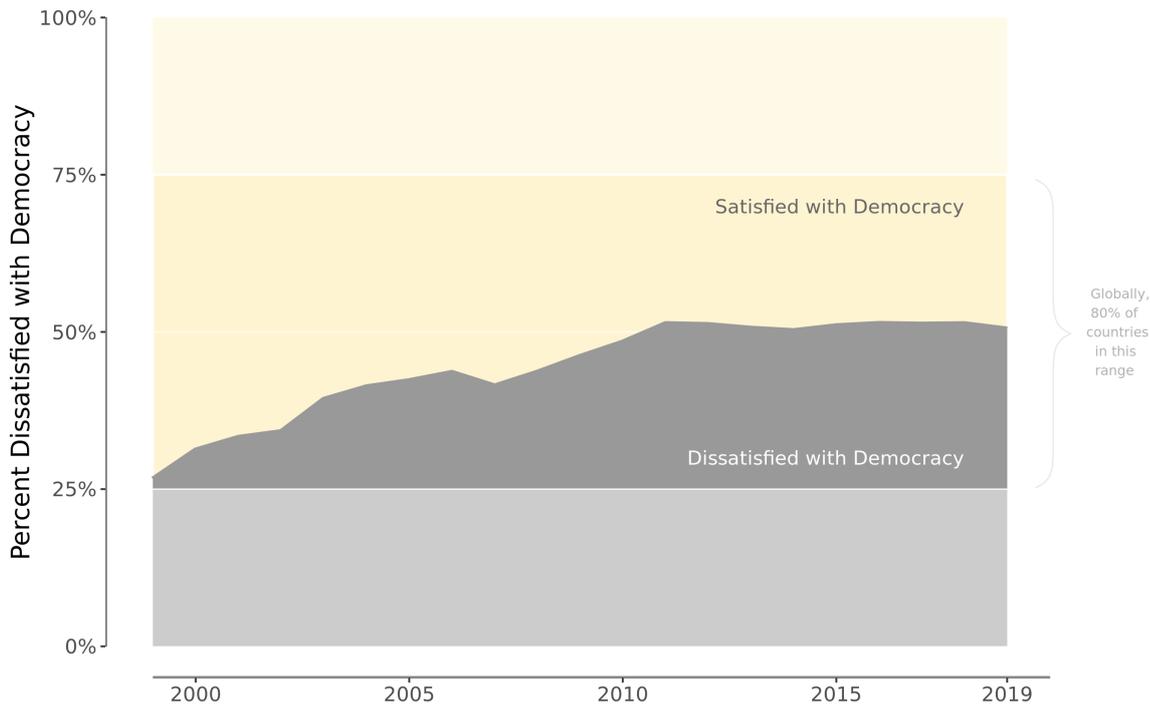
ing, crime, and corruption have threatened these outcomes. Civic confidence in domestic institutions is eroded, at its lowest level in two decades.

As figure 29 below shows, this leaves wide variation within the region. In Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, only a quarter to one-third of respondents express contentment with their system of government – while in Barbados, Antigua and the Bahamas, a clear majority do so.



**Figure 29:** Levels of dissatisfaction with democracy in Caribbean countries – latest available survey.

## Sub-Saharan Africa – Fading Euphoria, Growing Challenges



**Figure 30:** Satisfaction with Democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa. Population-weighted rolling average for Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Senegal, Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, Mali, Lesotho, Kenya, Ghana, Botswana, and Zambia.

Sub-Saharan Africa is among the last of the major world regions to experience widespread democratisation. Many countries only underwent free and fair elections in the 1990s, following a post-independence trajectory which saw so-called “big men” dominate politics in single-party, clientelistic regimes.<sup>25</sup>

Africa’s various transitions to democracy have been accompanied by a sense of public enthusiasm that is evident from the first round of surveys conducted by Afrobarometer in the late 1990s. In every country first surveyed at that time – South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Mali, and Ghana – a majority of the public expressed a positive view of the performance of democracy in their country. Such enthusiasm is unsurprising: given the deeply corrupt, personalistic, and brutal systems of rule which prevailed across Sub-Saharan Africa prior to democratisation.

However, as the dream of democracy has

become a reality, it has been superseded by the need to address pressing social challenges. Crime, urban poverty, and the persistence of corruption have eroded democratic legitimacy, and now half of individuals in the region express dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in their countries.

For the moment, however, democratic institutions across the region remain robust. Only in Mali has there been a major reversal, following a military coup in March 2012, with more limited signs of erosion in countries such as Tanzania and Senegal, where ruling administrations have intervened to limit political opposition. Meanwhile, the public’s sense of discontent appears to have stabilised around the global average, with no further growth in dissatisfaction over the last decade. With new governments promising reform in South Africa and Nigeria, and tentative signs of opening in Angola, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe, Sub-Saharan African democracies may yet rise to the challenge.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Bratton & Nicolas van de Walle (2011) “Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa”, *World Politics*.

## Country in Focus

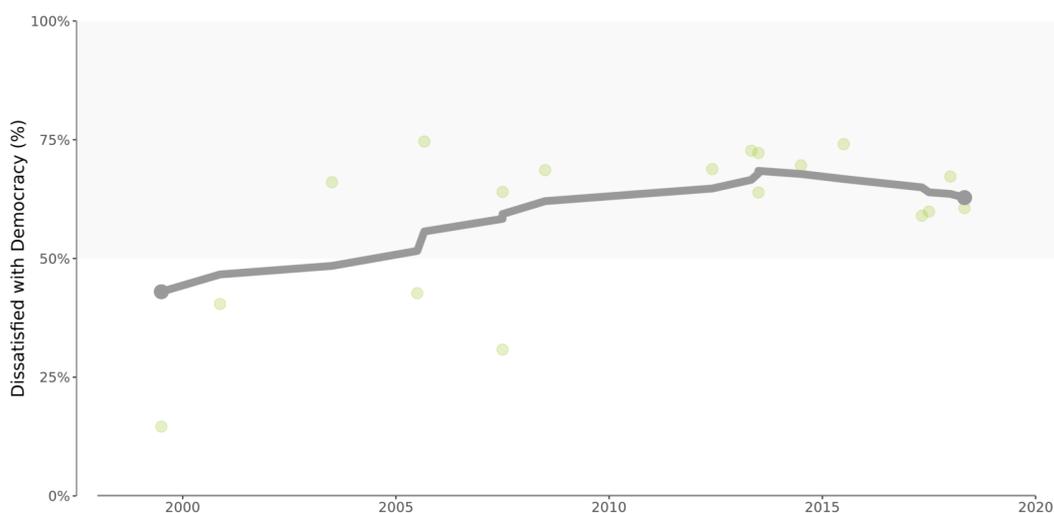
### Nigeria

Accounting for a fifth of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria is a bellwether for the region’s economic, political, and social future. During the 1960s, as Africa fell under military dictatorships, so did Nigeria; as Africa experienced brutal civil conflict, the country did likewise. Split equally between Christian and Muslims, Nigeria embodies Africa’s sectarian faultline. Since the 1990s, the country has also exemplified the challenging and incomplete nature of African democratisation.

Nigeria’s most recent pathway to democracy began in 1998, as the military dictatorship of Sani Abacha gave way to free and fair elections under the country’s fourth republic. In 1999, free elections were held for the national assembly and president, resulting in the victory of general Olusegun Obasanjo. This also marked a high point for civic optimism – the one and only time when an unambiguous majority of Nigerians felt positively regarding the state of democracy in their country.

Since then, however, Nigeria has had to struggle with the realities of governing a large, poor-albeit-resource-rich, and divided country. Following the transition from military rule, freedom of the press and human rights have markedly improved, and decentralisation has led to greater power for the country’s state governors. Yet communal violence has erupted recurrently, corruption has remained persistent, and urban poverty remains widespread, as the country struggles to provide services to its growing city slums. Elections have also been marred by fraud, and since the late 2000s, a clear majority in Nigeria have expressed their discontent with the functioning in democracy in their country.

With a rapidly growing population of over 200 million, Nigeria is not only the world’s fifth-largest democracy, but will potentially be the second -or third- largest within the next generation. Its future represents not only the future of Africa – but that of the world as a whole.



**Figure 31:** *Dissatisfaction with democracy in Nigeria from the late 1990s to the present day.*

## Country in Focus

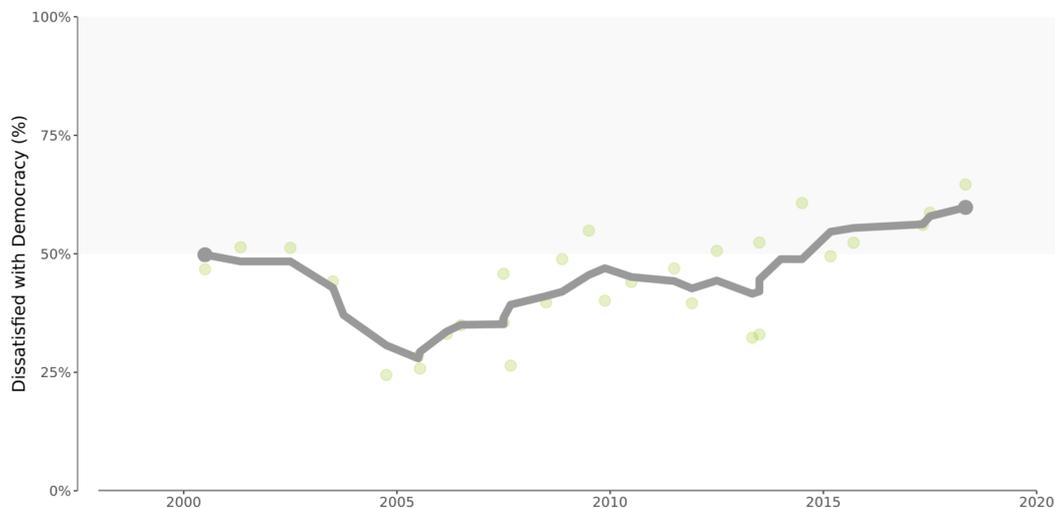
*South Africa*

Of all the democratic transitions that occurred from the 1970s to 1990s as part of the “Third Wave”, few raised as much hope or excitement as the fall of apartheid in South Africa and its succession by a multiracial, pluralist democracy.

Barring the period following Nelson Mandela’s election in 1994, for which no data is available, optimism regarding the health of democracy in South Africa subsequently peaked in the mid-2000s, towards the end of Thabo Mbeki’s presidency. At that time the South African economy was growing at an average rate of 4.5% per year, while quota policies helped to form a black middle class. Similar to the situation in Brazil under President Lula da Silva, there was a sense that South Africa had managed to square the circle – combining a free market, globally-integrated economy with social welfare and redistribution of income. Nor did the analogy end there, as in 2010 – four years prior to Brazil – South Africa hosted the FIFA World Cup, showcasing its economic growth and social transformation to the world at large.

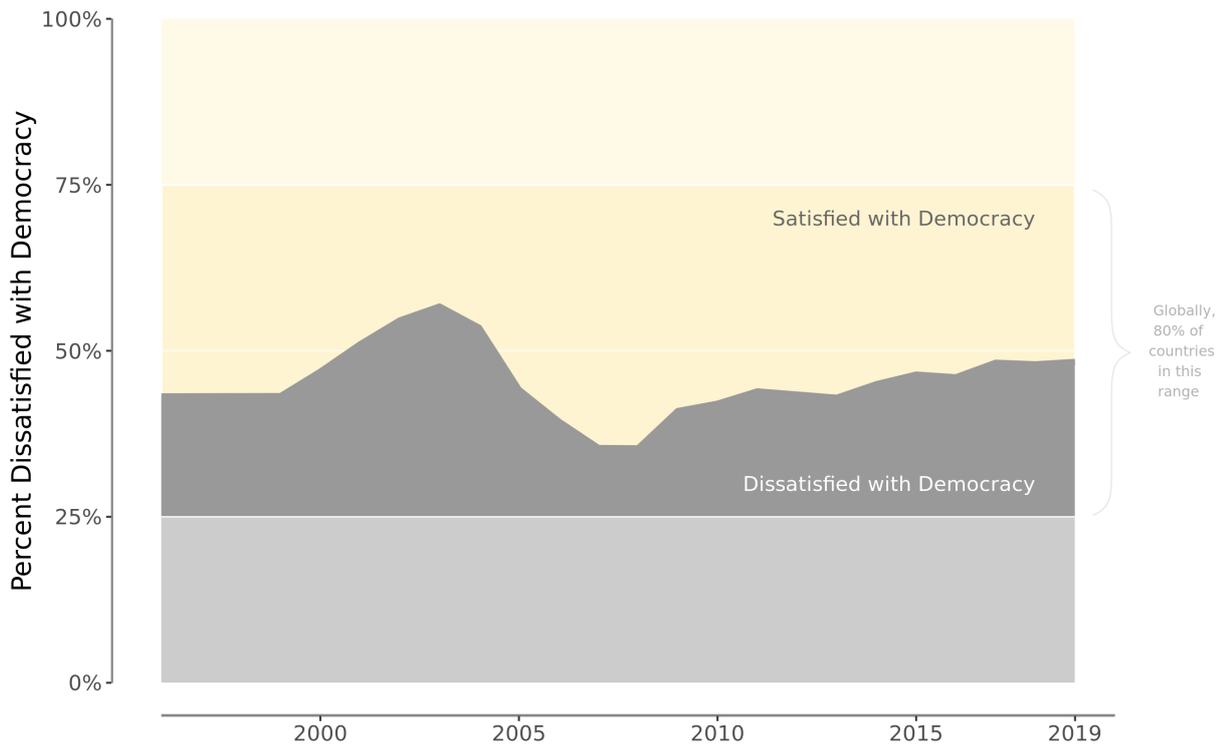
In the last decade, however, such optimism has faded as South Africa has had to reckon with problems of economic mismanagement, crime, and clientelism. Already under Mbeki, electricity rationing and widespread blackouts in 2008 revealed a deeper legacy of underinvestment and energy overallocation for political ends. The next year Jacob Zuma, who had previously been charged for corruption, won the presidency as candidate for the African National Congress. Under his administration from 2009 to 2018 a majority of South Africans turned negative in their evaluation of their democracy for the first time.

The Zuma years have been characterised by economic stagnation, with per capita income declining for six successive years and unemployment levels rising. Yet behind this lies a more fundamental political decay – misuse of resources, indebtedness in state-owned entities, rising public debt, and outflows of foreign capital – which Zuma’s successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, has vowed to reverse.



**Figure 32:** Dissatisfaction with democracy in South Africa from the late 1990s to the present day.

## Northeast Asia – Stability Amidst Change



**Figure 33:** Satisfaction with Democracy in Northeast Asia: average for Japan, South Korea, and the Republic of China (Taiwan).

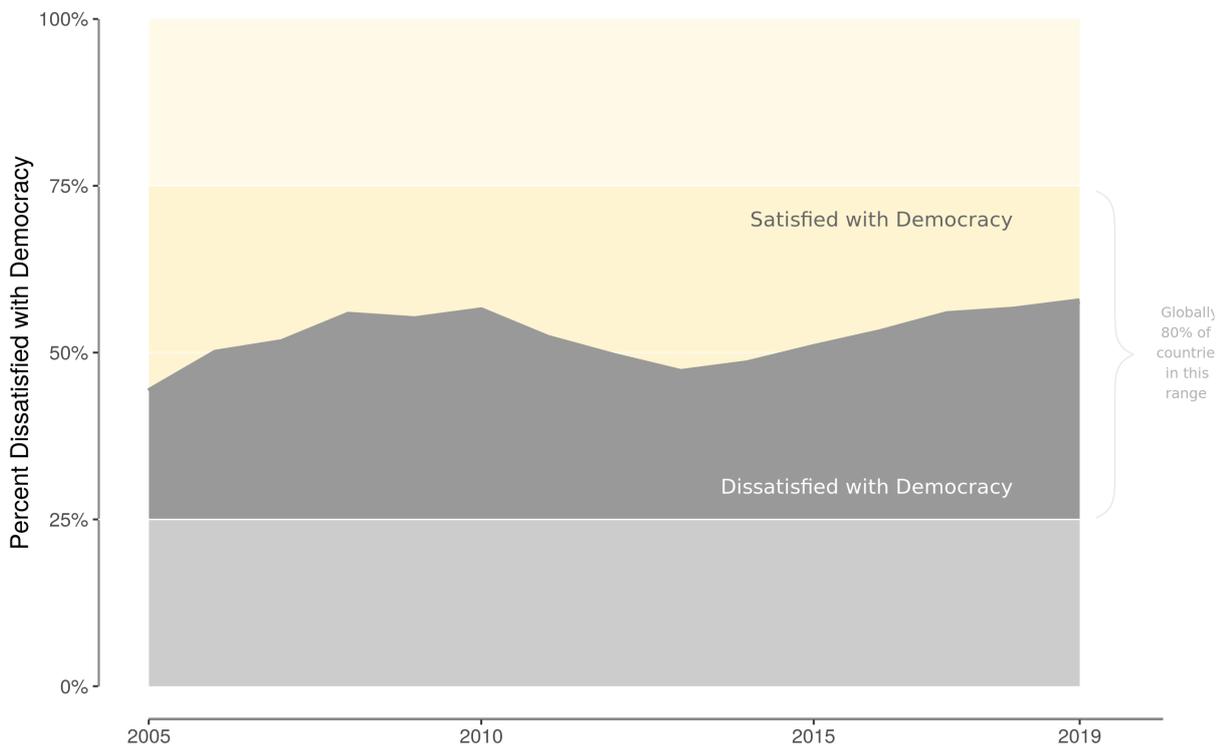
The Northeast Asia region comprises those countries forming the boundaries of the East China Sea – Korea, Japan, and China, including the Republic of China (Taiwan). Though Japan has practised free and fair elections since 1946, South Korea's democratic trajectory was interrupted by a period of military rule from 1971 to 1987, while Taiwan was under single-party rule by the Kuomintang until the 1980s.

Throughout most of the last twenty-five years, a majority of citizens in Northeast Asia have expressed satisfaction with the way democracy works in their country, yet there have been fluctuations over time. Following the East Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, dissatisfaction with democracy spiked, concurrent with a period of political turmoil, with the dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan forming a series of weak and unstable coalitions, and Taiwan electing its first non-Kuomintang government. Together with political upset came both polarisation

and political scandal, including corruption allegations against the new presidents of Taiwan and South Korea – both of whom were eventually prosecuted (though the latter committed suicide before charges could be brought).

However dissatisfaction has begun to rise again in the past decade, principally in Japan, which following a period of relative contentment under the administration of Junichiro Koizumi is now at an all-time high, with 55% of the public dissatisfied with democracy's performance. This has come in the wake of corruption scandals, dissatisfaction over the government's handling of nuclear and flooding disasters, and polarisation over constitutional reform. It has also come amidst a backdrop of steady economic and demographic decline – a factor which augurs ill for neighbouring democracies in South Korea and Taiwan, which in the coming decades must increasingly grapple with the same dilemmas.

## The Broader Middle East – Hope and Disappointment



**Figure 34:** Satisfaction with democracy among countries surveyed in the broader Middle East region. Includes Lebanon, Turkey, Israel, and Tunisia.

The Middle East has been one of the regions most resistant to democratisation, and genuinely competitive multiparty elections occur in only a handful of countries. Two of the countries with the longest tradition of political pluralism are both non-Arab societies – Turkey and Israel – with a historical foothold in Europe, while in Lebanon, the one country in the Arab world with a history of political pluralism, elections since independence have been marred by recurrent violence and civil strife.

Though there is little data from the non-democratic Arab Middle East prior to 2010, the data from the region that is available – shown in Figure 34 above – suggests rising discontent in the five years building up to

the Arab Spring, during which regimes from Tunisia and Libya to Egypt and Syria were challenged by mass protest movements.

The years following the Arab Spring were concurrent with a wave of enthusiasm across the region that is also evident in comparative survey data. Yet this brief window of optimism has now passed, and now exhaustion and cynicism are prevalent. When prompted, half of all Arabs agree with the sentiment that people in their country are “not yet ready for democracy”, with clear majorities endorsing this view in Tunisia and Palestine: the two predominantly Arab Muslim societies with the most experience of the democratic process.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Natalya Rahman (2018), “Democracy in the Middle East and North Africa: Five Years after the Arab Uprisings”, *Arab Barometer*, Wave IV Topic Report.

## Country in Focus

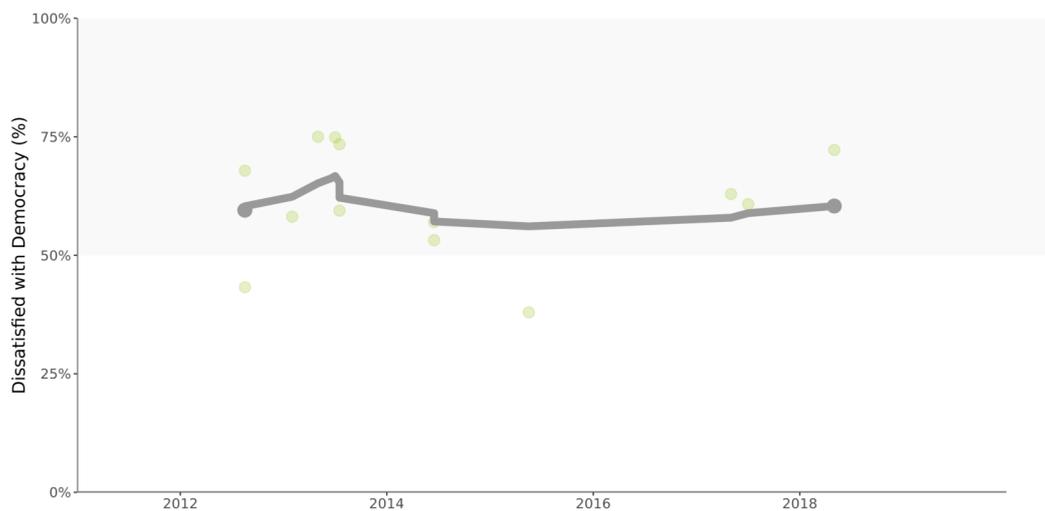
### Tunisia

Of all the countries that made up the “Arab Spring” of 2010, only Tunisia experienced a transition to free and fair elections. In Egypt, elections were held but succeeded by a military coup. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen, peaceful protest was followed by descent into brutal civil war. In Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, entrenched monarchies were able to co-opt and defuse dissent. This makes the fate of democracy in Tunisia symbolic for the region, if not for all states undergoing democratisation in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Almost a decade after Tunisian fruit-seller Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire and with him the entire Arab Middle East, Tunisia alone remains a multiparty democracy, with its most recent elections in September 2019 seeing Kais Saied win the presidency on a platform of anti-corruption and political reform. Yet Tunisian democ-

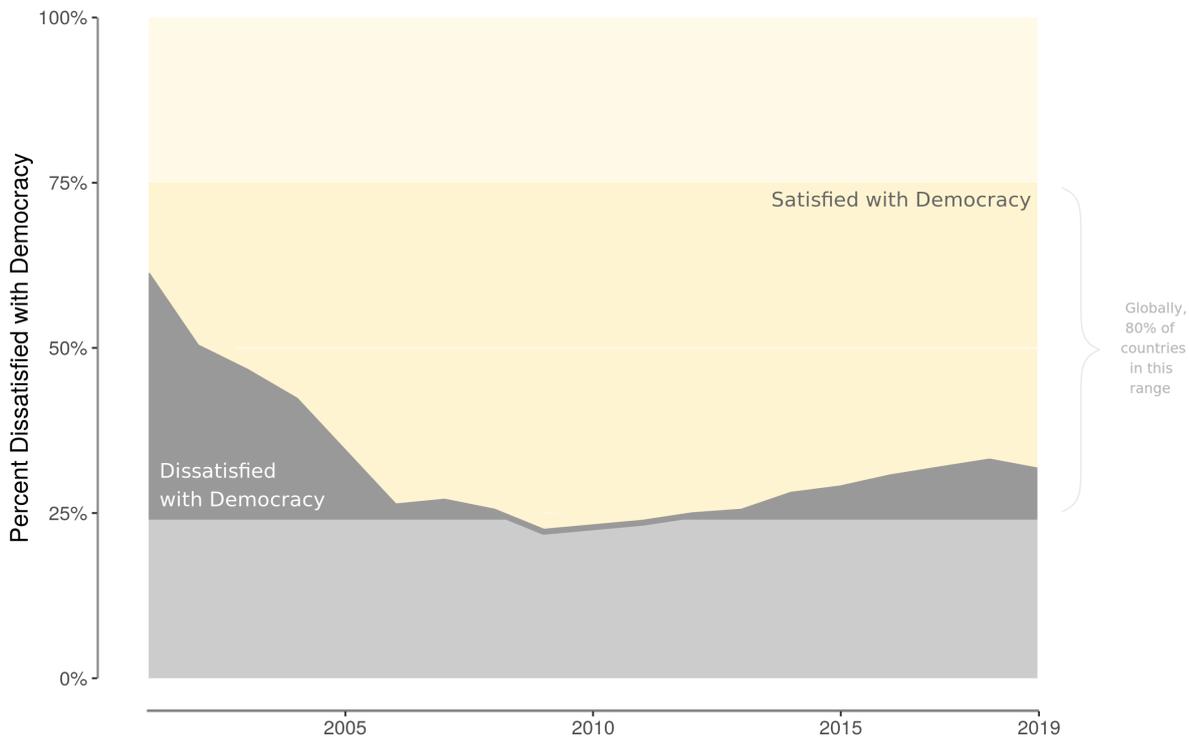
racy is by no means consolidated. Corruption is widespread, economic growth has been stagnant, and a state of emergency has been in place since terror attacks in 2015. In an Arab Barometer survey from 2016, over half of Tunisians responded that democracy is “ineffective in maintaining order”. Three-quarters of the public also stated that people in their country were “not yet ready for democracy,” and a third of the population now consider emigrating, including a majority of youth.

Trends in satisfaction with democracy are consistent with this sentiment: across 14 surveys conducted in the past seven years, a clear majority of the public has expressed dissatisfaction with the way democracy is developing in Tunisia on all but two occasions, with that figure reaching 72% in the most recent 2018 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center.



**Figure 35:** Dissatisfaction with democracy in Tunisia from 2013 to the present day. Following the transition to democracy, discontent in Tunisia began to moderate. In one poll in 2015, a majority reported satisfaction with the condition of democracy in the country.

## Southeast Asia – For Today, A Continued Faith in Tomorrow



**Figure 36:** Satisfaction with Democracy in Southeast Asia: average for Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Malaysia.

The Southeast Asia region is home to 650 million people, making it comparable in population to Europe, Latin America, or Sub-Saharan Africa. It also contains some of the most extreme diversity in political institutions to be found anywhere on earth: ranging from newly emerging democracies in Indonesia and the Philippines, episodic military rule in Thailand, a communist regime in Vietnam, and Singapore’s one-party-dominant technocracy.

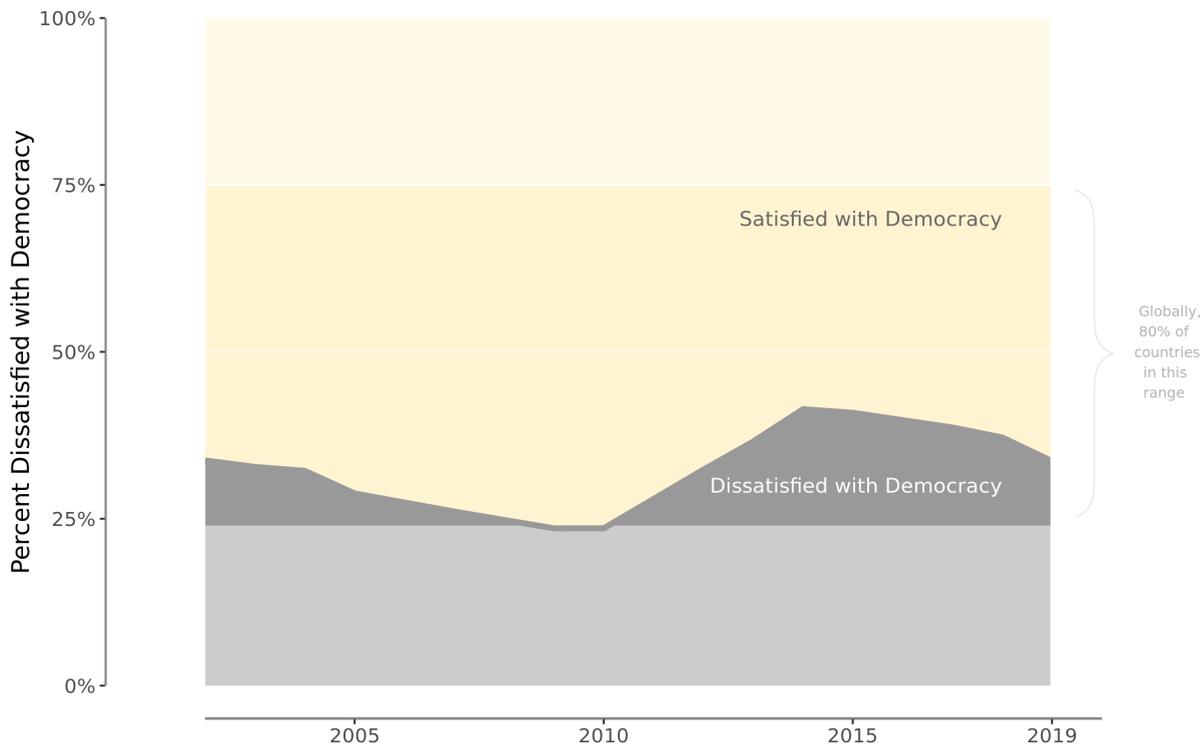
If we consider only the emerging democracies from this cluster – Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and, until recently, Cambodia – we find a surprising degree of contentment and optimism with the condition and performance of the region’s democratic institutions. Surprising, perhaps, because of the manifest challenges: In Indonesia, which transitioned to democracy following Suharto’s resignation in 1998, political liberalisation has been jolted by ethnic and sectar-

ian conflict, rampant low-level clientelism, and more recent concerns over freedom of expression, yet the broader social background is one in which the country has recovered firmly from the East Asian financial crisis and experienced two strong decades of economic growth – raising living standards for rich and poor alike. A similar picture prevails in the Philippines, where in spite of persistent corruption and a ruthless drug war led by President Rodrigo Duterte claiming thousands of innocent lives, steady economic growth is transforming the lives of the next generation.

As a result, there is optimism in Southeast Asia regarding the performance of elected governments. In no other region of the world is contentment with the functioning of the political system presently as high, with more than two-thirds of survey respondents in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia expressing their satisfaction with the current state of democracy in their countries.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See Yun-han Chu, Michael Bratton, Mark Tessler, Marta Lagos and Sandeep Shastri (2008) “Public Opinion and Democratic Legitimacy”, *Journal of Democracy*; and Richard Nadeau, Vincent Arel-Bundock and Jean-François Daoust (2019) “Satisfaction with Democracy and the American Dream”, *The Journal of Politics*, 81(3).

## South Asia – Democracy Continuing to Survive Against the Odds



**Figure 37:** Satisfaction with Democracy in South Asia: average for India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

South Asia’s experience of democratisation differs from other former colonies in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as under the pressure of the Indian National Congress, elections were organised during the final decades of British colonial rule. Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India therefore each have a long experience with electoral institutions, which in the latter case has been unbroken barring two years of emergency rule in the 1970s.

Satisfaction with democracy is also comparatively high across the region today, not only in India but also in neighbouring countries, where consistent majorities have expressed satisfaction in all but two surveys (Bangladesh in 2013, amidst widespread unrest, and Pakistan in 2001, preceding the Musharraf coup). The one exception to this picture of contentment is Nepal, where in each of three surveys since 2005, between half and three-quarters of respondents express dissatisfaction with how their democracy is performing.

As for India, scholars have long asked why the country’s experience of democracy has been so stable relative to that of other former colonies. These explanations range from a deferential political culture rooted in the caste system,<sup>28</sup> colonial-era socialisation of democratic norms,<sup>29</sup> and the dominance of the Congress Party – a dominance, however, that has recently come to an end.<sup>30</sup>

However, though majorities in India have consistently expressed satisfaction with the country’s institutions, the data is sparse and there have been fluctuations over time. On two occasions – in 2013, a year before the landslide election of the BJP under Narendra Modi, and several years later, following a botched currency reform – dissatisfaction spiked at close to half of all respondents. Nor do we yet have data on public opinion during the current period of protests and instability, which may prove to be a fresh dip of confidence in India’s democratic process.

<sup>28</sup> Barrington Moore (1966) *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Wilkinson & Massimiliano Onorato (2010) “Colonial Democratic Legacies”, *APSA Annual Conference*.

<sup>30</sup> Ashutosh Varshney (1998), “Why Democracy Survives”, *Journal of Democracy*.

## 7. Conclusion: Why Are Citizens Unhappy with Democracy?

The results of our analysis suggest that dissatisfaction with democracy among the citizens of developed countries has increased from a third to half of all individuals, while in transitional democracies in Africa and Latin America, a growing majority is also discontent with their system of governance. What can explain this trend?

One factor, undoubtedly, is the point from which we have fallen. During the 1990s, western liberal democracy had emerged from the Cold War with its legitimacy renewed, while across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia, it was believed that the adoption of multiparty competitive elections would not only bring out greater civic participation and influence, but also help solve diverse problems of corruption, state fragility, and the absence of infrastructure or welfare provision.

Today, a quarter of a century later, both western legitimacy and the merit of democracy as a development panacea have come under strain. In the established democracies of the western world, the financial and eurozone crises, foreign policy failures, and the rise of populism have eroded the perception that democratic institutions produce governance that is balanced, far-sighted and effective. Meanwhile, in new democracies in Latin America, Africa and Asia, elected governments have struggled to overcome endemic problems of corruption, criminality, and state fragility, disappointing the early hopes of the transition years. If anything, the rise of populism may be less a cause, than a symptom of this weakening legitimacy: without it, it would have been unthinkable for a U.S. presidential candidate to denounce American democracy as rigged and corrupt, or for the winning presidential candidate in Latin America's largest democracy to openly entertain nostalgia for military rule.

At the same time, there are positive stories amongst our findings which must not be lost. Countries such as Switzerland, Denmark, Norway and Luxembourg are at all-time highs for contentment with their democracies, and may have lessons to offer regarding the role of electoral systems in enhanc-

ing democratic responsiveness and representativeness. In addition the global scope of our analysis has revealed significant regional differences, with civic contentment much higher in Asia than in the established democracies of the West. Part of the democratic malaise, perhaps, may simply be a western malaise.

Finally, might it be that rising levels of dissatisfaction reflect higher civic standards, as better educated and informed citizens "raise the bar" on their expectations regarding the probity and integrity of public officials? It is possible, though also, unlikely: were it true, we would expect high quality of government and critical citizenship to go hand in hand, when in reality the most politically satisfied societies are those in which institutions are transparent, responsive, and free of corruption, while societies where satisfaction with democracy is at its lowest are uniformly characterised by political instability and conflict.

That means that if satisfaction with democracy is now falling across many of the world's largest mature and emerging democracies – including the United States, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and South Africa – it is not because citizens' expectations are excessive or unrealistic, but because democratic institutions are falling short of the outcomes that matter most for their legitimacy, including probity in office, upholding the rule of law, responsiveness to public concerns, ensuring economic and financial security, and raising living standards for the larger majority of society. Our analysis suggests that citizens are rational in their view of political institutions, updating their assessment in response to what they observe. If confidence in democracy has been slipping, then the most likely explanation is that democratically elected governments have not been seen to succeed in addressing some of the major challenges of our era, including economic coordination in the eurozone, the management of refugee flows, and providing a credible response to the threat of global climate change. The best means of restoring democratic legitimacy would be for this to change.

## **Methodological Annex**

## Methodology I: Data Sources

### Survey Sources

Public opinion on satisfaction with democracy is drawn from twenty-five different nationally representative survey sources, most of which was formatted and merged by the HUMAN Surveys project. We supplemented this with aggregated measures of satisfaction with democracy from the most recent years of Pew Research's Global Attitudes and Trends series, since the respondent survey data was not available to the public at the time of publication. We additionally included survey data from YouGov for recent years to get to most up-to-date picture of global satisfaction with democracy.

The report draws upon the aggregated responses of almost four million survey respondents from over 150 countries between 1969 and 2019. The merged data represents over 3500 country-survey observations. Many countries were surveyed multiple times a year by different survey sources, providing greater reliability from repeated measurements. Data comes from the rounds, waves, years, or modules containing selected satisfaction with democracy variables that were listed in Table 1 at the start of this report.

### Survey Items

The following questions and answers are used on different surveys to measure satisfaction with democracy. There may be minor differences from the version asked on surveys, such as the layout of the questions and direction or order of the answers. HUMAN Surveys reordered answer values for consistency to facilitate harmonization of target variables. The formatted versions are displayed here, but all original responses were maintained. All non-valid and unusable answers were recoded into four standard missing values wherever possible (do not know, refused, not applicable, and missing), but these were all treated as missing data when aggregating national scores for analysis.

#### **AmericasBarometer, IntUne - Integrated and United:**

*"In general, would you say you are very satisfied, satisfied, unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with the way*

*democracy works in [Country]? 0 = very dissatisfied, 1 = dissatisfied, 2 = satisfied, 3 = very satisfied"*

**Asian Barometer Survey, European Values Study, Latinobarómetro, World Values Survey, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Australian Election Study, Eurobarometer: Central and Eastern, Eurobarometer: Applicant and Candidate Countries, Eurobarometer: Standard and Special, Global Attitudes and Trends, American National Election Studies, EU Neighbourhood Barometer:**

*"On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in [Country]. Are you ...? 0 = not at all satisfied, 1 = not very satisfied, 2 = fairly satisfied, 3 = very satisfied"*

**Voice of the People Series, New Europe Barometer:**

*"Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement. Is that strongly or slightly? In general, I am satisfied with democracy. 0 = disagree strongly, 1 = disagree slightly, 2 = agree slightly, 3 = agree strongly"*

**American National Election Studies:**

*"On the whole, are you satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [Country]? 0 = not at all satisfied, 1 = not very satisfied, 2 = fairly satisfied, 3 = satisfied"*

**Arab Transformations Project:**

*"How satisfied are you with the following: The way democracy is developing in our country? 0 = definitely dissatisfied, 1 = rather dissatisfied, 2 = quite satisfied, 3 = definitely satisfied"*

**Afrobarometer:**

*"Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [Country]? 0 = [Country] is not a democracy, 1 = not at all satisfied, 2 = not very satisfied, 3 = fairly satisfied, 4 = very satisfied"*

**Asia Barometer:**

*“Please tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with the following aspects of your life. The democratic system. 0 = very dissatisfied, 1 = somewhat dissatisfied, 2 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 3 = somewhat satisfied, 4 = very satisfied”*

**Afrobarometer:**

*“Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [Country]? 0 = [Country] is not a democracy, 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat satisfied, 5 = very satisfied”*

**Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe:**

*“Are you completely satisfied or completely dissatisfied with the way in which democracy is working in [Country] today? 0 = completely dissatisfied, 9 = completely satisfied”*

**Eurobarometer: Standard and Special:**

*“On the whole, to what extent would you say you are satisfied with the way democracy works in [Country]? 0 = completely dissatisfied, 9 = completely satisfied”*

**European Social Survey:**

*“And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [Country]? 0 = extremely dissatisfied, 10 = extremely satisfied”*

**International Social Survey Programme, Australian Survey of Social Attitudes:**

*“On the whole, on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is very poorly and 10 is very well: How well does democracy work in [Country] today? 0 = very poorly, 10 = very well”*

**Eurobarometer: Standard and Special:**

*“Now I would like you to indicate on this scale to what extent you are satisfied with your present situation in the following respects: The way democracy is functioning in [Country]? 0 = completely dissatisfied, 10 = completely satisfied”*

**World Values Survey Wave 7, European Values Study:**

*“On a scale from 1 to 10 where “1” is “not satisfied at all” and “10” is “completely satisfied”, how satisfied are you with how the political system is functioning in your country these days? 1 = not at all satisfied, 10 = completely satisfied” (note: question follows two previous items on democracy: the importance of living in a democracy, and how democratically the respondent feels the country is being governed)*

## Methodology II: Aggregation Methodology

Before aggregating data from individual survey sources, we first recode responses to satisfaction with democracy questions in to a binary classification: as either “satisfied” or “dissatisfied.” This allows us to state the percentage of respondents in a given country in a given month who are satisfied with the performance of democracy in their country.

The overwhelming majority of observations in our dataset derive from survey indicators based upon a symmetrical 4-point scale, asking respondents directly about their degree of satisfaction with democracy in their country. As such, these pose few dilemmas regarding possible differences in meaning (absence of semantic equivalence). For other indicators we had to first test for semantic equivalence, which is dealt with in the next section.

After reducing indicators to a binary (satisfied/dissatisfied) classification, we then took the mean average for each polling observation: the percentage who are satisfied (or dissatisfied) with the condition of democracy in their country, at that exact point in time.

The data presented in the individual country charts in this report shows the outcomes for each poll within that country, at the point (month and year) in which the survey was conducted.

For regional charts, population-weighting by country was used to generate a weighted average “as if” we had conducted a stratified random survey sample in that region, sampling based on the population of each constituent country unit.

In addition, for regional charts we also ensured a constant country sample in each year (or quarter, for quarterly annual charts) by “rolling forward” country observations in periods in which there was no new survey, thus using the “most recent” information for each country before aggregation. For the 1995 series used in Figures 3 and 5, some countries entered the time series shortly after 1995 but not in 1995 itself: these cases data were “rolled back” to 1995 to ensure constant country representation, in this case with the most recent observation being in the future rather than in the past.

## Methodology III: Testing Semantic Equivalence for Non-Standard Satisfaction Items

The vast majority of polling observations in our dataset derive from 4-point scale questions regarding satisfaction with democracy, whereby two points indicate some degree of satisfaction (e.g. “fairly satisfied” and “very satisfied”) and two points indicate some degree of dissatisfaction (e.g. “not very satisfied” and “not satisfied at all”). Because they are ordered scales with four items around a midpoint – using the same substantive question keywords (democracy and satisfaction) – few concerns arise regarding the semantic equivalence of the resultant averages.

However, the same cannot be said for a range of additional satisfaction with democracy survey items that depart from a 4-step scale, for example using a 3-step scale with a single middle category, or asking respondents to rate their degree of satisfaction on a 10-point scale. Which of these can be recoded to a “semantically equivalent” satisfied vs. dissatisfied dichotomy – and if so, how should the items be recoded such that they appropriately match the result that a 4-step scale would have attained?

Fortunately, because so many surveys are conducted at the same time as other surveys within each country, we have a simple means of checking for semantic equivalence: to examine the common sample of country-year observations for each indicator, and see which survey recodings, if any, correlate sufficiently with our baseline 4-item response scale results.

### The Results

We present in this section the results of the semantic equivalence tests for the items that were ultimately included in our final dataset. They include scatter plots of country-year observations using only the 4-point scales against country-year results of a range of recoding possibilities for our non-standard items, together with a 45-degree line – representing what we should expect to see if there is perfect equivalence. A weighted regression line of fit through the actual shared observations is also shown for comparison.

While we were able to find semantic equivalents for the large majority of survey items, several measures failed our tests and were eventually excluded from the dataset.

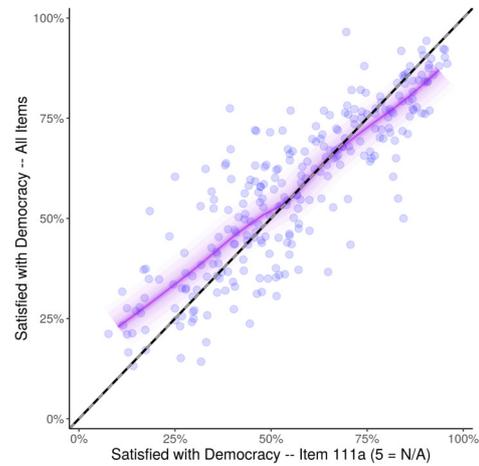
1. **All 3-item survey questions were excluded from the dataset.** In these cases, no possible recoding produced an unbiased range of values equivalent to those of the 4-item scale. This is most likely because the language of the middle value was not neutral, but leaned towards or away from satisfaction (e.g. “somewhat satisfied”).
2. **Several items with insufficiently equivalent question wording were excluded.** For example, items on satisfaction with government, which did not specifically mention democracy, failed tests of semantic equivalence, as did a survey question on “pride” in one’s democracy.

## The 11-Point Satisfaction With Democracy Scale (A)

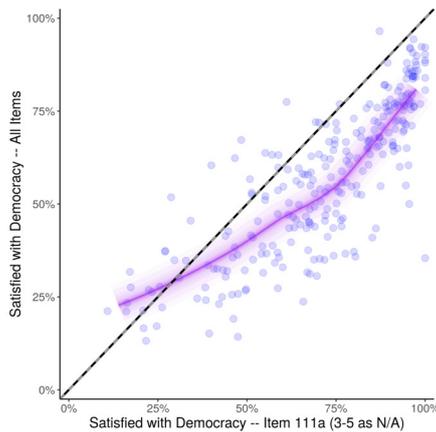
“And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [Country]? 0 = extremely dissatisfied, 10 = extremely satisfied”

This is the 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale is used in the European Social Survey (ESS) dataset. Instead of respondents being asked whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in their country, they were asked to rate their satisfaction on an 11-point scale from 0 to 10 inclusive.

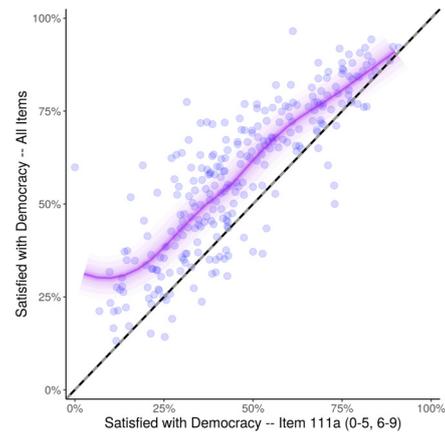
To find a semantically equivalent recoding, we test five alternative recodings of the satisfaction scale, starting with the intuitive split of 5 and below as dissatisfied, and 6 and above as satisfied. This is found to be negatively biased; yet recoding 5 as a midpoint (N/A) value produces a close approximation.



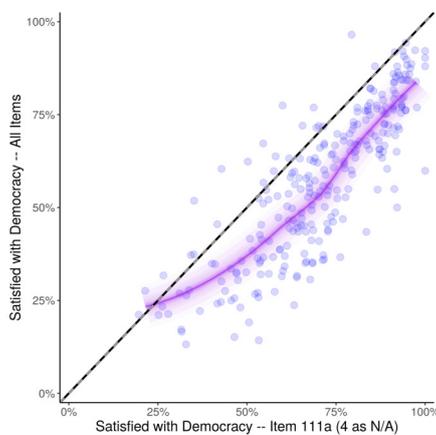
(1) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 5 as N/A midpoint (0-4 dissatisfied, 6-10 satisfied).



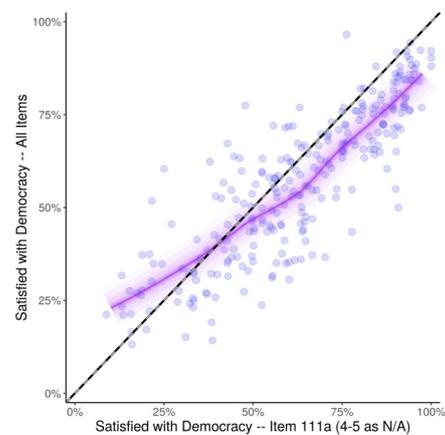
(2) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 3-5 as N/A midpoints (0-2 dissatisfied, 6-10 satisfied).



(3) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with no midpoint: i.e. 0-5 as dissatisfied, 6-10, satisfied.



(4) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 4 as midpoint (0-3 as dissatisfied, 5-10 satisfied).

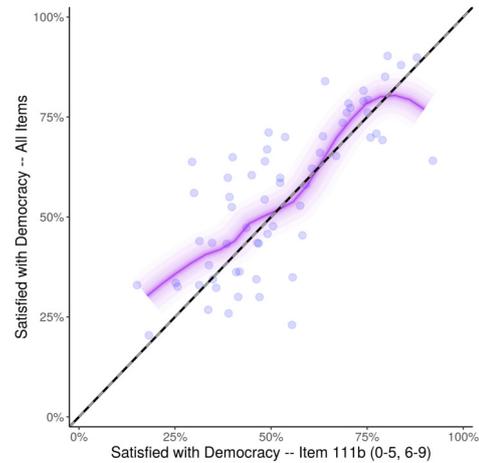


(5) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 4-5 as midpoints (0-3 as dissatisfied, 6-10, satisfied).

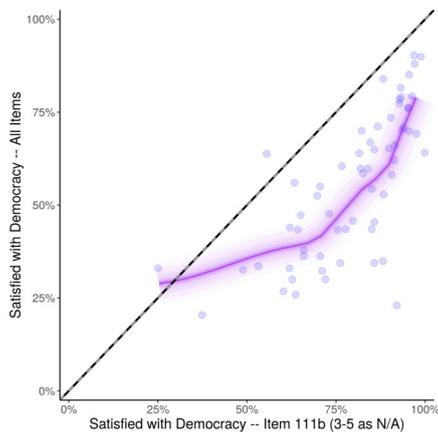
## The 11-point Satisfaction with Democracy Scale (B)

“On the whole, on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is very poorly and 10 is very well: How well does democracy work in [this country] today? 0 = very poorly, 10 = very well”

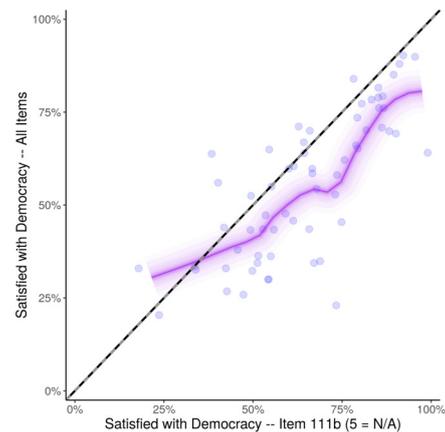
The 11-point scale used by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) asks respondents about how well democracy is performing. We find that the shift in question formulation – from one’s own personal feeling of satisfaction to an objective assessment of democratic performance – makes respondents more positive, on average: recoding the mid-point (5) to N/A in this instance biases results upwards. The equivalent recoding for this item is to exclude the midpoint, and re-code 0-5 as dissatisfied, and 6-10 as satisfied.



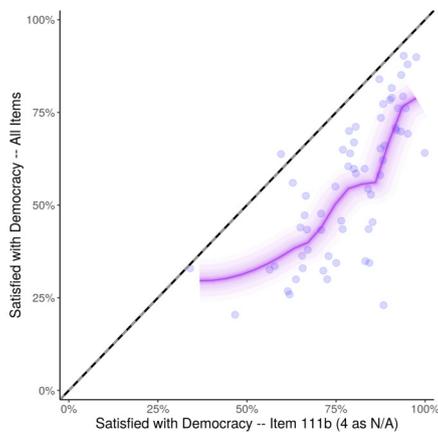
(1) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with no midpoint: i.e. 0-5 as dissatisfied, 6-10, satisfied.



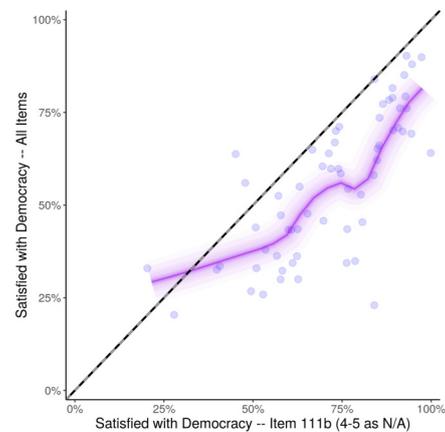
(2) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 3-5 as N/A midpoints (0-2 dissatisfied, 6-10 satisfied).



(3) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 5 as N/A midpoint (0-4 dissatisfied, 6-10 satisfied).



(4) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 4 as midpoint (0-3 as dissatisfied, 5-10 satisfied).

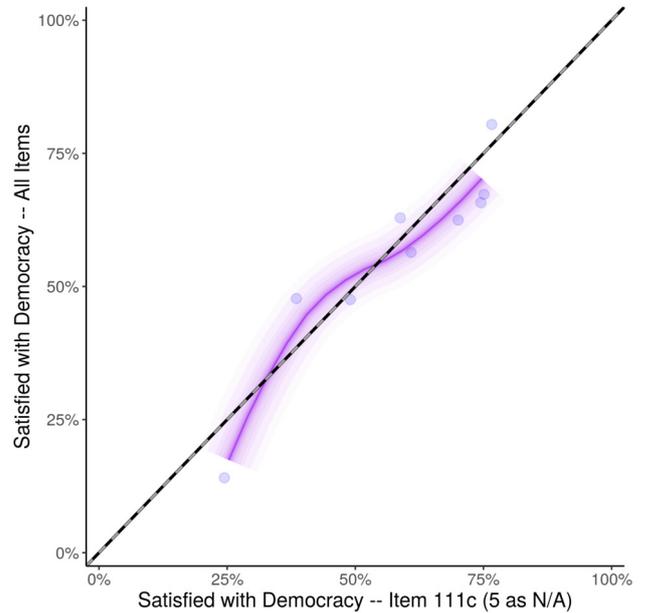


(5) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 4-5 as midpoints (0-3 as dissatisfied, 6-10, satisfied).

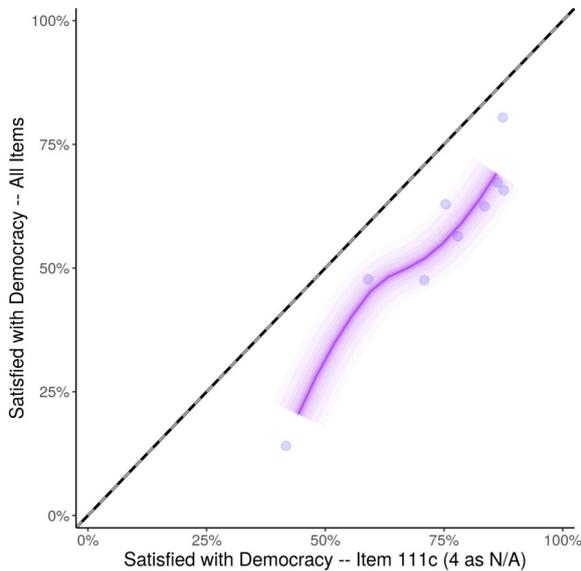
## The 11-point Satisfaction with Democracy Scale (C)

“Now I would like you to indicate on this scale to what extent you are satisfied with your present situation in the following respects: The way democracy is functioning in [Country]? 0 = completely dissatisfied, 10 = completely satisfied”

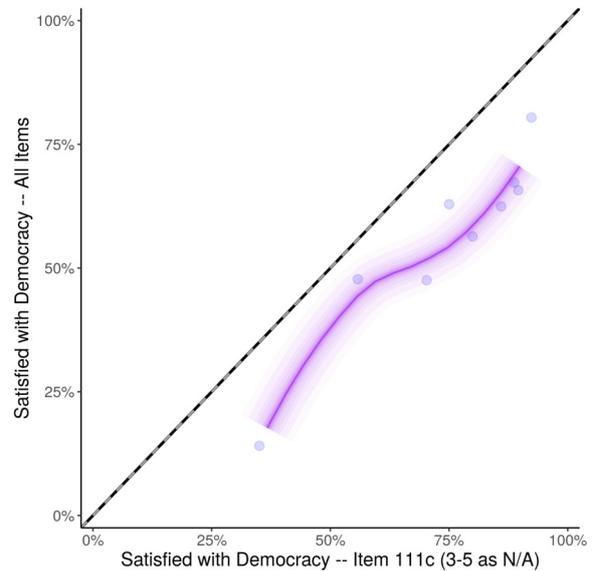
This 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale was featured in the early Eurobarometer surveys of the 1970s, for a limited number of countries in Western Europe. In common with the later 11-point scale used by the European Social Survey (ESS) – with which it shares a common phraseology – we find that a recoding of the middle value (5) to N/A is the most equivalent in its results to the 4-point scale used in later surveys. This implies, again, that respondents use the 5 value as a neutral or non-response, and express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy at values above or below this point, respectively.



(1) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point (0-10) satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 0-4 as dissatisfied and 6-10 satisfied.



(2) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point (0-10) satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 0-3 as dissatisfied and 5-10 satisfied.



(3) Semantic equivalence test for 11-point (0-10) satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 0-2 as dissatisfied and 6-10 satisfied.

## 5-Point and 6-Point Satisfaction With Democracy Scales

### 5-point scale

“Please tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with [...] The democratic system. 0 = very dissatisfied, 1 = somewhat dissatisfied, 2 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 3 = somewhat satisfied, 4 = very satisfied”

### 6-point scale

“Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [this country]? 0 = [Country] is not a democracy, 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat satisfied, 5 = very satisfied”

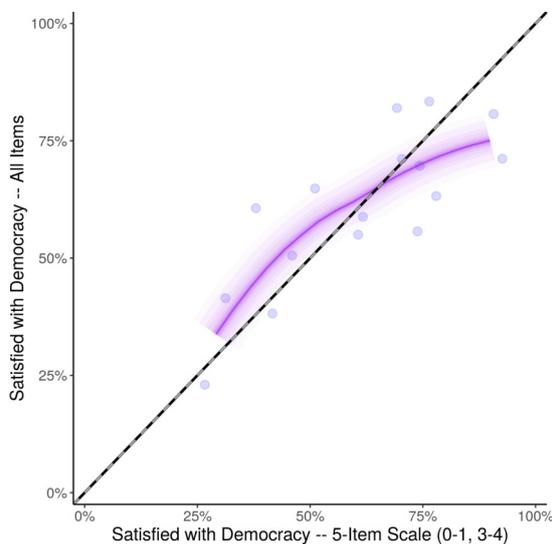
Whereas the conventional 4-point satisfaction with democracy scale (used since the 1970s by Eurobarometer) offers a clean recoding into “satisfied” and “dissatisfied” respondents, the 5-point satisfaction with democracy scale, used only by Asia Barometer from 2003-7, leaves a dilemma of how to code the middle value. A neutral response to a satisfaction prompt could be coded as not being satisfied, or could be coded as equivalent to N/A (undecided).

To find a semantically equivalent recoding, we test both of these. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the recoding of the middle value to not satisfied introduces a negative bias. However, recoding the midpoint to N/A produces a close approximation

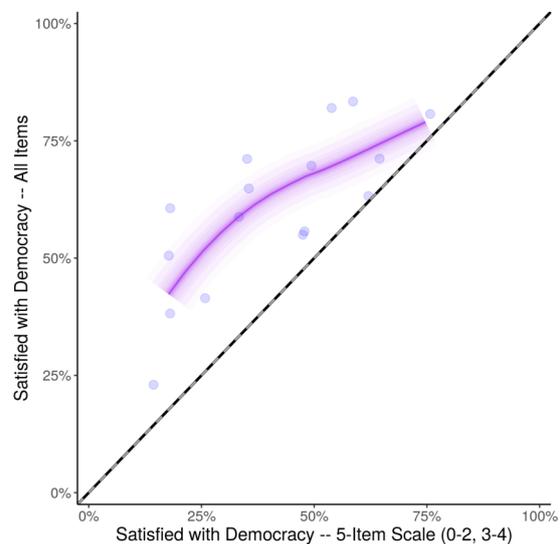
to a satisfied/dissatisfied recoding of the 4-item scale.

A further variant is a 6-point satisfaction with democracy scale that also offers an additional “negative” response: to say that the country is “not a democracy”. Such an item was fielded only by Afrobarometer during their first wave. This introduces a semantic dilemma, as it could either be treated as the most negative possible response on an ordinal scale, or as equivalent to a non-response – a refusal to answer the question.

In practice, however, only a very small number (< 2%) of interviewees offer this response when asked, such that it is best coded as N/A.



(1) Semantic equivalence test for 5-point satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 2 as midpoint (0-1 as dissatisfied, 3-4 satisfied).



(2) Semantic equivalence test for 5-point (0-4) satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 0-2 as dissatisfied and 3-4 satisfied.

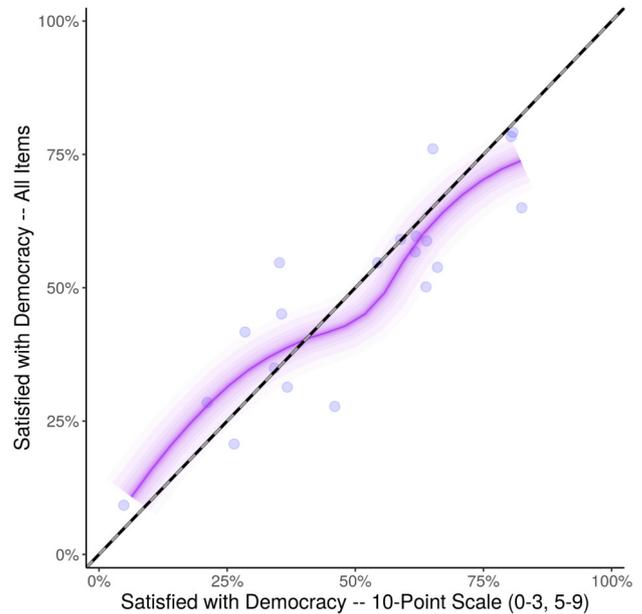
## The 10-point Satisfaction with Democracy Scale (A)

“Are you completely satisfied or completely dissatisfied with the way in which democracy is working in [this country] today? 0 = completely dissatisfied, 9 = completely satisfied”

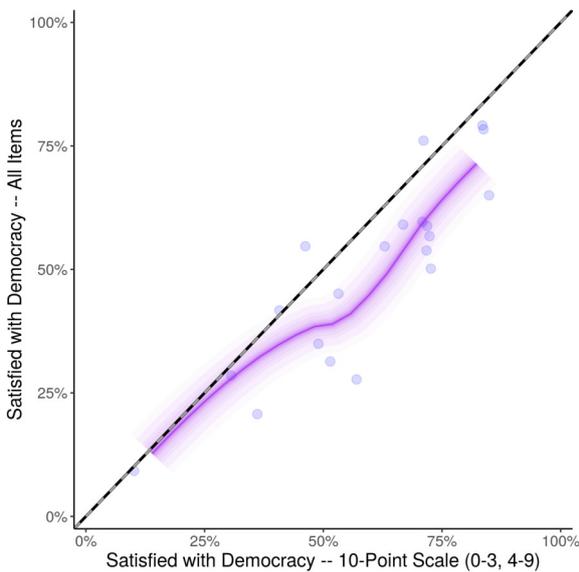
“On the whole, to what extent would you say you are satisfied with the way democracy works in [Country]? 0 = completely dissatisfied, 9 = completely satisfied”

The 10-point satisfaction with democracy scale asks respondents to rate their satisfaction on a numerical scale from 0 to 9 inclusive, and appears (in slightly different forms) in both the Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (CDCEE) surveys, fielded in 1990-2 and 1998-2001, and in a single round of the Eurobarometer surveys in 1988.

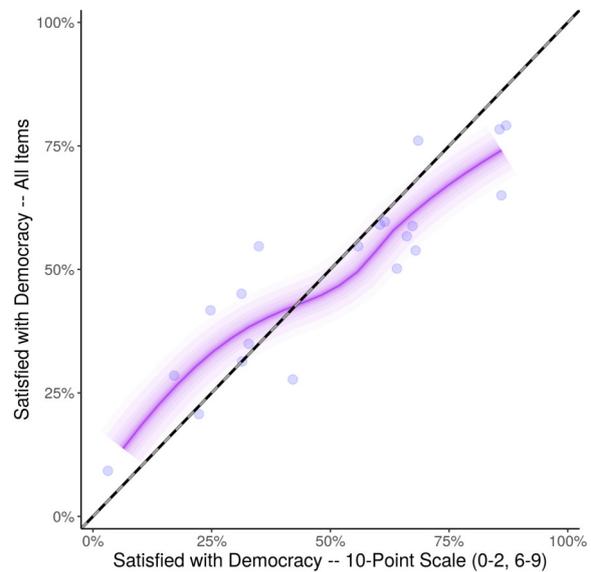
While an intuitive approach might be to split the first 5 and last 5 points – that is, recoding to 0-4 dissatisfied, and 5-9 satisfied – we found that this resulted in estimates that were heavily biased to lower reported satisfaction. We suspect this may be due to a tendency for respondents to have used “4” as a neutral category; after considering a range of recodings, we found the most equivalent results when either omitting the response category of 4, or recoding it as positive.



(1) Semantic equivalence test for 10-point (0-9) satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 0-3 as dissatisfied and 5-9 satisfied.



(2) Semantic equivalence test for 10-point (0-9) satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 0-3 as dissatisfied and 4-9 satisfied.



(3) Semantic equivalence test for 10-point (0-9) satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 0-2 as dissatisfied and 6-9 satisfied.

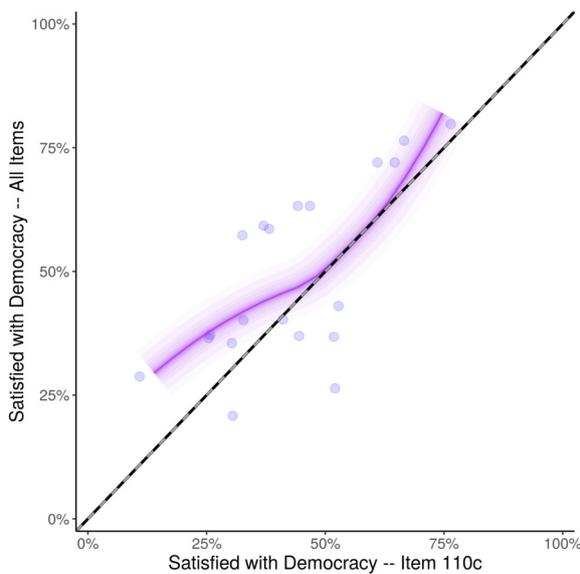
## The 10-point Satisfaction with Democracy Scale (B)

“On a scale from 1 to 10 where “1” is “not satisfied at all” and “10” is “completely satisfied”, how satisfied are you with how the political system is functioning in your country these days? 1 = not at all satisfied, 10 = completely satisfied” (this question follows two previous items on democracy: the importance of living in a democracy, and how democratically the respondent feels the country is being governed)

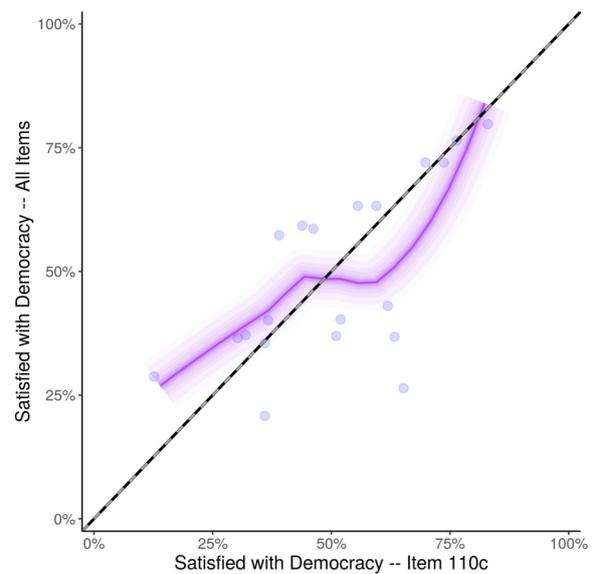
This 10-point satisfaction scale is used in the current round of the European Values Study and the World Values Survey, fielded from 2017 to 2019. Due to the large number of non-democratic regimes in the World Values Survey sample, the item refers to “the political system” rather than to the “democratic system”, as in earlier surveys. However it follows two preceding questions that ask directly about the condition of democracy in one’s country, setting a contextual frame for an evaluation of democratic performance.

In order to check whether the question formulation has affected its interpretation in a way

that deviates significantly from other satisfaction with democracy items, we check the satisfaction/dissatisfaction coding of this item against the results of standard satisfaction with democracy items in the same country-years. In this case, a simple recoding “down the middle” of 1-5 (dissatisfied) and 6-10 (satisfied) provides the highest correspondence with standard satisfaction with democracy items. We suspect that using a 10-point scale starting from 1 (rather than from 0) proved less confusing for respondents, who could more easily interpret the midpoint range between satisfaction and dissatisfaction.



(1) Semantic equivalence test for 10-point (1-10) satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, on a simple split coding (1-5 dissatisfied, 6-10 satisfied).

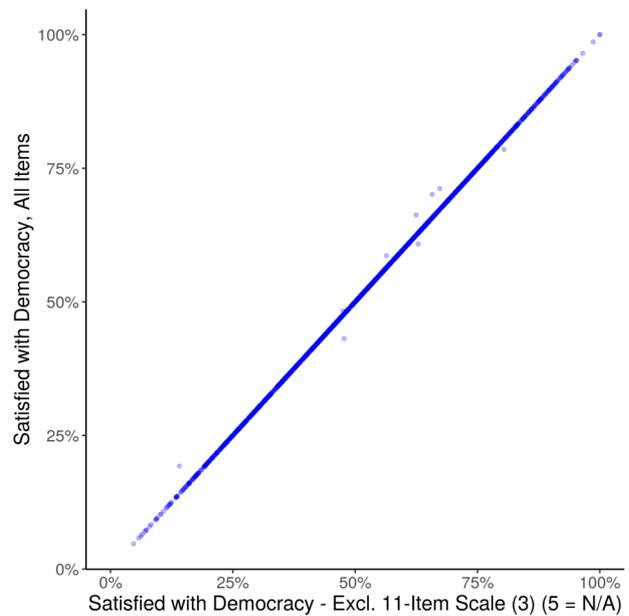


(2) Semantic equivalence test for 10-point (1-10) satisfaction with democracy scale and other items, with 5 recoded to NA (1-4 dissatisfied, 6-10 satisfied).

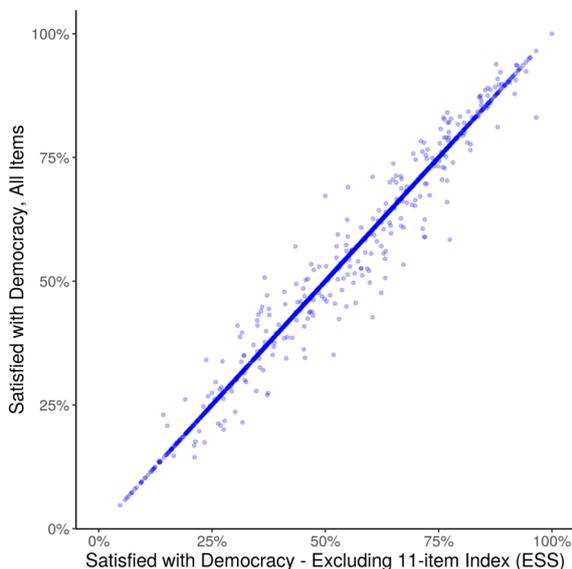
## Methodology IV: Sensitivity Analysis

To test that our results are robust to alternative decisions regarding inclusion or exclusion of different satisfaction with democracy question formulations, we conducted a series of alternative aggregations: excluding each measure one by one from the dataset and checking to see how this changes the resultant values, and checking the plot of all country-year observations with and without the source question. If a measure was found to have a disproportionate or biasing effect upon index scores, it was excluded.<sup>31</sup>

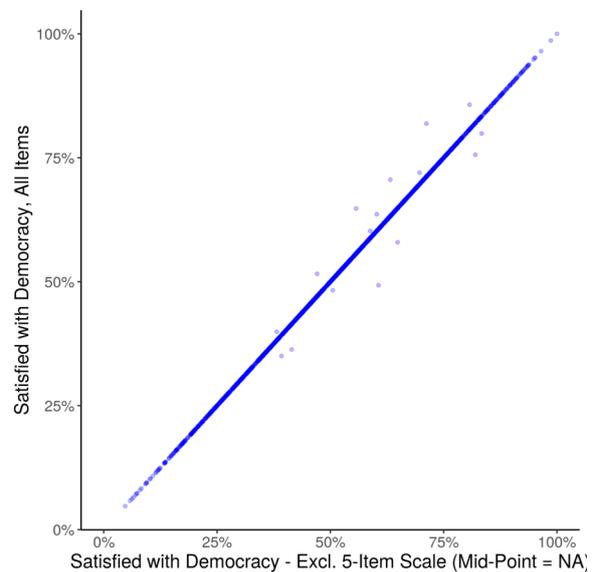
As indicator selection for inclusion within the final dataset had to first pass a semantic equivalence test, the sensitivity analysis reveals that the inclusion or exclusion of individual survey sources has only a marginal effect on the resultant satisfaction with democracy averages.



*Sensitivity to exclusion of 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale. “Now I would like you to indicate on this scale to what extent you are satisfied with your present situation in the following respects: The way democracy is functioning in [this country]? 0 = completely dissatisfied, 10 = completely satisfied.” 5 treated as N/A midpoint.*



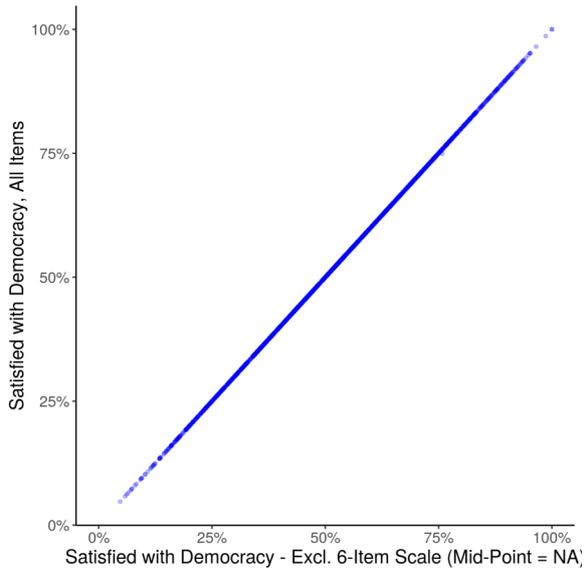
*Sensitivity to exclusion of 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale. “On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [Country]? 0 = extremely dissatisfied, 10 = extremely satisfied.” Over a large number of observations, there are no outliers and a high correlation.*



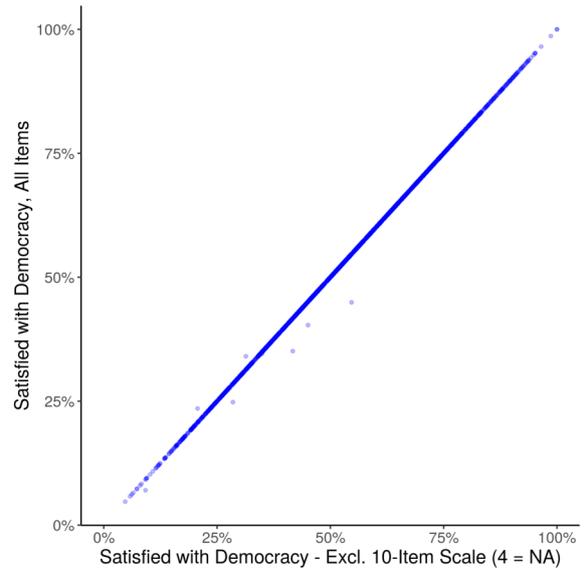
*Sensitivity to exclusion of 5-item satisfaction with democracy scale, with mid-point values recoded to N/A. “Please tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with [the democratic system]. 0 = very dissatisfied, 1 = somewhat dissatisfied, 2 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 3 = somewhat satisfied, 4 = very satisfied.” No outliers.*

<sup>31</sup> Michaela Saisana, Andrea Saltelli and Stefano Tarantola, (2005) “Uncertainty and Sensitivity Analysis Techniques as Tools for the Quality Assessment of Composite Indicators”, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 168, 307–323.

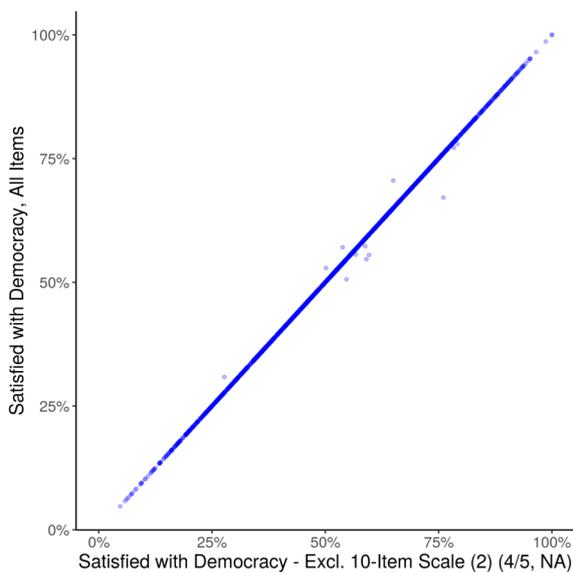
Sensitivity Analysis Plots (Continued)



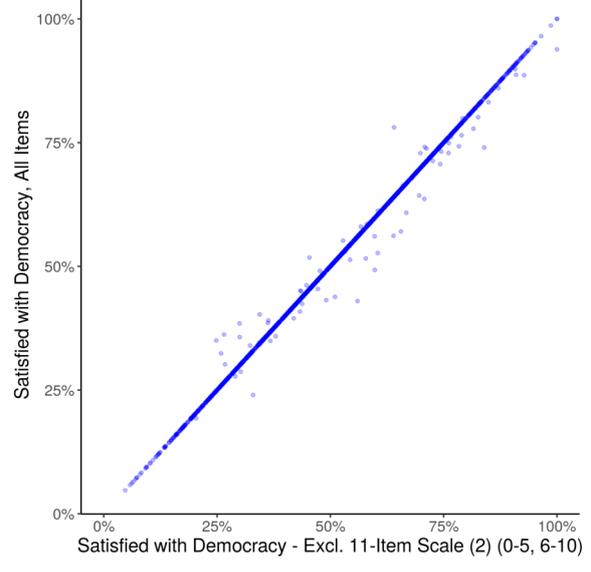
*Sensitivity to exclusion of 6-point satisfaction question: “Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [Country]? 0 = [Country] is not a democracy, 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat satisfied, 5 = very satisfied.” Midpoint and “not a democracy” recoded N/A. Few cases but no outliers.*



*Sensitivity to exclusion of 10-point (0-9) satisfaction with democracy scale. “Are you completely satisfied or completely dissatisfied with the way in which democracy is working in [Country] today? 0 = completely dissatisfied, 9 = completely satisfied.” With “4” recoded as N/A midpoint. Minor discrepancies exist but no substantial outliers.*



*Sensitivity to exclusion of 10-point satisfaction with democracy scale. “On the whole, to what extent would you say you are satisfied with the way democracy works in [Country]? 0 = completely dissatisfied, 9 = completely satisfied.” 4/5 treated as midpoint N/A values. No outliers.*



*Sensitivity to exclusion of 11-point satisfaction with democracy scale. “On the whole, on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is very poorly and 10 is very well: How well does democracy work in [Country] today? 0 = very poorly, 10 = very well.” (1-5, dissatisfied, 6-10, satisfied). Many observations, no substantial outliers.*

## Methodology V: Detrending Satisfaction with Democracy from the Economic Cycle

In two of the insets in this report – on divergence within the eurozone, and the end of the “pink tide” in Latin America – we present cyclically detrended estimates of democratic satisfaction, in an attempt to remove the influence of short-term economic trends upon trends in satisfaction with democracy. This is clearly indicated within each inset, and these are the only instances in the report where detrended (rather than raw) data are presented.

Why generate a cyclically-detrended satisfaction with democracy series? The underlying assumption is that in times of economic prosperity, citizens’ satisfaction with the political system will be higher, whereas in times of recession it declines. This has important consequences for our understanding of democratic dissatisfaction following financial crises, and in particular the Great Recession. Insofar as we are interested in long-term or structural change, we may wish to strip out that portion of variation that is due to temporary economic factors, in order to focus on the underlying shift, if any, that remains.

The detrended satisfaction series produce a number of important results. First, there is little evidence that the decline in satisfaction with democracy in the West, and in particular the United States, is due to cyclical economic factors. There is at best weak correlation between the decline in satisfaction and periods of economic growth or recession. Other economic factors may play a role – but not in a way that is clearly linked to the economic cycle.

Second, there is however some evidence of a cyclical pattern in emerging democracies, in particular in Latin America. After detrending for economic growth effects, we have seen that levels of dissatisfaction in Brazil, Chile, and even Venezuela are at a similar level today to their previous lows of the 1990s. This also has the implication that the currently high levels of democratic satisfaction in Southeast Asia may be dependent upon continued economic growth in this region.

### Detrending the Data

We detrend the data by estimating a simple regression that controls for each country’s average satisfaction (the country “fixed” effect), and then the effect on satisfaction of the current rate of economic growth, plus the per capita economic growth rate in *each* of the six years preceding the survey.

**Table 2:** *Estimated coefficients for association between satisfaction with democracy and recent economic growth.*

Estimated Effect of Per Capita GDP Growth (on % Satisfied) in:	
Current Year	+0.5***
Previous Year	+0.4***
2 Years Prior	+0.4***
3 Years Prior	+0.2*
4 Years Prior	+0.3**
5 Years Prior	+0.02
6 Years Prior	+0.02

\*\*\* significant at  $p < 0.001$ ;

\*\* significant at  $p < 0.01$ ;

\* significant at  $p < 0.1$ .

What we find is rather as one would expect: the strongest effect is growth in the year of the survey, with a steadily weaker effect for each of the preceding years. Thus if a country has an economic shock of -6%, this reduces satisfaction by -3% pts: but if a country experiences five years of -6% growth the cumulative effect is around -11% pts. To produce a detrended series around the country mean, we first adjust the satisfaction with democracy data to remove the growth effect, before “adding back” effects using the average growth rate of that country during the period of observation.

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