

## CONTENTS

1	A Crisis of Democracy?	1
2	The Euro-Crisis	17
3	The Welfare State	52
4	Immigration	86
5	Democratic Frustrations	114
6	The Populist “Wave”	147
7	Democracy Erodes from the Top	185
8	Public Opinion and Democratic Politics	216

*Appendix* 239

*Acknowledgments* 251

*References* 253

*Index* 263

# 1

## A Crisis of Democracy?

THERE IS A PALPABLE sense of crisis in Western democracies. The rise of right-wing populist parties in several parts of Europe, the erosion of constitutional checks and balances in Hungary and Poland, the 2016 Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the election of Donald Trump as US president, and the antidemocratic turn of the Republican Party under his leadership have all stirred significant alarm regarding the present state of democracy and prospects for its future.

Political leaders and would-be leaders have not hesitated to stoke perceptions of crisis in pursuit of their own ends. The then-vice-president of France's right-wing National Front greeted Trump's election with a triumphal tweet: "Their world is collapsing. Ours is being built." Even more ominously, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared that "the era of liberal democracy is over."<sup>1</sup>

The notion that democracy is in crisis provides a compelling hook for much recent political writing. In the opening pages of his book *Fractured Continent: Europe's Crises and the Fate of the West*, a former chief European correspondent of the *Washington Post* warned, "Just a quarter century after the liberal international order of open markets, free speech, and democratic elections had triumphed over the forces of communism, the Western democracies now seem in danger of collapsing, as a backlash against globalization arouses angry opponents of immigration, free trade, and cultural tolerance."<sup>2</sup>

1. Josh Lowe, Owen Matthews, and Matt McAllester, "Why Europe's Populist Revolt Is Spreading," *Newsweek*, 23 November 2016. Marc Santora and Helene Bienvenu, "Secure in Hungary, Orban Readies for Battle with Brussels," *New York Times*, 11 May 2018.

2. Drozdiak (2017: xii).

Some academic observers have echoed this apocalyptic tone. One's attention-getting book began,

There are long decades in which history seems to slow to a crawl. Elections are won and lost, laws adopted and repealed, new stars born and legends carried to their graves. But for all the ordinary business of time passing, the lodestars of culture, society, and politics remain the same.

Then there are those short years in which everything changes all at once. Political newcomers storm the stage. Voters clamor for policies that were unthinkable until yesterday. Social tensions that had long simmered under the surface erupt into terrifying explosions. A system of government that had seemed immutable looks as though it might come apart.

This is the kind of moment in which we now find ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

One of the world's most eminent scholars of comparative politics began his book *Crises of Democracy* with less purple prose, but many of the same empirical premises. "Something is happening," he wrote. "‘Anti-establishment,’ ‘anti-system,’ ‘anti-elite,’ ‘populist’ sentiments are exploding in many mature democracies. . . . Confidence in politicians, parties, parliaments, and governments is falling. Even the support for democracy as a system of government has weakened."<sup>4</sup>

All of this does sound portentous. But, at least insofar as the attitudes and preferences of ordinary Europeans are concerned, *virtually none of it is true*. On the whole, Europeans were just as satisfied with the working of democracy in 2019 as they had been 15 years earlier. Trust in national parliaments and politicians remained virtually unchanged. They were just as enthusiastic as they had been about the project of European integration. While "angry opponents of immigration" dominated the headlines, most Europeans' attitudes toward immigrants and immigration were becoming significantly warmer, not more hostile. In these and other respects, the conventional wisdom about a "crisis of democracy" in contemporary Europe is strikingly at odds with evidence from public opinion surveys.

One aim of this book is to document the gulf between the alarming portrait of democracy in crisis and the more prosaic reality of contemporary European public opinion. The point of this debunking is *not* to suggest that all is well with European democracy—though, for what it is worth, I do think the "dan-

3. Mounk (2018: 1).

4. Przeworski (2019: 1).

ger of collapsing” is greatly overblown. The deeper issue here is that the focus on public opinion as a barometer of democratic functioning is itself fundamentally misguided.

The “folk theory” of democracy, as Christopher Achen and I have called it, exalts “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” in Abraham Lincoln’s famous formulation. Even when citizens’ preferences do not directly determine policy, they are, somehow, supposed to be the primary force animating democratic politics. The myth of rule by the people implies that bad attitudes, rash choices, or insufficient diligence in fulfilling the obligations of citizenship must constitute a crisis of democracy. And conversely, if democracy falters, its erosion or breakdown must somehow be traceable to faults of public opinion. Regardless of whether the reasoning goes forward, from vagaries of public opinion to their presumed consequences, or backward, from failures of democratic institutions to their presumed causes, the logical glue connecting public opinion and crises of democracy is supplied by the “folk theory.”<sup>5</sup>

The alternative view propounded here might be termed an *elitist* account of democratic crisis. “Elitist” has become a scornful term in modern discourse, especially in the context of discussions of democracy.<sup>6</sup> My aim in employing it here is not to wade into complex normative debates regarding the appropriate roles of leaders and citizens in democratic politics. It is simply to underscore the remarkable disconnection of ordinary public opinion from the developments that are commonly taken as indicative of a “crisis of democracy” in contemporary Europe, and the crucial role of political leadership in preserving or dismantling democratic institutions and procedures.

At first glance, it may seem preposterous to suggest that ordinary citizens are bit players in Europe’s political troubles. However, the notion has a good

5. Achen and Bartels (2016). The “folk theory” undergirds a good deal of scholarly writing as well as popular thinking about democracy. For example, one of the most influential scholars of contemporary democracy, James Stimson (2015: xix), described shifts in public opinion as “the most important factor in American politics” and “the drive wheel” of policy change; “the public governs,” he wrote, “much more than most realize.”

6. See, for example, the 1966 exchange in the *American Political Science Review* between Jack Walker and Robert Dahl regarding “the elitist theory of democracy.” In a letter to the editor, Walker (1966: 391) wrote, “After reading Professor Dahl’s rejoinder, I am convinced that it was a mistake to use the label ‘The Elitist Theory of Democracy’ . . . The word ‘elitist’ apparently carries, at least in Dahl’s view, some objectionable anti-democratic connotations.” Despite Walker’s misgivings, a Google search for the exact phrase “elitist theory of democracy” returns more than 10,000 results.

deal of both tacit and explicit support in scholarship on breakdowns of democracy. One of the most striking, but little-remarked-upon, features of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's scholarly best-seller, *How Democracies Die*, is the scant attention the authors felt compelled to devote to public opinion. "Institutional guardrails," "unwritten rules," "fateful alliances"—these are the constraints and choices facing political leaders, not their followers. The same might be said of much scholarship on democratic instability over the preceding 40 years. One scholar who did pay unusually close attention to the role of "ordinary people" in more than a dozen full-blown breakdowns of democracy in 20th-century Europe and Latin America, Nancy Bermeo, concluded that "in the vast majority of our cases, voters did not choose dictatorship at the ballot box," and that "the culpability for democracy's demise lay overwhelmingly with political elites."<sup>7</sup>

A key implication of the evidence presented in this book is that the culpability for Europe's current political troubles likewise lies overwhelmingly with political elites rather than ordinary citizens. That is not to say that public opinion is necessarily wise or highly principled. We will see plenty of instances of ordinary Europeans exhibiting foibles common to humans in all realms of life, including short-sightedness, scapegoating, and aversion to change. But their failings have generally not been decisive in accounting for toxic politics, policy failures, or democratic backsliding.

Of course, recognizing the decisive importance of political elites in the democratic process will not, in itself, explain why they behave the way they do, much less provide a blueprint for curing the ills of democracy. In that sense, the present work is merely a *preface* to democratic theory rather than a fully developed account of how and why democracies succeed or fail. Nonetheless, given the distorting impact of the "folk theory" on thinking about democracy, being clear about what Europe's crisis of democracy is *not* may be an indispensable first step toward better understanding what it *is*.

### "Something Is Happening"

Perceived crises of democracy are hardly rare. A Google search turns up almost 300 million results for the phrase "crisis of democracy," ranging widely through time and space, from "The Present Crisis in Democracy" by former Harvard

7. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018); Linz and Stepan (1978); Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013); Bermeo (2003: 222, 221).

University president A. Lawrence Lowell in *Foreign Affairs* in 1934 to “The Crisis of Democracy” report prepared for the Trilateral Commission by three prominent social scientists in 1975, to the recent survey “Democracy in Crisis” from the global research and advocacy organization Freedom House.<sup>8</sup>

On the *New York Times* op-ed page, legendary columnist James Reston pondered “The Crisis of Democracy” in 1974, and again in 1975. A generation later, in 2012, the distinguished economist Amartya Sen addressed “The Crisis of European Democracy,” warning that “drastic cuts in public services with very little general discussion of their necessity, efficacy or balance have been revolting to a large section of the European population and have played into the hands of extremists on both ends of the political spectrum.” In 2018, political researcher David Adler amped up the alarmism, writing, “The warning signs are flashing red: Democracy is under threat. Across Europe and North America, candidates are more authoritarian, party systems are more volatile, and citizens are more hostile to the norms and institutions of liberal democracy.” The following year, not to be outdone by op-ed writers, the *Times* Berlin bureau chief capped off a five-part podcast on “The Battle for Europe” with an episode asking ominously, “Can Liberal Democracy Survive in Europe?”<sup>9</sup>

A few writers have swum against this strong tide of alarmism. For example, a leading scholar of populism, Cas Mudde, provocatively characterized populist radical right parties as “a relatively minor nuisance in West European democracies,” pointing to

the relatively modest electoral support that these parties generate in parliamentary elections. With an average support of less than 10 per cent of the electorate, few PRRPs are major players in their national political system. Moreover, even fewer make it into government, majority or minority, and most are shunned by the other parties in parliament. Hence, direct policy

8. Muliro (2017); Lowell (1934); Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki (1975). Michael J. Abramowitz, “Democracy in Crisis,” Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/democracy-crisis>.

9. James Reston, “The Crisis of Democracy,” *New York Times*, 3 March 1974. James Reston, “The Crisis of Democracy,” *New York Times*, 29 June 1975. Amartya Sen, “The Crisis of European Democracy,” *New York Times*, 22 May 2012. David Adler, “Centrists Are the Most Hostile to Democracy, Not Extremists,” *New York Times*, 23 May 2018. Katrin Bennhold, “Can Liberal Democracy Survive in Europe?,” *New York Times*, 14 June 2019.

influence is already quite rare. And even when PRRPs make it into power, they are dogs that bark loud, but hardly ever bite.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, many observers are not as clear-eyed as Mudde—and even if they were, “a relatively minor nuisance” would stand little chance of capturing the popular imagination when pitted against a “crisis of democracy” in which “everything changes all at once.” Journalists, especially, are partial to dogs that bark loud, even if they hardly ever bite.

In this book, I summarize broad trends in European public opinion from 2002 through 2019, focusing particularly on attitudes commonly taken as symptomatic of a “crisis of democracy,” including economic disaffection, antipathy to immigration and European integration, ideological polarization, distrust of political elites, and dissatisfaction with the workings of democracy itself. I examine the impact of these attitudes on support for right-wing populist parties, which turns out to be substantial. I also explore their role in precipitating significant erosions of democracy in Hungary and Poland, which turns out to be remarkably modest.

My data on European public opinion come primarily from the European Social Survey (ESS), an academic collaboration that has tracked political and social views in most European countries since 2002. I focus on 23 countries, each of which has been surveyed at least four times; 15 are represented in all nine rounds of the survey, providing roughly biannual readings of opinion from 2002 through 2019.<sup>11</sup> Table 1.1 shows the countries represented in each wave of the survey as well as the sample size in each country-round; the total sample includes 354,829 survey respondents.<sup>12</sup>

A major virtue of the ESS project is that the survey content has been admirably consistent across countries and rounds, providing hundreds of thousands of responses for most key indicators—an unparalleled record of con-

10. Mudde (2013: 14).

11. Data, documentation, and background information appear on the ESS website, <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>. My analysis generally includes EU countries as of 2006 and those in the Schengen area. It excludes countries admitted to the EU after 2006 (Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania), some small countries with little or no ESS data (Cyprus, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Malta), and several other countries represented sporadically in the ESS dataset (Albania, Israel, Kosovo, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine).

12. The 354,829 respondents represent 183 country-rounds; the country-round sample sizes range from 985 to 3,142 and average 1,939. Surveys were not conducted in the remaining 24 country-rounds (11.6%).

TABLE I.1. Countries Represented in European Social Surveys, 2002–2019

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Total
<b>Austria (AT)</b>	2,257	2,256	2,459	0	0	0	1,825	2,010	2,503	13,310
<b>Belgium (BE)</b>	1,899	1,778	1,798	1,760	1,704	1,869	1,769	1,766	1,769	16,112
<b>Czechia (CZ)</b>	1,360	3,142	0	2,394	2,518	2,076	2,148	2,269	2,398	18,305
<b>Denmark (DK)</b>	1,506	1,487	1,505	1,610	1,576	1,650	1,502	0	0	10,836
<b>Estonia (EE)</b>	0	1,989	1,517	1,954	1,935	2,452	2,111	2,019	1,905	15,882
<b>Finland (FI)</b>	2,000	2,039	1,921	2,340	1,878	2,197	2,087	1,925	1,755	18,142
<b>France (FR)</b>	1,503	1,806	1,986	2,073	1,820	2,021	1,977	2,070	2,010	17,266
<b>Germany (DE)</b>	2,919	2,870	2,916	2,751	3,031	2,958	3,045	2,852	2,360	25,702
<b>Great Britain (GB)</b>	2,052	1,897	2,394	2,352	2,422	2,286	2,264	1,959	2,211	19,837
<b>Greece (GR)</b>	2,566	2,406	0	2,249	2,811	0	0	0	0	10,032
<b>Hungary (HU)</b>	1,685	1,498	1,518	1,544	1,561	2,014	1,733	1,624	1,661	14,838
<b>Ireland (IE)</b>	2,069	2,304	1,814	1,764	2,576	2,628	2,433	2,757	2,216	20,561
<b>Italy (IT)</b>	1,207	0	0	0	0	985	0	2,653	2,746	7,591
<b>Lithuania (LT)</b>	0	0	0	0	1,677	2,109	2,250	2,122	1,836	9,994
<b>Netherlands (NL)</b>	2,364	1,881	1,889	1,778	1,829	1,845	1,969	1,681	1,673	16,909
<b>Norway (NO)</b>	2,036	1,760	1,750	1,760	1,653	1,666	1,451	1,545	1,406	15,027
<b>Poland (PL)</b>	2,110	1,716	1,750	1,759	1,852	1,999	1,728	1,705	1,500	16,119
<b>Portugal (PT)</b>	1,511	2,052	2,222	2,642	2,296	2,229	1,265	1,270	1,055	16,542
<b>Slovakia (SK)</b>	0	1,512	1,766	1,810	1,856	1,847	0	0	1,083	9,874
<b>Slovenia (SI)</b>	1,519	1,442	1,476	1,477	1,403	1,257	1,224	1,307	1,318	12,423
<b>Spain (ES)</b>	1,729	1,664	1,876	2,828	2,021	1,967	1,975	1,958	1,668	17,686
<b>Sweden (SE)</b>	1,999	1,948	1,927	1,830	1,497	1,898	1,829	1,551	1,541	16,020
<b>Switzerland (CH)</b>	2,084	2,141	1,804	2,005	1,583	1,555	1,582	1,525	1,542	15,821
<b>Total</b>	38,375	41,588	36,288	40,680	41,499	41,508	38,167	38,568	38,156	354,829

Note: Sample size by country and ESS round



temporary European public opinion.<sup>13</sup> In analyzing these data, I focus on both broad patterns and cross-country variation in attitudes and trends. The adult populations of the 23 countries represented in my analyses vary widely, from just over one million in Estonia to more than 70 million in Germany. To provide trustworthy summaries of public opinion in Europe as a whole, I generally weight the data from each country in each round of the survey in proportion to its population.<sup>14</sup> In analyses characterizing trends or comparing time periods, I employ statistical adjustments designed to compensate for changes in the set of countries participating in each ESS round.<sup>15</sup> Additional information regarding my data and analyses—including details of survey question wording and coding, descriptive statistics for key indicators, comparisons of trends based on weighted and unweighted data, and discussion of statistical methods and assumptions—appears in the Appendix.

### Economic Crisis, Political Crisis?

Much of what has been written about the “crisis of democracy” in contemporary Europe posits a key role for the political ramifications of the global economic crisis triggered by the Wall Street meltdown of 2008. The magnitude of the economic crisis and its resonant echoes of the Great Depression led many observers to draw parallels between contemporary political developments and those of the 1930s, including the rise of populism in the US and fascism in Europe. For example, Matt O’Brien of the *Washington Post* argued that “it shouldn’t be too surprising that the worst economic crisis since the 1930s has led to the worst political crisis within liberal democracies since the 1930s.” The thesis of John Judis’s popular book *The Populist Explosion* was conveyed by its subtitle: *How the Great Recession Transformed*

13. There are at least 330,000 nonmissing observations for 16 of the 22 key ESS variables listed in Appendix Table A1.

14. Appendix Table A3 details the composition of the weighted sample. Table A4 provides a comparison of overall trends in the weighted and unweighted data. My substantive conclusions remain essentially unchanged when each country-round is weighted equally.

15. Unless otherwise indicated, all analyses of data from Europe as a whole include indicators (“fixed effects”) for countries. To the extent that cross-country differences in opinion are consistent over time, this approach will provide reliable estimates of shifts and trends in opinion despite missing country-rounds. To allow for statistical uncertainty due to idiosyncrasies in the timing and administration of each survey, most analyses allow for arbitrary correlation among the statistical disturbances in each country-round (“clustered standard errors”).

*American and European Politics*. A scholarly guide *The Global Rise of Populism* reported that “a prolonged global financial downturn, rising unemployment in a number of areas and a loss of faith in perceived elite projects like the European Union are helping fuel the flames” of populism, threatening “a crisis of faith in democracy” in which citizens are “more and more disillusioned with mainstream politics.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite this alarmism, as we shall see, Europe’s “worst political crisis” since the 1930s turned out to be milder, briefer, much more localized, and different in kind from the rise of fascism. European politics was altered, but hardly transformed—and even the alterations were often quite temporary. This is particularly true for shifts in public opinion. The timing of the economic crisis roughly divides the period covered by my analyses into three distinct subperiods: a pre-crisis period (from 2002 through 2007), a crisis period (from 2008 through 2013), and a post-crisis period (from 2014 through 2019). Thus, in many cases it will be fruitful to characterize stability or change in public opinion, or in the bases of public opinion, across these three periods, with due allowance for the roughness of the division and for differences in the precise timing and duration of the economic crisis in different parts of Europe.<sup>17</sup> Applying this periodization, we shall generally find that public opinion shifted somewhat during the crisis, but subsequently reverted to pre-crisis patterns.

In Chapter 2, I briefly review the economic and political developments that constituted “the worst economic crisis since the 1930s,” including the collapse of financial arrangements built on subprime mortgage lending, the resulting global recession, the sovereign debt crisis stemming from the impact of that recession on the balance sheets of governments and financial institutions, and the struggles of European political leaders to respond to those economic blows. Despite the severity of the economic downturn, Europeans’ economic mood was surprisingly resilient. By 2014–2015, average satisfaction with the economy was higher than it had been before the crisis began, and it continued

16. Matt O’Brien, “Why Liberal Democracy Only Dies When Conservatives Help,” *Washington Post*, 17 May 2017. Judis (2016); Moffitt (2016: 159–160, 1).

17. In other cases, this periodization will be less helpful. For example, in considering attitudes toward immigrants and immigration, the salience of the asylum crisis of 2015 argues against the assumption of consistency in the nature and bases of opinion from 2013 to 2019, so I focus considerable attention on stability and change *within* the post-(economic) crisis period.

to improve substantially until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. There were pockets of severe, prolonged economic pain; but for most Europeans, the crisis was successfully contained.

Many observers viewed the Euro-crisis as a failure, first and foremost, of the European Union. Ashoka Mody, an international economist with experience at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, castigated European leaders' "hesitant monetary and fiscal policy response to the global financial crisis" and "disastrous policy errors in dealing with the euro-zone's own rolling crises between late 2009 and early 2014." According to political scientist Sheri Berman, "The EU's technocratic rather than democratic nature generated a backlash against the EU as it became associated with economic problems rather than prosperity."<sup>18</sup> Here, too, however, public opinion surveys reveal remarkably little evidence of crisis. Overall support for European integration dipped only modestly in the wake of the Euro-crisis, and by 2019 it was higher than at any point since at least 2004. Moreover, the places where enthusiasm for European integration did decline significantly—Slovakia, Czechia, Poland, and Hungary—were places that experienced unusually *high* levels of economic growth, suggesting that the most important challenges facing the EU were not rooted in "economic problems," but in cultural and political frictions.

The Euro-crisis also magnified long-standing concerns about the viability of the European welfare state. Even before the crisis, scholars were writing of "the beleaguered welfare states" of Western Europe. In 1998, the managing director of the IMF announced a "Worldwide Crisis in the Welfare State," warning ominously that "reforms will be necessary." The Euro-crisis was a massive additional shock to the system, driving up public debt and generating demands for austerity from bondholders and the so-called Troika—the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the IMF. "As the financial crisis puts strains on national budgets," an analyst writing in the midst of the crisis anticipated, "the dissatisfaction with the way democracy works is likely to be exacerbated. High deficits and huge public debt will force governments to curb spending, shrink the public sector, and look for further revenues from privatization for years to come . . . and citizens' faith in democratic politics is likely to erode further as a result."<sup>19</sup>

18. Mody (2018: 391, 458); Berman (2019: 402).

19. Esping-Andersen (1996: ix, 1); Michel Camdessus, "Worldwide Crisis in the Welfare State: What Next in the Context of Globalization?" International Monetary Fund, 15 Octo-

In Chapter 3, I explore the implications of the economic crisis for the contemporary European welfare state. I assess the impact of the crisis on patterns of social spending, focusing especially on the austerity policies imposed or inspired by the Troika in Greece, Spain, and Ireland. I also explore the impact of the Euro-crisis on citizens' perceptions of the quality of social services and on overall satisfaction with their lives. Surprisingly, Europeans were significantly more satisfied with the quality of health services, education, and life as a whole in the years after the Euro-crisis than they had been before it began. These improvements in subjective well-being seem to have been due, at least in part, to a gradual increase in real social spending, notwithstanding the strains put on national budgets by the financial crisis.

In light of these improvements in subjective well-being, it should perhaps not be surprising that public support for the welfare state remained steadfast. The Euro-crisis produced no perceptible shift in overall left-right ideology or in support for income redistribution. More detailed questions regarding specific government social responsibilities and spending programs produced virtually identical readings of public opinion in 2016 as in 2006. The largest—still modest—shift in opinion over the course of this tumultuous decade was a decline in public support for *cutting* government spending as a means of bolstering the economy. Both functionally and politically, the European welfare state emerged from the Euro-crisis in remarkably good shape.

### Not-So-Bad Attitudes

The resilience of public support for the European welfare state and for the project of European integration are just two significant examples of a broader pattern in European public opinion. Time and again, readers primed to expect a political terrain in which “everything changes all at once” will instead find that, with respect to public opinion, not much changed at all—and certainly not for the worse.

In Chapter 4, I document another instance of this pattern, public opinion regarding immigrants and immigration. Europe has experienced a steady inflow of immigrants in recent decades, and in 2015–2016 faced a massive influx of asylum-seekers, mostly from war-torn Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Observers trumpeted an “immigration crisis,” with headlines warning that “The

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ber 1998, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/sp101598>; Schäfer (2013: 192).

Immigration Crisis Is Tearing Europe Apart” and that “Europe’s Immigration Crisis Is Just Beginning.”<sup>20</sup> But while “angry opponents of immigration” have dominated media portrayals, there is remarkably little evidence that these surges in immigration and asylum-seeking produced any significant erosion in public attitudes toward immigrants. In Sweden, which experienced substantial net immigration over the past two decades and one of Europe’s largest influxes of asylum-seekers in 2015, attitudes toward immigrants and immigration remained more positive than anywhere else in Europe. In Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel’s determination to open borders to refugees was hailed as an act of remarkable political courage, public support for immigration remained unwavering throughout the asylum crisis, even in the wake of a deadly terrorist attack by a foreigner denied asylum.

Overall, European public opinion toward immigrants became gradually but significantly more positive in the face of these developments, largely due to generational replacement of older cohorts by young people with more welcoming attitudes. The few places where anti-immigrant sentiment increased were mostly conservative, highly religious countries in which prominent nationalist political leaders mounted vigorous anti-immigrant campaigns—most notably, Orbán’s Hungary. And even in those places, the same process of generational replacement seemed to be at work, making it likely that anti-immigrant sentiment will fade with time, as it already has in other parts of Europe.

In Chapter 5, I turn to a variety of specifically political attitudes, including ideological polarization, trust in political leaders and institutions, and satisfaction with the workings of democracy itself. Here, too, the conventional wisdom is that the Euro-crisis has reshaped public opinion for the worse. For example, the editors of the scholarly volume *Politics in the Age of Austerity* argued that the “vast deterioration in public finances” stemming from the crisis put “pressure on government to make unpopular choices,” producing popular frustration with democracy. “In parallel with the faltering capacity for discretionary spending,” they wrote, “public fatigue with democratic practice and core institutions has grown.”<sup>21</sup>

But here, too, the reality seems rather less dire. Europeans’ trust in parliaments and politicians, having dipped modestly during the Euro-crisis, rebounded completely once it ended. So, too, did satisfaction with incumbent

20. Bruce Stokes, “The Immigration Crisis Is Tearing Europe Apart,” *Foreign Policy*, 22 July 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/22/the-immigration-crisis-is-tearing-europe-apart/>. Max Ehrenfreund, “Europe’s Immigration Crisis Is Just Beginning,” *Washington Post*, 1 July 2016.

21. Schäfer and Streeck (2013: 2).

governments. Overall satisfaction with the workings of democracy remained robust even through the crisis. In times and places where these attitudes did deteriorate, they shifted in close parallel with assessments of the economy, suggesting that democratic frustrations often reflected economic dissatisfaction rather than specifically political grievances.

## Populism and Democratic Backsliding

If Europe is experiencing a crisis of democracy, most Europeans seem not to have gotten the message. Over the past two decades, the key discontents that are supposed to be “exploding in many mature democracies” have, in fact, hardly budged. In Europe as a whole and in most countries considered separately, attitudes toward immigration and European integration, trust in parliament and politicians, and satisfaction with democracy turn out to be largely unchanged since the turn of the century.

In Chapter 6, I consider the implications of this stability for our understanding of the “populist explosion” that is supposedly rocking contemporary Europe. First, I examine the bases of support for sixteen prominent right-wing populist parties. In most cases, that support is indeed strongly related to attitudes figuring centrally in discussions of populism, including antipathy toward immigrants and immigration, opposition to further European integration, and political distrust. But that fact presents a considerable puzzle. If the attitudes conducive to right-wing populism have been essentially constant over the past two decades, what explains the surge in support for right-wing populist parties?

One answer, as Mudde’s characterization of “a relatively minor nuisance” implied, is that the surge in support for these parties is commonly exaggerated. While several countries have seen flare-ups in voting for populist parties in recent years, the overall increase has been very modest—by my tabulation, amounting to just a few percentage points over two decades.<sup>22</sup> Insofar as there *has* been an increase in support for right-wing populist parties, it seems to be driven much more by the “supply” of populist mobilization, conditioned by institutional rules that facilitate or inhibit that mobilization, than by citizens’

22. Figure 6.1 in Chapter 6 shows a secular increase in the average vote share of 16 European right-wing populist parties from 12.6% in 2001 to 16% in 2021. Norris and Inglehart’s (2019: 9) tabulation of support for “populist” parties in 32 Western democracies produced an even less dramatic trend; these parties’ average vote share increased from 10.9% in the 1980s and 9.9% in the 1990s to 11.4% in the 2000s and 12.4% in the 2010s.

“demand” for populism. Contrary to the familiar image of a *wave* of populism in the wake of the Euro-crisis, European public opinion has long provided a *reservoir* of right-wing populist sentiment that political entrepreneurs have drawn on with varying degrees of success at different times in different places.

This reservoir of right-wing populist sentiment is by no means inconsiderable. As Mudde has observed, “The public attitudes of many Europeans were already in line with the basic tenets of the populist radical right ideology (even if in a more moderate form)” long before the current “populist explosion.” The prevalence of attitudes conducive to populist mobilization represents a significant resource for would-be populist leaders, and a significant challenge for mainstream politicians, in every democracy. On the other hand, the success of contemporary European populists in exploiting this sentiment has, so far, been rather limited. As a result, the relationship between the extent of populist sentiment in specific times and places and support for populist parties at the polls has been remarkably hit-or-miss. Of the nine European countries with the highest levels of right-wing populist sentiment in 2014–2019, only three (Hungary, Italy, and Slovenia) had right-wing populist parties attracting as much as 15% of the vote. On the other hand, right-wing populist parties flourished in Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, all of which were among the half-dozen European countries with the *lowest* levels of right-wing populist sentiment. In these cases, as political scientist Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser put it, “populist radical right parties have shown a great success precisely in those regions of Europe where the structural prerequisites for their rise were hardly existent.”<sup>23</sup>

I explore this paradox by examining the rise of some key right-wing populist parties in recent years, including Vox in Spain, Lega in Italy, and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). My analyses suggest that none of these parties owed their rise to a significant increase in right-wing populist sentiment; indeed, in some cases, their electoral support grew even as the prevalence of right-wing populist sentiment in their societies declined significantly. Their successes seem to be due mostly, in varying degrees, to charismatic leadership, over-the-top media coverage, and the stumbles and scandals of mainstream competitors. Nonetheless, political observers have not hesitated to interpret these electoral gains as evidence of fundamental shifts in public attitudes and values.

While support for right-wing populist parties in Western Europe has provoked consternation, the most concrete and alarming evidence that “democracy is under threat” in contemporary Europe comes from Hungary and Poland,

23. Mudde (2013: 7); Kaltwasser (2012: 188).

where nationalist leaders have gone some way toward dismantling democratic institutions, curbing the power of the judiciary, muzzling independent media, and rewriting electoral laws in efforts to entrench themselves in power. In Chapter 7, I examine these two crucial instances of democratic backsliding, tracing the bases of popular support for Fidesz in Hungary before and after its rise to power in 2010 and for the Law and Justice party in Poland before and after its rise to power in 2015.

I find surprisingly little support for the notion that these parties were swept into office by popular waves of right-wing populism, much less a hankering for authoritarian rule. Indeed, most of the factors contributing to support for right-wing populist parties elsewhere in Europe were unrelated to support for both Fidesz and the Law and Justice party before their rise to power and, for the most part, absent from their pivotal election campaigns. In 2015, a pair of Polish scholars wrote, Law and Justice “softened its image. It placed signs of authoritarian leanings as well as controversial personalities . . . out of public view. Running on the slogan ‘Good Change,’” the party “called for compassionate conservatism, and sought to offer undecided voters an alternative to the ‘boring’” incumbent party.<sup>24</sup>

It was only *after* gaining power that these rather conventional-looking conservative parties embarked upon the project of “illiberal democracy.” As they did so, they increasingly turned to scapegoating would-be immigrants and the European Union, bringing the bases of their support into somewhat closer alignment with those of right-wing populist parties elsewhere in Europe. However, even then, it seems likely that their popular support depended less on the appeal of radical nationalism than on the fact that they presided over substantial increases in prosperity and subjective well-being. As a result, both countries saw substantial increases in public trust in political elites and—ironically—in public satisfaction with the workings of democracy. While ordinary citizens in these cases were guilty of prioritizing the quality of their daily lives over democratic institutions and procedures, they were little more than passive bystanders to the erosion of democracy.

## Public Opinion and Democratic Politics

Almost a century ago, the sage political analyst Walter Lippmann pointed to “immense confusions in the current theory of democracy which frustrate and pervert its action.” Chief among these he noted “the fictitious power” of public

24. Fomina and Kucharczyk (2016: 60–61).



opinion in thinking about democratic governance.<sup>25</sup> In the decades since Lippmann wrote, the world has acquired vastly more experience with democracy, and social scientists have greatly refined our understanding of public opinion and political behavior. Yet, the immense confusions persist, a testament to the mythic power of the “folk theory” of democracy. The startling discrepancy between the perception of democratic crisis and the reality of public opinion in contemporary Europe is a dramatic case in point. I hope that exploring that discrepancy may help us learn “to think of public opinion as it is, and not as the fictitious power we have assumed it to be.”

For democratic theorists, the pressing task is to identify and analyze the forces shaping the behavior of powerful political actors in democratic systems. If aggregate public opinion is seldom decisive, when and why are the intense preferences of slivers of the public more consequential? What factors govern the translation of right-wing populist sentiment, prevalent in most contemporary societies, into direct or indirect policy influence? Why do some elected leaders exploit opportunities to entrench themselves in power, as Orbán did in Hungary, while others forebear? These are fundamental political questions, but not central concerns of contemporary political science. A more forthrightly “elitist” theory of democratic crisis would help to bring them into clearer focus.

As Lippmann recognized, democratic theory is not merely an academic pursuit; misunderstanding the nature of democracy can “frustrate and pervert its action.” In the United States, the rise of Donald Trump was facilitated by the putative “democratization” of the process by which major parties select their presidential candidates. In the United Kingdom, David Cameron promised Euro-skeptic voters a “referendum lock to which only they should hold the key,” then blundered into inviting them to use it.<sup>26</sup> Across Europe, political analysts and mainstream party leaders have frequently misread modest flare-ups in support for right-wing populist parties as major shifts in public sentiment, magnifying the political influence of extremists.

For citizens and political leaders alike, better understanding the lessons of experience provided by two turbulent decades of European politics may help to surmount crises of democracy, both imagined and real.

25. Lippmann (1925: 200).

26. Deborah Summers, “David Cameron Admits Lisbon Treaty Referendum Campaign Is Over,” *Guardian*, 4 November 2009.

## I N D E X

Note: Page numbers in *italic* type refer to figures or tables.

- Achen, Christopher, 3  
Adler, David, 5  
AfD. *See* Alternative for Germany  
age: democratic satisfaction linked to, 146;  
economic satisfaction linked to, 35–36;  
immigration attitudes linked to, 12, 88, 98,  
100–101, 100; old-age dependency, 86–87;  
political trust linked to, 122, 124; support  
for European integration linked to, 40–42;  
worldviews linked to, 48  
AIG (company), 19  
Allende, Salvador, 187  
Alliance for Sweden, 223  
Alliance of Free Democrats (Hungary), 189  
Almond, Gabriel, 135  
Alternative for Germany (AfD), 104, 151,  
155, 225  
Applebaum, Anne, 173  
Armingeon, Klaus, 121n12  
Arrow Cross Party (Hungary), 193  
asylum-seekers, 87, 90–91, 90, 108–109  
austerity measures, 10–11, 25–29, 53, 58, 59  
authoritarianism, 43–44, 159–160, 159n16,  
213–214, 220  
AWS. *See* Solidarity Electoral Action  
  
Bale, Tim, 225–226  
Bear Stearns, 18  
Bentley, Arthur, 238  
Berlusconi, Silvio, 136–141, 174, 177, 210  
Berman, Shari, 10  
Bermeo, Nancy, 4, 206, 214, 220–221, 226, 230  
Bernanke, Ben, 18–19  
Bersani, Pier Luigi, 139  
birth cohorts: and conservative worldviews,  
47, 48; and immigration attitudes, 100  
Blair, Tony, 75, 77  
Bolsonaro, Jair, 147  
Brexit, 147, 179–180, 182, 222, 226  
Brexit Party (Britain), 182  
Britain, right-wing populism in, 178–183, 181  
Bröning, Michael, 148  
Brookings Institution, 109  
Brooks, Clem, 78  
Brown, Gordon, 75–76  
Buchanan, Pat, 160  
  
Cameron, David, 16, 76, 178–182, 221–222, 226  
Caputova, Zuzana, 236–237  
Castles, Frances, 52–54, 77, 87  
Catholic Church, 212  
Centre Party (Sweden), 223  
*Charlie Hebdo* (newspaper), 107  
Chavez, Hugo, 147  
Christian Democratic Party (Italy), 136–137,  
139  
Christian Democratic People's Party  
(Hungary), 196  
Citizens (Spain), 170–173, 172n  
Citrin, Jack, 116  
Civic Choice (Italy), 138–139  
Civic Platform (Poland), 200–201, 203

- “clean hands” investigation (Italy), 136
- Clinton, Bill, 219n5
- coalition politics, 223–225
- Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD, Poland), 205
- Common Good (Italy), 138–139
- Communist Party (Italy), 136
- Conservative Party (Britain), 75–76, 178–182, 225–226
- Conservative People’s Party (Estonia), 151, 152
- conservative worldview: authoritarian character of, 43–44; characteristics of, 44, 45; by country, 46; in Hungary, 82n40; immigration attitudes linked to, 101–102; in Poland, 82n40; social bases of, 47; and support for EU, 43–44; and support for populist right-wing parties, 152, 155, 158, 159–160, 173, 190, 192–193, 195, 198, 205. *See also* worldviews
- Conte, Giuseppe, 141, 144, 174
- Converse, Philip, 219
- Cottarelli, Carlo, 141
- Covid-19 pandemic, 144, 233–236
- Craxi, Bettino, 136
- Dahl, Robert, 3n6
- Dancygier, Rafaela, 87
- Danish People’s Party (DPP), 112, 151, 151n9, 155, 205
- Dawn (Czechia), 151
- debt, public sector, 23–25, 24
- democracy: crisis of, 1–2, 4–6, 115–116, 124, 126, 147, 185, 211, 220, 231, 237; elite influences on, 3–4, 14–15, 16, 194–199, 210, 214–215, 219–221; folk theory of, 3–4, 3n5, 15–16, 233; in Hungary, 1, 14–15, 186–187, 188, 189–199, 206–215, 229–230, 237–238; meaning of, 115, 231–232; in Poland, 14–15, 186–187, 188, 189, 199–215, 230, 237–238; political institutions and the stability of, 224–230; political trust in relation to, 121, 124–128; public opinion’s role in, 3–4, 3n5, 15–16, 114–116, 145, 185, 216–220, 232–233; quantifying erosion of, 187–189. *See also* democratic satisfaction
- Democratic Left Alliance (Poland), 200–201, 204
- Democratic Party (Italy), 138–139, 176
- Democratic Party (United States), 141, 144
- democratic satisfaction: age as factor in, 146; bases of, 126, 127; by country, 124–125, 125; economic satisfaction linked to, 126–128, 142–143, 145; effect of Euro-crisis on, 120; functioning of democracy (breakdown/crisis) in relation to, 2–3, 114–115; in Hungary, 15, 116, 220; ideological polarization in relation to, 128–130; in Italy, 134–145; life satisfaction in relation to, 220; in Poland, 15, 116, 220; public protest in relation to, 130–134; stability of, 2–3, 13, 124–126, 125, 145–146; and support for populist right-wing parties, 155, 158. *See also* government; political trust
- democratic theory, 4, 16, 216, 219–220, 230–233
- Denmark, and immigration, 110–112
- Dennison, James, 112
- de Vries, Catherine, 236
- Dialog for Hungary, 197
- dictatorship, 185, 187, 206, 214
- Diez, George, 86
- Di Maio, Luigi, 140–141
- distancing capacity, 220–222, 226
- Donadio, Rachel, 175–176
- Donnelly, Michael, 87
- DPP. *See* Danish People’s Party
- Draghi, Mario, 28–29, 144
- Duda, Andrzej, 206
- Eatwell, Roger, 115–116, 186
- economic crisis (Euro-crisis, 2008–2013), 17–51; EU response to, 10; European institutions and, 17, 20–21, 51; Ireland affected by, 20, 69–73, 72; origins and development of, 17, 18–23, 21; political crisis linked to, 8–12; public response to, 9–10, 30–36, 217, 218; and sovereign debt crisis,

- 23–30; Spain affected by, 69; UK affected by, 76; and the welfare state, 11; well-being affected by, 61
- economic output, 21
- economic satisfaction: democratic satisfaction linked to, 126–128, 142–143, 145; effect of Euro-crisis on, 30–36, 31, 32, 34; in Hungary, 207; immigration attitudes linked to, 101; in Ireland, 72; personal characteristics linked to, 35–36; in Poland, 209; political trust linked to, 13, 121–123, 122, 142–143; in Spain, 68, 69; support for European integration linked to, 42–43; and support for populist right-wing parties, 158, 164
- Economist* (newspaper), 111
- education, satisfaction with, 60–62, 61, 63
- education level: economic satisfaction linked to, 35; immigration attitudes linked to, 98–99; support for European integration linked to, 40; worldviews linked to, 48–49
- Ehrenfreund, Max, 86
- elites: attitudes toward, as factor in support for populist parties, 160–161, 162n22; direction of democracies established by, 3–4, 14–15, 16, 194–199, 210, 214–215, 219–221; and EU's construction, 36–37; populist right-wing parties promoted by, 168; responses of, to political extremism, 220–224, 226
- Elsässer, Lea, 160–161
- Erdoğan, Recep Tayyip, 147
- Erlanger, Steven, 148
- Esping-Andersen, Gøsta, 52, 66
- ESS. *See* European Social Survey
- EU. *See* European Union
- Eurobarometer surveys, 37, 97–98, 111, 236
- Euro-crisis. *See* economic crisis (Euro-crisis, 2008–2013)
- European Central Bank, 10, 19, 20, 27–30.  
*See also* Troika
- European Commission, 10. *See also* Troika
- European integration: economic satisfaction linked to support for, 42–43; effect of Euro-crisis on support for, 36–43, 32, 38; opposition to, 6; support for, 2, 10, 13, 18, 36–51, 38, 41; and support for populist right-wing parties, 155, 158; worldviews as influence on support for, 43–50
- European Monetary Union (EMU), 18
- European Parliament, 107, 117–118, 178
- European People's Party, 221
- European Social Survey (ESS), 6–8, 6n11, 30, 37–39, 44, 60, 64, 67, 78, 87, 91, 97–98, 105, 108, 113, 117, 124, 126, 128, 130, 137–139, 142, 151–152, 155, 159, 160, 163, 165–167, 171, 173, 192–193, 197, 203–204, 206, 212, 217, 223–224, 240–242
- European Union (EU): Covid-19 pandemic in, 233–236; crisis of, 10, 17–18; old-age dependency in, 86; public opinion on, 10, 18, 37, 51, 236; unemployment in, 22–23, 22. *See also* European integration
- European Values Survey (EVS), 127–128
- extremism, political, 220–224
- Farage, Nigel, 178–180, 182
- fascism, 8–9, 43, 176, 232
- Federal Reserve (United States), 18–20, 23
- Feldman, Stanley, 43–44
- Fianna Fáil (Ireland), 71
- Fico, Robert, 236
- Fidesz (Hungary), 15, 107–109, 186, 189–199, 191, 192, 205, 206, 208, 210, 212–213, 215, 221, 229–230
- Fine Gael (Ireland), 71
- Five Star Movement (Italy), 138–141, 143–144, 174–177, 225
- Foa, Roberto Stefan, 114, 117, 146, 185
- Foreign Affairs* (magazine), 5, 148, 169–170
- Forza Italia, 136, 140, 174, 177
- Fox News, 227
- FPÖ. *See* Freedom Party of Austria
- France, public protests in, 133–134
- Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), 176
- Free Democrats (Germany), 104
- Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD, Czechia), 151–152

- Freedom House, 5  
Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), 151
- Gabel, Matthew, 42  
Geddes, Andrew, 112  
Germany: and immigration, 12, 103–106, 109, 110; response to Euro-crisis, 20, 24–27, 29; and right-wing extremism, 225  
Global Populism Database, 210  
Goodwin, Matthew, 115–116, 179, 186  
government, satisfaction with, 120, 124–125  
Graham, Matthew, 219  
Great Depression, 8  
Greece: debt crisis in, 23–30; economic satisfaction in, 33; social services expenditures in, 58–59, 58; well-being and austerity measures in, 67  
Green Party (Germany), 104  
Green Party (Sweden), 222–223  
Greskovits, Béla, 194–199, 212  
Grillo, Beppe, 138  
Guthmann, Kai, 121n12  
Gyurcsány, Ferenc, 190–191, 212  
Gyurcsány scandal (Hungary), 191–194, 208
- Haggard, Stephan, 212  
health services, satisfaction with, 60–62, 61, 63  
Heinze, Justin E., 158n  
Hetherington, Marc, 43–44  
Hibbing, John, 117  
Hitler, Adolf, 187  
Hobolt, Sara, 37, 236  
Human Rights Watch, 107  
Hungarian Civic Alliance. *See* Fidesz  
Hungarian Guard, 193  
Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), 189, 191, 193n12, 194, 197  
Hungarian Social Workers' Party (MSZMP), 193n12  
Hungary: attitudes toward democracy in, 15, 116, 206–210, 220; conservative worldview in, 82n40; and immigration, 12, 15, 103, 106–109, 110, 113, 199; nationalism in, 14–15, 39, 198; political trust in, 15, 121, 212; post-communist government of, 189–193; threat to democracy in, 1, 14–15, 186–187, 188, 199, 206–215, 229–230, 237–238
- ideological polarization: by country, 129; defined, 128; democratic satisfaction in relation to, 128–130; and support for populist right-wing parties, 212–213  
IMF. *See* International Monetary Fund  
immigration, 86–113; asylum-seekers, 87, 90–91, 90, 108–109; bases of sentiment against, 98–101, 99; crisis of, 86, 88–91, 93–95, 103, 112; Denmark and, 110–112; dimensions of opinion, 92; extreme sentiment against, 94; Germany and, 12, 103–106, 109, 110; host countries' experiences of, 88, 89; Hungary and, 12, 15, 106–109, 110, 113, 199; Poland and, 15; political leadership on, 102–113; political tensions associated with, 15, 86–88, 95–96, 113; public opinion on, 11–12, 87–88, 91–113, 93; and support for populist right-wing parties, 152, 155, 158; Sweden and, 12, 96–98, 109–110, 110  
income redistribution, public support for, 78–80, 79, 80  
Inglehart, Ronald, 149, 151n9, 182–183  
institutions. *See* political institutions  
International Monetary Fund (IMF), 10, 25–26, 29, 208. *See also* Troika  
International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), 82–84  
Ireland: economic crisis's effect on, 20, 69–73, 72; social services expenditures in, 71; well-being and austerity measures in, 71–73, 74, 75  
Italy: attitudes toward democracy in, 134–145; coalition politics in, 225; nationalism in, 175; political scandals of 1990s in, 136–138; political trust in, 134–137, 139, 142–143; right-wing populism in, 136, 140–141, 174–178, 177
- Jobbik (Hungary), 108, 151, 151n9, 152, 155, 190, 193–194, 197–198  
Johnson, Boris, 180, 182

- Journal of Democracy*, 114  
J. P. Morgan, 18  
Judis, John, 8–9, 148  
Justice and Life Party (Hungary), 190  
  
Kaczynski, Jaroslaw, 199, 204–205, 208, 210, 215  
Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira, 14  
Kaufman, Robert, 212  
Kavanagh, Nolan M., 158n  
Kenworth, Lane, 59  
Key, V. O., Jr., 141–142, 216  
KOD. *See* Committee for the Defense of Democracy  
Kriesi, Hanspeter, 131  
Kristersson, Ulf, 223  
  
Labour Party (Britain), 75–76, 181  
Labour Party (Ireland), 71  
Law and Justice (Poland), 15, 186, 199–206, 202, 203, 210–213, 215, 230  
League of Polish Families, 200  
Leblond, Patrick, 37  
Lee, Frances, 226, 227  
left-right ideology, 11, 53, 81  
Lega (formerly Lega Nord, Italy), 14, 138, 140–141, 143, 151, 155, 174–177, 177, 225  
Lehman Brothers, 19  
Letta, Enrico, 139  
Levitsky, Steven, 4, 187, 189, 197, 199  
Liberal Democrats (Britain), 181  
Liberals (Sweden), 223  
liberal worldview, 44. *See also* worldviews  
life satisfaction: austerity measures and, 67–77; democratic satisfaction in relation to, 220; effect of Euro-crisis on, 11, 61, 65, 218; GDP as influence on, 66; in Hungary, 15, 207–208, 207, 220; in Ireland, 71–73, 72, 74, 75; personal characteristics linked to, 63; in Poland, 15, 208–209, 209, 220; social spending and, 59–77, 65; in Spain, 68–69, 69, 73, 74, 75; in the UK, 75–77  
Lincoln, Abraham, 3  
Lippmann, Walter, v, 15–16, 216, 233  
  
Löfven, Stefan, 222–223  
Lowell, A. Lawrence, 5  
  
Maastricht treaty, 24  
Macron, Emmanuel, 134  
Manza, Jeff, 78  
Mattarella, Sergio, 140  
May, Theresa, 180, 182  
McClosky, Herbert, 219  
media coverage: of immigration, 96–97, 111; of right-wing populism, 179  
Meloni, Giorgia, 176, 237  
Menon, Antil, 158n  
Merkel, Angela: and Euro-crisis, 20, 27, 29; and immigration, 12, 103–106, 109; and Italian politics, 138, 140; and Orbán, 221  
Messina, Anthony, 102  
Migration Policy Institute, 109  
Miller, Leszek, 200  
Modi, Narendra, 147  
Mody, Ashoka, 10, 26, 50  
Moffitt, Benjamin, 183–184  
Monti, Mario, 138–139, 225  
Morawiecki, Mateusz, 237  
Mounk, Yascha, 114, 117, 146, 185–186  
Movement for a Better Hungary. *See* Jobbik  
MSZP. *See* Hungarian Socialist Party  
Mudde, Cas, 5–6, 13–14, 117n8, 168, 184, 221, 224  
Müller, Jan-Werner, 148  
  
Napolitano, Giorgio, 138–139  
National Front (France), 1, 151, 151n9, 155  
nationalism: and anti-immigrant sentiment, 12, 112–113; in Hungary, 14–15, 39, 198; in Italy, 175; in Poland, 14–15, 39; in Spain, 173, 173n40  
National Rally (France), 151  
New Democracy (Greece), 27–28  
*Newsweek* (magazine), 147  
*New York Times* (newspaper), 5, 76, 96–97, 140–141, 175, 222, 224, 235, 237  
Norris, Pippa, 147, 149, 151n9, 182–183

- Obama, Barack, 23
- O'Brien, Matt, 8
- old-age dependency, 86–87
- Orbán, Viktor: amendment of constitution by, 194–195; democratic threat posed by, 1, 186, 194–199, 210, 213, 215, 221, 229–230; European responses to, 221; and immigration, 12, 103, 106–109, 113; popularity of, 208, 237; populism of, 210
- Pap, András, 195, 196
- Party for Freedom (PVV, Netherlands), 151, 155
- PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement), 27–28
- People of Freedom (Italy), 139
- People's Party (PP, Spain), 170–174, 172n
- People's Party Our Slovakia, 165n
- Perot, Ross, 160
- personal characteristics: democratic satisfaction associated with, 127; economic satisfaction associated with, 34, 35–36; immigration attitudes associated with, 98–101, 99, 100; political trust associated with, 122; support for European integration associated with, 40–42, 41; support for income redistribution associated with, 80–81, 80; and well-being, 63; worldviews linked to, 47, 48–49
- Pierson, Paul, 77–78
- Podemos (Spain), 151, 173
- Poland: attitudes toward democracy in, 15, 116, 205–206, 208–210, 220; conservative worldview in, 82n40; immigration in, 15; nationalism in, 14–15, 39; political trust in, 15, 121, 212; post-communist government of, 200–201; threat to democracy in, 14–15, 186–187, 188, 189, 199–215, 230, 237–238
- polarization. *See* ideological polarization
- Polish People's Party, 201
- political extremism, 220–224
- political institutions, 224–230
- political leadership, on immigration issue, 102–113
- political trust, 117–124; age as factor in, 122, 124; by country, 118–121, 119; democratic satisfaction in relation to, 121, 124–128; economic satisfaction linked to, 13, 121–123, 122, 142–143; effect of Euro-Crisis on, 12, 18, 37, 119, 120, 124; in the EU, 37; in Hungary, 15, 121, 207, 212; in Italy, 134–137, 139, 142–143; personal characteristics linked to, 122; in Poland, 15, 121, 209, 212; stability of, 12–13, 117, 118, 124; and support for populist right-wing parties, 155, 158; in various institutions, 118. *See also* democratic satisfaction
- population-weighted survey data, 244–246, 245
- populism, scholarship on, 231–232
- populist left-wing parties, 151
- populist right-wing parties, 147–184; and attitudes toward democracy, 115–116; bases of electoral support for, 152–155, 153–154, 158; bases of identification with, 155, 156–158; in Britain, 178–183, 181; by country, 149, 165, 166; identification with, 152, 155, 156–57, 192–193, 192, 201–202, 203, 204–206; issues associated with, 13, 148, 150, 152–162, 153–154, 156–158, 164, 178, 183, 190, 191, 195–196, 198–199, 201–210, 202, 203; in Italy, 136, 140–141, 174–178, 177; mobilization of, 13, 150, 168–169; sociohistorical foundation of, 14, 179, 183–184; in Spain, 169–174, 171; supply/demand explanation of, 13–14, 165–169; support for/success of, 5–6, 13–14, 147–152, 149, 162–169, 164, 166, 167, 184, 202, 236–237
- PP. *See* People's Party
- Prodi, Romano, 138, 141
- Progress Party (Norway), 151
- protests, public, 130–134, 132
- Przeworski, Adam, 114–115, 232
- PSOE. *See* Socialist Workers' Party
- public opinion: democratic role of, 3–4, 3n5, 15–16, 114–116, 145, 185, 216–220, 232–233; on economic crisis, 9–10, 30–36, 31, 32, 217, 218; on EU, 10, 18, 37, 51, 236; in Hungary,

- 15, 116, 206–210, 207, 220; on immigration, 11–12, 87–88, 91–113, 93; on life satisfaction, 11; in Poland, 15, 116, 205–206, 208–210, 209, 220; stability of, 2, 11–13, 217; on welfare state, 11, 77–85. *See also* democratic satisfaction; political trust
- public protests, 130–134, 132
- Putnam, Robert, 135
- PVV. *See* Party for Freedom
- quality of life. *See* life satisfaction
- Radcliff, Benjamin, 60, 64
- Rahn, Wendy, 160
- Rajoy, Mariano, 170
- Reagan, Ronald, 77
- redistribution. *See* income redistribution, public support for
- Reform UK, 182
- Reinfeldt, Fredrik, 222–223
- religion: immigration attitudes linked to, 12; worldviews linked to, 48, 49
- Renzi, Matteo, 139–140, 143–144
- Republican Party (United States), 1, 141, 227–228
- reservoir of right-wing populist sentiment, 162–164, 167
- responsiveness, of political system to citizen voice and influence, 160–161, 162n22
- Reston, James, 5
- right-wing populism. *See* populist right-wing parties
- Rome treaty, 36
- Rueda, David, 66n16
- Salvini, Matteo, 140–141, 144, 174–177, 237
- Sánchez, Pedro, 170, 172n
- Sarkozy, Nicolas, 27
- Schäfer, Armin, 145, 160–161
- Scharpf, Fritz, 18
- Schattschneider, E. E., 216, 217, 220
- Schumpeter, Joseph, 232
- Scruggs, Lyle, 66n16
- SD. *See* Sweden Democrats
- SDS. *See* Slovenian Democratic Party
- Self-Defense (Poland), 200–201
- Sen, Amartya, 5
- Slovakia, 133, 236–237
- Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), 151, 152, 155
- Smale, Alison, 148
- SMER-Social Democracy (Slovakia), 165n
- Social Democrats (Denmark), 110
- Social Democrats (SPD, Germany), 104–105
- Social Democrats (Sweden), 223
- Socialist Party (Italy), 136–137
- Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE, Spain), 170, 172–173
- social services. *See* welfare state
- Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS), 200
- Solyom, Laszlo, 192
- Soros, George, 213
- sovereign debt crisis, 23–30, 24
- Spain: debt crisis in, 23, 26, 28; economic satisfaction in, 33, 68; nationalism in, 173, 173n40; right-wing populism in, 169–174, 171; social services expenditures in, 58–59, 58, 68; well-being and austerity measures in, 67–69, 73, 74, 75
- SPD. *See* Freedom and Direct Democracy (Czechia); Social Democrats (Germany)
- SPP. *See* Swiss People's Party
- Stenner, Karen, 43–44
- Stimson, James, 3n5
- Stokes, Bruce, 86
- Stokes, Susan, 215
- subjective well-being. *See* economic satisfaction; well-being/life satisfaction
- Svolik, Milan, 206, 219
- Sweden: and immigration, 12, 96–98, 109–110, 110, 222; and right-wing extremism, 222–224
- Sweden Democrats (SD), 151, 151n9, 155, 169, 222–224
- Swiss People's Party (SPP), 151, 152, 155, 160, 205



- SYRIZA (Greece), 28, 29  
Szydło, Beata, 204
- Taylor, Adam, 147  
Thatcher, Margaret, 77  
Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, 117  
Tillman, Erik, 43, 159n16  
*Time* (magazine), 147  
Tooze, Adam, 19–21, 24, 26, 29–30, 36–37, 50, 53, 75  
Trichet, Jean-Claude, 19, 20  
Trilateral Commission, 5  
Troika, 10, 11, 26, 29–30, 53, 67, 169–174  
Troubled Asset Relief Program (United States), 19  
Trounstein, Jessica, 238  
True Finns, 151, 151n9, 155  
Trump, Donald, 1, 16, 147, 160, 179, 213, 227–228  
trust in government. *See* political trust  
Turkey, 212, 219  
Tusk, Donald, 201
- UKIP. *See* United Kingdom Independence Party  
unemployment: in EU, 22–23, 22; of immigrants and nationals, 89; social services expenditures on, 55–56, 57  
United Kingdom: effect of Euro-crisis on, 76; social services expenditures in, 75–76, 85; well-being and austerity measures in, 75–77  
United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), 14, 151, 155, 178–183, 181, 225  
United Left (Poland), 204  
United Nations, 107  
United States, right-wing extremism in, 226–229, 238
- van der Meer, Tom, 116  
Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, 187–189, 187n5, 188  
Varoufakis, Yanis, 25, 26, 29, 51, 67  
Venezuela, 212, 219  
Verba, Sidney, 135  
Vox (Spain), 14, 151, 155, 170–174, 171, 172n, 177
- Walker, Jack, 3n6  
Weiler, Jonathan, 43–44  
welfare state, 52–85; crisis of, 10, 52–54, 59, 84; economic satisfaction in relation to, 36n36; effect of Euro-crisis on, 11; in Greece, 58–59, 58; in Ireland, 71; post-economic crisis public opinion on, 11; public support for, 11, 77–85; resilience of, 53–59, 77–85; in Spain, 58–59, 58, 68; spending by country, 54–59, 55, 57; Troika as enemy of, 53; in the UK, 75–76, 85; and well-being, 59–77  
well-being. *See* life satisfaction  
World Bank, 208  
World Values Survey, 114–115  
worldviews: ideologies in relation to, 44; immigration attitudes linked to, 101–102; moderation of European self-reported, 81–82; national expressions of, 45–46, 46; personal characteristics linked to, 47, 48–49; support for European integration linked to, 43–50; support for income redistribution associated with, 81; survey on, 45. *See also* conservative worldview
- “yellow vests” protests (France), 133–134  
youth. *See* age
- Zaller, John, 219, 219n5  
Ziblatt, Daniel, 4, 187, 189, 197, 199