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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

I.1 – THE RETURN OF HISTORY

In a 1989 article in *The National Interest*, American political scientist Francis Fukuyama made a bold declaration: history had ended, and liberal republicanism–alongside its economic counterpart, market capitalism–had emerged its victor.[1] Though grandiose, such a pronouncement was far from unprecedented. Instead, it expressed the zeitgeist which defined Fukuyama's historical moment. The fall of the Berlin Wall and decline of the Soviet Union arrived at the culmination of a decade of neoliberal ideological consolidation in the West.   With its only remaining systemic competitor seemingly in retreat, an air of triumphalism reigned. Fukuyama did not mean to suggest that historical developments would simply cease–indeed, he acknowledged that patterns of geopolitical conflict and cooperation were likely to continue indeterminately into the future.[2] Rather, he believed that despite present society's manifest flaws, humanity had discovered the most-ideal *feasible* form of social organization. Liberal republicanism, however imperfect, marked the end state of human society's structural evolution–though significant changes would likely still occur within its framework. Margaret Thatcher's thesis would be validated: *there was no alternative.* History, however, would prove harder to bury than this story anticipated. Indeed, as David Held states in the preface to his 1996 edition of *Models of Democracy,* this "victory [...] left unresolved many important questions of democratic thought and practice".[3] The three decades since Fukuyama's pronouncement have seen history return, at times seemingly with a vengeance. 'Victory' no longer feels as pertinent a term to describe the present moment. Instead, another word has come to define the past several decades: **crisis**.

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[1] Fukuyama, "The End of History."

[2] Fukuyama, 12.

[3] Held, *Models of Democracy*, xi.

I.2 – A CRISIS OF CRISES?

Terminologically, few words have achieved such ubiquity in contemporary political discourse as 'crisis'. From the *subprime mortgage crisis* which led to the *economic* or *financial crisis* and *Eurocrisis,* to the *migration crisis* of the 2010s, the *Covid-19 crisis* of the early 2020s, to the contemporary *Ukraine crisis*–all of which have occurred alongside a multitude of *humanitarian crises,* the increasingly discussed *mental health crisis,* and the mounting *climate crisis*. While growing in severity, these latter two have been brewing throughout the entire period. This is only a list of major transnational crises; were countries' own domestic troubles to be added, the list would certainly explode. David Brooks of the New York Times confirmed this in 2020, citing five "epic crises" that the United States was facing in that year alone.[4]

Although all impactful, few of these crises has acquired a similar air of foreboding as the *crisis of democracy*–a concept whose discussion has recently become routine across media, academic, and political circles. Writing in 2016, researchers Jean-Paul Gagnon and George Vasilev counted nearly 50 publications dedicated to the subject between 2014 and 2015 alone, and over a thousand which at least discussed it.[5] Furthermore, key reports have indicated that a problem may indeed be mounting. In 2020, the University of Cambridge's Centre for the Future of Democracy published a report titled 'Global Satisfaction with Democracy', noting among its key findings that 2019 "represents the highest level of democratic discontent on record."[6] Nevertheless, despite widespread concern about such a crisis, there appears to be little consensus on its actual details. To the contrary, this is the subject of ongoing and near-endless contention. While many assert that democracy is 'in crisis', many others either disagree outright or argue the framing is overly hyperbolic[7, 8]. Those in the former group are liable to view the political status quo as increasingly dire, while those in the latter may be inclined to deride the concern itself as little more than populist hot air. The issue is politicized and, as is often the case in politics, obscured by rhetoric which makes it difficult to find clarity.

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[4] Brooks, "Opinion | America Is Facing 5 Epic Crises All at Once."
[5] Gagnon and Vasilev, "Opportunity in the Crisis of Democracy," 1.
[6] "Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020," 2.
[7] Merkel, "Is There a Crisis of Democracy?"
[8] Merkel and Kneip, *Democracy and Crisis*.

I.3 – METHODOLOGY

What then should one make of this situation? The claim that democracy is 'in crisis' is far too significant to simply ignore. The implications of such a crisis would be extraordinary, with ramifications for all levels of society. Nevertheless, as Carl Sagan once quipped, "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence". This thesis aims to evaluate and present an overview of the 'crisis of democracy'. The purpose of this exercise is not merely to understand the situation, but to derive elements which may be relevant to addressing it. To this end, analysis will focus on the concrete situations in two countries–the United States and France–and compare them to draw conclusions. The choice of these two countries is a product of both their relevance to the subject as well as their potential for comparison. Both countries feature heavily in the history of democracy in the West, and both have been highly influential in its development and spread. Both the American and French revolutions marked key turning points when democracy gained a foothold among major Western powers–and both countries have developed civic cultures which reflect this fact. Nevertheless, the two countries feature a variety of differences in their institutional structures and sociopolitical contexts which render their comparison interesting and ideally insightful. If the 'crisis of democracy' is indeed present in both countries despite their differences, what can this tell us about which factors contribute most to it?

To answer this question, the discussion will be structured into three phases. First, I will narrow the broad concepts of *democracy* and *crisis* through a brief review of relevant literature. This review is not intended to be exhaustive; democratic theory is far too broad and diverse to fully consider here. Instead, a selection of innovations made by key thinkers will help to establish a conceptual basis for later chapters' analysis. Second, I will examine the American and French political systems, emphasizing democracy's role in their national consciousness and how they practice it. In each case this will be followed by an analysis of the country's 'crisis'–relevant data, factors at play, and its implications. This analysis will focus on current trends as opposed to those throughout history[9]–not because these are unimportant, but because the aim is to determine features of the present crisis. Finally, I will apply a comparative lens to the information developed in these two parts. By putting the two parallel crises into conversation, I will address what underlies them both; what can each case

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[9] *Although historical factors will be addressed to the extent that they provide relevant context to current trends.*

tell us about the nature of the 'crisis of democracy' writ large, and what might be done about it? In conclusion, I will reiterate these points and leave with a thought: might the crisis be wielded as an opportunity?

This analysis will ultimately show that the 'crisis of democracy' belies something deeper. Instead of mere difficulties with malfunctioning political institutions, the United States and France[10] face a profound crisis of society which their political institutions increasingly struggle to accommodate. The idea that democracy faces crisis will prove an apt description, but the present situation did not emerge from nowhere. Rather, it is the product of a complex combination of longer-term trends. While true that anti-democratic groups pose an acute and growing threat, the 'crisis of democracy' may reside just as much in the mounting demands of populations increasingly convinced our societies are already out of line with their stated democratic ideals–and that they may require radical changes to ensure those ideals are practiced. As much as our societies face a crisis *of* democracy, the United States and France demonstrate that we now face a crisis *for* democracy.

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[10] *And likely a broader swath of countries left outside the present analysis.*

LITERATURE REVIEW

LR.1 – A CRISIS OF CONFUSION

Even before drawing conclusions about whether democracy could be in crisis, popular discourse on this subject leaves certain key questions unanswered. Neither concept, 'crisis' nor 'democracy', generally receives much examination itself. Both are frequently assumed so elemental that discussing them would be a waste of time. This is problematic; as any social scientist is aware, undefined terms are tinder for debates which lead nowhere. To some extent this sort of dispute is unavoidable: according to W.B. Gallie, democracy is a classic example of an "essentially-contested concept", or one "the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users."[11] By extension, any 'crisis' which concerns democracy would likely face similar discursive trouble. Nevertheless, anybody intending to analyze such a crisis must offer at least a rudimentary framework for analysis. Many have still neglected to do so. This is the overriding point of Selen A. Ercan and Jean-Paul Gagnon's 2014 piece "The Crisis of Democracy: Which Crisis? Which Democracy?", which points to the need for greater discursive clarity. Referencing a conference where scholars debated the subject, the authors note that "the two contested terms, "democracy" and "crisis," when paired, required paying particular attention to various contextual factors that give these terms their particular meaning."[12] In other words, both terms can acquire different meanings in different contexts, so it is important to be clear in how one uses them. To provide a useful basis for analysis and avoid these pitfalls, we will begin our discussion of the 'crisis of democracy' with a consideration of both terms.

LR.2 – UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY

Taking Selen and Ercan's suggestion, the first question which must be asked to discuss a 'crisis of democracy' is what 'democracy' means in this specific context. Only after contextualizing the concept can it be determined whether it faces crisis. This is easier said than done as 'democracy' can refer to a myriad of concepts with diverging implications. In

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[11] Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 169.
[12] Ercan and Gagnon, "The Crisis of Democracy," 1.

common speech, the term is often used to mean "rule of the people"[13]–either abstractly or in relation to political structures. This is reflected in the word's Greek origins, as its root words are 'demos', which translates to "people", and 'kratos', or "rule".[14] Accordingly, many theorists point to ancient Athens as the original source for Western democratic thought.[15] Aristotle in particular was among the first to define the term, which he took to be a relatively deviant and extreme form of government, though far from the worst.[16] In the millennia since, countless theorists have sought to better understand the concept and how to operationalize it–a process resulting in a proliferation of various interpretations. 'Democracy' can refer to a system of government, a set of institutions, an ideal, a process, a means to legitimize sovereign power, a call to action, or a wide variety of other ideas. Some widespread articulations include liberal, representative, participatory, deliberative, and direct democracy, among others.[17] In his 2015 book *Le bon gouvernement,* French professor Pierre Rosanvallon identifies four "dimensions" of democracy: activeness of the citizenry, political regime, structure of society, and governance.[18] In order to be democratic, he explains, each of these factors must be conducive to democracy's operation. Therefore, the complexities of democracy are not limited to its structure, but even encompass its practice and social context.

　　　While interesting, a detailed interrogation of each such conception of democracy and its practical implications lies far outside the scope of this thesis. So which definitions are relevant to the proposed 'crisis'? At the level of political systems, one form of democracy is hegemonic: *liberal representative democracy.* Originating in Western countries like the United States and France, this model has come to dominate among modern democratic regimes. The extent of its influence is such that many modern democratic theorists, themselves residing in liberal democracies, orient their theories in relation to it.[19] In other words, modern theorists may either take the liberal variety of democracy as given or make the practical decision to base their analyses on it due to its relevance. Consequently, liberal representative democracy is the form most important to discourse on democracy in such places–and broad rhetorical

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[13] Held, *Models of Democracy*, 1.
[14] Held, 1.
[15] Held, 14.
[16] Miller, "Aristotle's Political Theory."
[17] Cunningham, "Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction," 1.
[18] Rosanvallon, *Le bon gouvernement*, 31.
[19] Cunningham, "Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction," 2–3.

references to 'democracy' in general can operate as a shorthand for it. For each of these reasons, we will focus our analysis on this variety of democracy.

As the name suggests, liberal representative democracy traces its theoretical foundations to *Liberalism*, a broad school of thought which emphasizes individualism, legal equality, the concept of individual rights, a division between public and private spheres, market capitalism, and so on.[20] Political liberalism traces its origins to the Enlightenment and intellectuals like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Thomas Hobbes is best known for his 1651 book *Leviathan* in which he accepts the period's norm of monarchical power–a state structure in which sovereign power is exercised from the top. Hobbes makes a crucial innovation, however, in his conception of where such authority derives. He states that sovereign authority arises "when men agree amongst themselves to submit to some man, or assembly of men, voluntarily, on confidence to be protected by him against all others".[21] In *Models of Democracy*, David Held explains the significance of this point. He notes that Hobbes "marks an interesting point of transition between a commitment to absolutism and the struggle of liberalism against tyranny."[22] In other words, Hobbes set the stage for thinkers after him like John Locke.

In his 1690 *Second Treatise on Government,* John Locke provides an account of political power which outlines a prototype of social contract theory–a term later coined and elaborated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke imagined a conceptual "state of nature" in which society has yet to materialize. In this situation, humans exist as isolated individuals without relations amongst them; society, and the structures of power to regulate it, come into being only because these individuals consent to it. Therefore, power in society–political power–derives from the *consent of the governed.*[23] This marks a further development of Hobbes' ideas and positioned Locke firmly against the 'divine right of kings', or the idea that monarchs derive their authority directly from God. While Hobbes generally accepted monarchical power, Locke's theories set the stage for the shift to republicanism and constitutional monarchy in the centuries which followed.[24]

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[20] Held, *Models of Democracy*, 74.

[21] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civill* London, 1651, 106.

[22] Held, *Models of Democracy*, 74.

[23] Locke, "Second Treatise of Government," chap. 2.

[24] Held, *Models of Democracy*, 74.

In *The Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau takes these ideas a step further. While he generally concurs with Locke, Rousseau constructs a broader conceptual framework for how such ideas should operate in practice. He posits that the authority derived from consent of the governed requires concrete institutions to effect and mediate its use–in other words, a government[25]. In Rousseau's arrangement, the popular will manifests as legislative power, and the government is the executive tasked with carrying it out without abrogating individual rights or liberties. This is the 'contract': sovereign power is ceded by the governed on the condition that the sovereign fulfills its duties and obligations without excess. This sovereign manifests not as an individual as in a monarchy, but instead in a set of legal bodies vested with authority which designated individuals are permitted to wield. This may be referred to as a 'state'. As such, liberal democracy is characterized by sets of institutions and structures which employ democratic processes to translate the tenets of liberalism into social and political practice. In general, institutions and their operation are central to this form of democracy. The addition of the word *representative* to *liberal democracy* reflects this by denoting institutions designed to facilitate democracy's practice via indirect means[26]–a concept particularly advocated by theorists like John Stuart Mill.[27] Such institutions often include elections, parliaments, constitutions, limits on individual and institutional powers, and so on–features which are therefore relevant for evaluating how 'crisis' may manifest in such democracies. As such, political institutions will feature heavily in our analysis.

While these institutions and features are important, one fundamental question remains unanswered: what is it about liberal democracy which makes it *democratic?* Although there are countless interpretations of 'democracy', all of them return to the first fundamental element at the word's Greek roots: *rule by the people*. It is who 'the people' are and how they should 'rule' which forms the basis of much contention.[28] This principle can be found in Locke's arrangement: the consent of the governed may always be withdrawn, so it is incumbent upon those in power to exercise their mandate in service of the "public good"[29]. This means that ultimately, power and sovereignty rest in the people themselves, which is where the link between *liberal* and *democratic* becomes firmly established. This basic ideal is

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[25] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, bk. 3, part 1.
[26] *In contrast to the aptly-named 'direct democracy', which refers to the opposite.*
[27] Held, *Models of Democracy*, 104.
[28] Held, 2.
[29] Locke, "Second Treatise of Government," chap. 1, sect. 3.

central to modern democratic politics. From U.S. President Abraham Lincoln's proclamation at Gettysburg that "government of, by, and for the people shall not perish from the Earth"[30], to the contemporary French constitution's statement that the French Republic rests on "government of, by, and for the people"[31]–this principle lies at the heart of modern conceptions of democracy. The extent to which they practice it therefore also provides a metric by which they may be judged.

While these definitions are useful, they require the addition of one further assumption to render analysis possible. As democracy is based on the people's rule, the nature of 'the people' is a relevant concern. Simply put, 'the people' in a democratic arrangement must be assumed to be (more or less) rational. The extent of human rationality is a contentious philosophical debate, but analysis requires that actors have discernible reasons for their views or actions. At the very least, 'the people' must not be so irrational as to render collective decision-making impossible. Luckily, there is evidence to support this perspective: the Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020 report finds their data "implies that citizens are ultimately rational in their assessment of democratic governance, updating their views in response to the flow of information."[32] Nevertheless, while this assumption permits analysis, it is a double-edged sword; if 'the people' become dissatisfied with democracy, there is the possibility that they have decent reasons for it. Such a situation would almost certainly constitute crisis.

LR.3 – DECONSTRUCTING 'CRISIS'

What is meant by the idea that democracy could be 'in crisis'? One could argue that the 'crisis' diagnosis simply represents an assignment of blame; the contemporary onslaught of crises in general is taken as evidence of political systems' failure to mitigate them. The collective impact of so many intersecting crises is certainly a relevant concern. Taken together, the amalgamation of crises faced by Western societies in recent times presents a major challenge to governments and political leaders. Their frequent inability to produce

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[30] Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address."

[31] "Texte intégral de la Constitution du 4 octobre 1958 en vigueur | Conseil constitutionnel," https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/le-bloc-de-constitutionnalite/texte-integral-de-la-constitution-du-4-octobre-1958-en-vigueur.

[32] "Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020," 10.

satisfactory results may contribute to the development of a higher-order phenomenon some have termed 'crisis fatigue'.[33] This is a non-diagnostic term most often applied to individuals to describe the psychological effects of enduring crisis situations, likened to a sort of "burnout".[34] In the aftermath of Covid-19, a crisis whose impacts both dwarfed and amplified many others, the concept of 'fatigue' may provide a useful lens to understand political developments at the population level.[35] In this scenario, a growing slate of crises may have the paradoxical effect of rendering populations *less* supportive of measures to address them. This is due to a lack of political will to explore reform within a "fatigued" citizenry. Democracy may face dysfunction due to populations' reduced appetite for exploring solutions through the political process. While worrying, this remains an understudied phenomenon. It is not yet possible to say what its effects may be, let alone its long-term impacts.

But is this explanation sufficient to account for a 'crisis of democracy'? In a 'crisis fatigue' scenario, why is democracy singled out as the locus of trouble? If the 'crisis of democracy' merely represents a failure of crisis management and its political effects, then why not just say so? The widespread concern that democracy itself faces crisis is reason for pause. Unfortunately, this does little to clarify what such a crisis would entail. 'Crisis' is an interesting diagnosis in part because the word is extremely general. The Cambridge dictionary offers that a crisis may imply "great disagreement, confusion, or suffering", or "an extremely difficult or dangerous point in a situation."[36] By contrast, the Merriam-Webster dictionary insists on a potential for change as a crucial element, defining a crisis as "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending."[37] While often useful, dictionary definitions can only provide general guidance. Their inconsistencies render them insufficient for pointed analysis. How then might we know if democracy has truly entered a stage of crisis?

Like 'democracy', the concept of 'crisis' traces its roots to ancient Greek. In their 2006 article simply titled "Crisis", Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela W. Richter explain that the Greek 'krisis' implied a need for decisive decision-making. It specifically implicates major choices between "stark alternatives-right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death."

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[33] Flinders, "Coronavirus and the Politics of Crisis Fatigue."
[34] Coelho, "Crisis Fatigue."
[35] Petersen et al., "Pandemic Fatigue and Populism."
[36] "Crisis."
[37] "Definition of Crisis."

Applied to the political sphere, 'krisis' "was a central concept by which justice and the political order could be harmonized through appropriate legal decisions."[38]   In contrast, modern usage is far less precise. The two explain that nowadays, the term "is often used interchangeably with "unrest," "conflict," "revolution," and to describe vaguely disturbing moods or situations"[39]. This reflects the concerns raised by Erkan and Gagnon, as the range of possible meanings assigned to 'crisis' can be so broad as to render it almost meaningless. This thesis will consider crisis more carefully. Crucial to the word's origins is an implied urgency of action to address an untenable situation. Arrival at a harmful impasse ultimately proves unmanageable under the *status quo*, so reform to address root causes becomes a precondition for resolving it. This criterion is appropriate to describe present crises such as the 2008 financial crisis. At that time, the *status quo ante* of an under-regulated investment banking sector, justified by laissez-faire economic ideology, proved incompatible with the broader goal of stable and growing economies. Preservation of the latter therefore required abandoning that *status quo*. This laid the foundations for a new social arrangement in which the conditions which created the crisis were no longer present. Assuming 'crisis' is used consistently across cases, a 'crisis of democracy' would therefore entail something similar: a failure to reconcile democracy with the *status quo* of politics or society.

It is at this point that David Held introduces a useful distinction in *Models of Democracy,* between "partial" or "limited" crises, and those with "transformative potential". The critical difference between the two is that whereas the former can be resolved within society's existing framework, the latter portends "challenges to the very core of the political order."[40]   Such a crisis would run deep–beyond what can be addressed through tweaks or reforms of the political status quo.   Rather, it would imply a critical dissonance between desired social arrangements and those which exist. A 'crisis of democracy' would invariably cut to the core of the political order–an indication that it may well fall into Held's second category. Interestingly, Reinhart and Richter conclude their etymological investigation of 'crisis' with a remark which ominously reflects this. The two note that the term's often vague usage in the modern era "may itself be viewed as the symptom of a historical crisis that cannot

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[38] Koselleck and Richter, "Crisis," 358–59.
[39] Koselleck and Richter, 399.
[40] Held, *Models of Democracy*, 241.

as yet be fully gauged."[41]   As we delve into our analysis of the crisis of democracy, their intuitions may prove more prescient than ever.

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[41] Koselleck and Richter, "Crisis," 399.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1.1 – FROM DE TOCQUEVILLE TO DONALD TRUMP

While many countries refer to themselves as 'democratic', relatively few claim the concept as such an integral component of their identity as the United States of America. The United States is a relatively young country, having declared its independence from the United Kingdom less than 250 years ago on July 4, 1776. In the two centuries since, the United States built itself a name and reputation, rapidly ascending to usurp the British as the world's lead superpower. Despite its comparatively short history, the United States is home to the world's oldest constitution which remains in use, as it has retained its original political system without interruption since the document's ratification in 1788. Although the term 'democracy' is never directly referenced either there or in the American Declaration of Independence, one can find the concept's basic principles at the foundations of both. The American constitution begins with a reference to the source of the nation's power: "we the people…"[42], while the Declaration of Independence draws clear inspiration from Locke with its assertion that "governments … [derive] their just power from consent of the governed" and that the people retain the right "to alter or abolish it."[43] It is thus unsurprising that the association between the United States and democracy has existed since the country's founding. This fact was famously noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1835 work *Democracy in America*, where he unambiguously pronounced that "America is a land of democracy."[44] This association has remained firm ever since, at least in the country's own national mythology. Born in the milieu of the late 18th-century, the American political system was indeed innovative for its time, if not radical. Rightly or wrongly, this has contributed to a general belief in the country's "exceptionalism" among the American population. A crisis of democracy in the United States, therefore, would indicate something substantial at the level of American national identity. The University of Cambridge's 'Democracy in the World 2020' report explains that this would implicate "a profound shift in America's view of itself, and

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[42] Philadelphia Convention, "U.S. Constitution."

[43] Hancock and Representatives of the Thirteen Colonies, "American Declaration of Independence."

[44] Tocqueville, "Democracy in America — Volume 1," chap. X.

therefore, of its place in the world."[45] Beyond its domestic implications, such a crisis would indeed have a global impact.

Notwithstanding the United States' unsurpassed hard power, the longevity of its political institutions has granted the United States a nearly unparalleled degree of ideological cache among democracy's advocates. Reformers in many countries, particularly other former colonies in the Americas, have sought to emulate the American political system. The U.S. constitution even influenced notable figures like Filipino nationalist Jose Rizal and Chinese nationalist Dr. Sun Yat-Sen[46]–whose legacy is today claimed by *both* the Communist Party of China and the Taiwanese Kuomintang. Therefore, the American model's impact is far-reaching even before considering the country's massive global sway and many American leaders' (ostensible) attempts to spread it abroad. The question of whether American democracy may face crisis is therefore not merely a local concern, but a global one. A United States in crisis would have ramifications across the world, so it is imperative that we understand the parameters of such a situation. This is what we will try to do here, starting with the events which catapulted these concerns into the public conversation.

January 6, 2021 marked a turning point in US history–one who's impacts have yet to fully materialize. Following the November 2020 election of Joseph R. Biden Jr. to the presidency–unseating incumbent President Donald J. Trump–a crowd gathered in Washington, D.C. to rally in support of the latter. Not coincidentally, this took place in the vicinity of the U.S. capitol where the congress was certifying the election's results. Boldly declaring that his opponents had "stolen the election", Donald Trump made little effort to hide his desire that his supporters *do something about it.* Following his speech, the crowd fulfilled his wish by marching to the U.S. capitol in support of the man they viewed as the "true winner". The events which followed take various names depending on who one asks, being referred to as an "insurrection" or "coup attempt" by most, but also a "peaceful demonstration" or even a "leftist false flag operation" by certain segments of the right-wing. In any case, Trump's supporters violently invaded the capitol building–the first time such an event had occurred in American history. Notably, these supporters included members of organized far-right militia groups which have rapidly grown in membership and activity in

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[45] "Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020," 20.
[46] Kratz, "Global Influence of the U.S. Constitution."

recent years. Their stated goal: "taking their country back".[47] The insurrection widely served as a wake-up call, eliciting one question above all: *how did things get this bad?*

1.2 – TRACKING AMERICANS' PERSPECTIVES

For many, the invasion of the U.S. capitol was merely the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back, providing irrefutable evidence of a crisis in American democracy. At the same time, the event merely capped off four years of Donald Trump's presidency, a period marked by an increasing tolerance of right-wing extremism and the prevalence of "alternative facts". For this reason, Trump's presidency is often cited as the moment America went wrong. Less discussed but equally important, however, is how the U.S. arrived at Trump himself. Far from a political "black swan", Trump's election was preceded by numerous developments which contributed to it. As will become clear, Trump and his insurrection may be best understood not purely as causes of the crisis, but also as symptomatic of problems which run far deeper.

The idea that American democracy faces crisis is hardly new. In fact, a 1975 report written for a private international organization in Japan referenced a problematic "democratic distemper" in the United States characterized by a "decline in the authority of American governing institutions."[48] The report pointed to factors like increasing political extremism, a dearth in public confidence, state financial precarity, and the long-term effects of the U.S.' adventurous wars in East Asia as contributing factors. That this report was followed five years later by the election of Ronald Reagan, a marked shift in the fortunes of the religious right-wing, should not be discounted. Thirty years later, another paper pointed to a similar crisis, arguing that a politicized media formed a crucial pillar in the election of President George W. Bush.[49] The idea that American democracy faces serious challenges is therefore nothing new. Nevertheless, recent events have given these ideas–and the necessity of understanding them–a new air of urgency. Unfortunately, evidence for the crisis is far from lacking.

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[47] "Capitol Riots Timeline."

[48] Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*, 106.

[49] Kellner, "The Media and the Crisis of Democracy in the Age of Bush-2."

A multitude of reports and studies use quantitative methods to evaluate the state of U.S. society and politics. In general, these either utilize survey methodology to collect data from a representative sample of the U.S. population or analyze and showcase official statistics. These reports are usually not intended to determine the status of democracy as such, but instead offer a diverse variety of lenses useful for evaluating it. One particularly well-known polling company is Gallup, which conducts a variety of surveys on a regular basis to determine Americans' viewpoints and their evolution over time. In recent years, their results have not been encouraging. One question illustrates this point above all; starting in
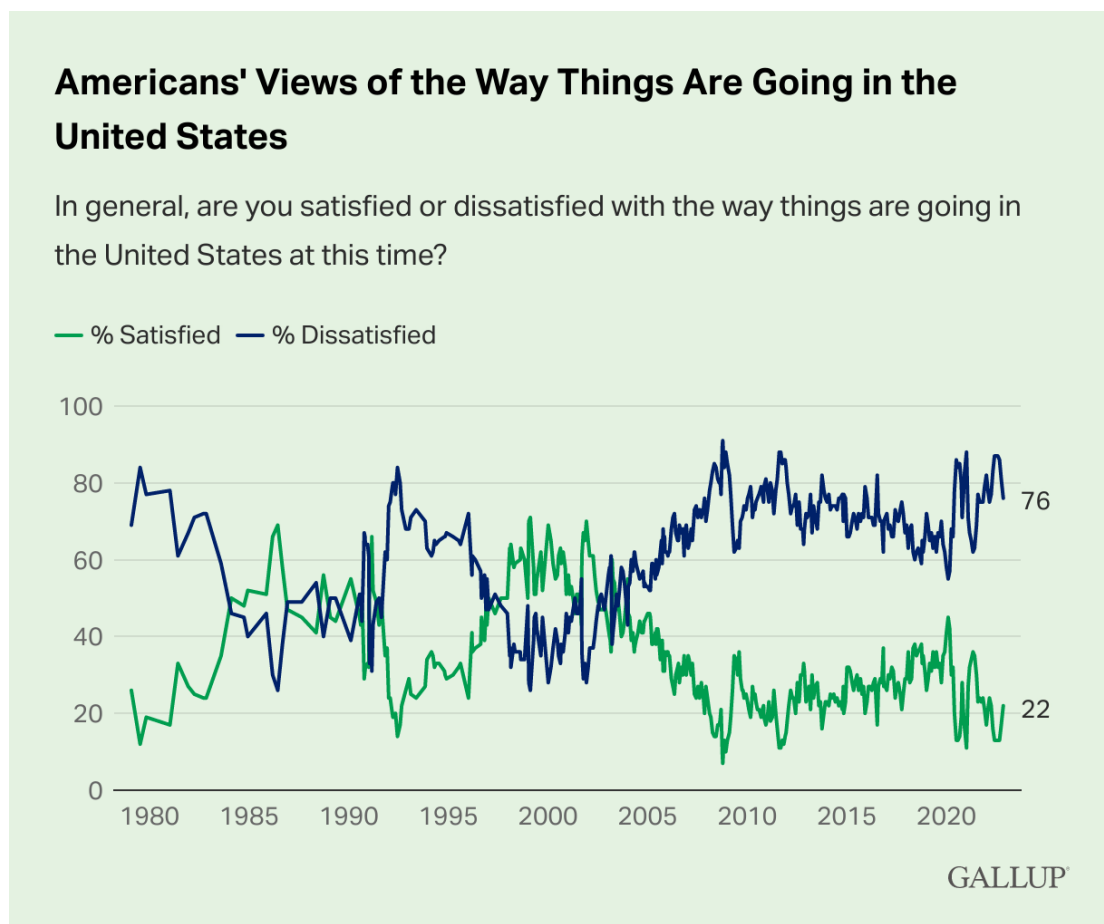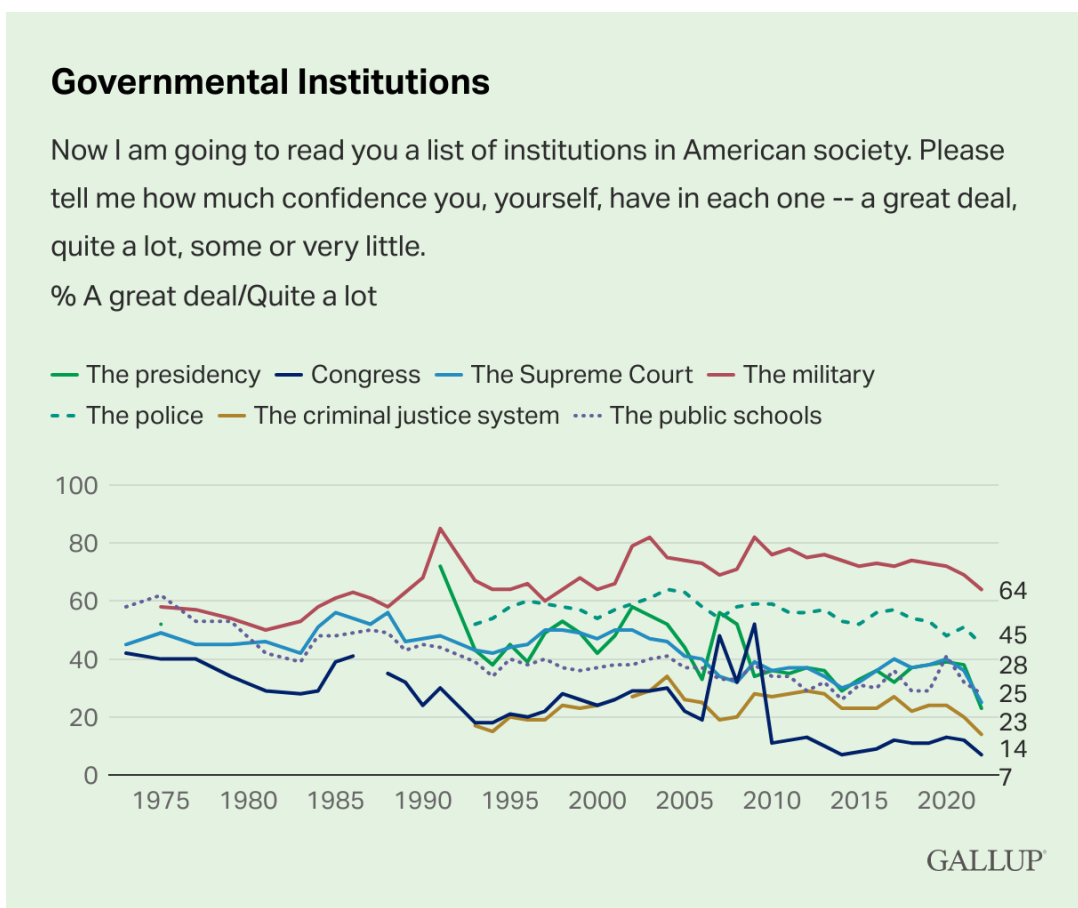

the mid-1970s, the company began asking Americans each year whether they are satisfied with "the way things are going in the United States". The results are charted below:

Figure 1: Americans' General Satisfaction – Source: Gallup Polling 2022[50]

These data present a worrying trend. Up to the mid-2000s, Americans' satisfaction was highly volatile, flipping back and forth at least once per decade. Volatility is not

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[50] Gallup Inc., "Indicators: Leadership Approval and Trust in Institutions."

necessarily negative; practically, it means that Americans were mostly satisfied at least some of the time. Since then, however, that volatility has given way to a worrying consistency: those expressing general satisfaction have remained in the minority, most often by a factor of 2-3. Nevertheless, although important, general dissatisfaction does not alone reflect problems with democracy. More relevant is its tendency to change in relation to democratic decision-making. For example, the rapid increase in dissatisfaction around 1991-2 may indicate public disapproval following the 1991 recession. This fact helps to explain Bill Clinton's successful 1992 campaign to replace President George H. W. Bush given the tendency of incumbents to win reelection. Given this, the recent trend of dissatisfaction to remain high despite three high-profile transfers of power–from George W. Bush to Barack Obama, from Obama to Donald Trump, and from Trump to Joe Biden–suggests that the outcomes of democratic processes have ceased having notable impacts on aggregate satisfaction. Indeed, public attitudes towards these processes, and the institutions which

Governmental Institutions

Now I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one -- a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little.

% A great deal/Quite a lot

— The presidency — Congress — The Supreme Court — The military
-- The police — The criminal justice system ···· The public schools

GALLUP

regulate them, has also shifted. In the same survey, Gallup asked Americans their level of confidence in public institutions:

Figure 2: Americans' Confidence in Government – Source: Gallup Polling 2022[51]

In the context of Americans' broad dissatisfaction, these data are hardly surprising. Out of all the institutions mentioned, Congress receives the least public confidence. Only 7% of all Americans expressed a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the institution–a nearly 6-fold reduction from the first year of the survey in 1973. This is intriguing because the body is directly elected by the same people dissatisfied with it. As the legislative arm of the U.S. federal government, Congress wields the most power to effect society's democratic will. No other institution received single digits, but the trend of decreasing confidence is also present for the criminal justice system (14% approval), the Presidency (23%), the Supreme Court (25%), and the public school system (28%). Interestingly, only two institutions have maintained near-stable degrees of public confidence: the police (45%)[52] and the military (64%), the latter of which marks a slight increase. These results are worrying; both directly elected institutions, the Congress and the Presidency, receive low approval ratings. The justice system, responsible ensuring the integrity of the democratic process, is viewed similarly negatively. Only the two institutions least subject to democratic input–those charged with the use of state force domestically and abroad–elicit much confidence. It takes little imagination to see the dangers of such a situation or how they might indicate a democracy in crisis.

While Gallup is only one institution, its data are corroborated by those gathered by others. Another influential American polling organization, Pew Research Center, conducts similar surveys of the US population. In a somewhat more general survey than Gallup's, Pew also found similarly low levels of trust in US federal institutions. As of 2022, Pew recorded that only around 20% of Americans expressed trust in

Low public trust in federal government has persisted for nearly two decades

*% who say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right **just about always/most of the time***
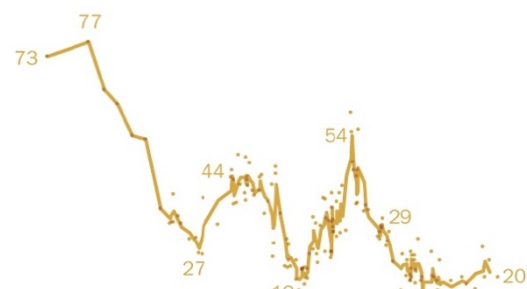
Figure 3: Americans' Trust in the Federal Government
Source: Pew 2022 (Nadeem)

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[51] Gallup Inc.

[52] *In an article explaining these results, Gallup notes that the police confidence number marks a slight departure from the norm. Normally, the police maintain majority confidence, and their slight dip may be a consequence of a recent spate of brutality and murders of black citizens like George Floyd.* Gallup Inc., "Confidence in U.S. Institutions Down; Average at New Low."

the federal government, a figure which had remained constant for "nearly two decades"[53], a timeframe which parallels Gallup's data on satisfaction trends. The implication is clear: Americans' satisfaction on the direction of the country in general is correlated with their perspective on the country's governing institutions–and the verdict is not positive.

Nevertheless, Pew explains that this data reflects an apparent paradox. Intriguingly, "Americans' unhappiness with government has long coexisted with their continued support for government having a substantial role in many realms."[54] To make sense of this, Pew asked a further series of questions designed to gauge respondents' views of the federal government's actions. Specifically, Pew asked on whose behalf they believe the government currently acts versus on whose it ought to. The results are stark: nearly across the board, Americans think the federal government does too little for almost everybody. The sole exception to this is the wealthy, with a large majority (61%) of respondents saying the

Majorities of Americans say federal government does too little to address issues affecting several groups, including lower- and middle-income people, retirees
% who say the federal government does ___ to address issues affecting each of the following people
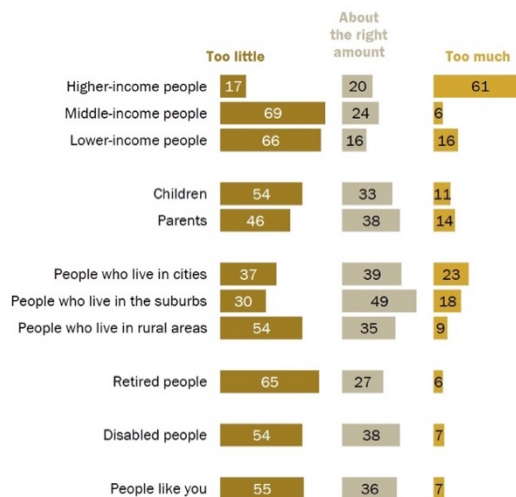
Figure 4: Who the Federal Government Represents
Source: Pew 2022 (Nadeem)

government focuses too much on their issues to the exclusion of others. Not a single other social group even receives a quarter of respondents saying the government does "too much" on their behalf. This disparity indicates that a simple preference for 'smaller government'–an oft-repeated and little-questioned stereotype about Americans–is likely not the determining factor. Instead, something more significant is at play. Americans seem relatively united in the opinion that the government does too little for almost everybody except higher-income groups–something particularly notable at a time when broad agreement on many political questions can feel out of reach. Indeed, this 'unity in dissatisfaction' masks yet another, similarly pervasive phenomenon which has become a defining feature of contemporary American politics: so-called "polarization".

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[53] Nadeem, "Americans' Views of Government."

[54] Nadeem.

1.3 – THE DISUNITED STATES

The idea that the US politics are "polarizing" is another underexamined refrain that tends to be taken as common sense in political discourse. The term is frequently used synonymously with the "collapse of the center", or the idea that political moderation is dying as people shift to political extremes. Worth bearing in mind is that where citizens are polarizing to (i.e., what are the 'poles' in question) can be dynamic and does not necessarily indicate growing extremism. At its core, "polarization" simply refers to a trend of increasing social coalescence into distinct and oppositional groups with reducing degrees of overlap. This is conceptually similar to the idea of "siloization", or a trend of reduced cooperation in the context of specialization or perceptions of low thematic overlap.[55] Polarization takes this a step further, however: while 'silos' can create difficulties for communication and cooperation between groups of actors, they are not, by their nature, oppositional. By contrast, polarization directly implicates *identity* and reflects deepening in-group vs. out-group orientations. This can mutate into direct animosity, a phenomenon referred to as 'affective polarization'.[56] In the case of the United States, with its entrenched two-party political structure, polarization has principally revolved around party affiliation. In 2020, three researchers from Stanford and Brown Universities sought to model this trend and compare the United States with other developed countries. They found that not only had political polarization "increased substantially in the US in recent decades", but that the pace of American polarization outstripped that of eleven other OECD countries.[57] Other researchers have corroborated this conclusion[58] and its impact has been noted as increasingly problematic for addressing key issues, particularly climate change.[59, 60] But what does this mean for how democracy operates in the United States?

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[55] Wiktionary, "Siloization."

[56] Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States."

[57] Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization."

[58] Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States."

[59] Fisher, Waggle, and Leifeld, "Where Does Political Polarization Come From?"

[60] "The US News Media, Polarization on Climate Change, and Pathways to Effective Communication."

One further question asked by Pew Research since 2021 provides some insight. In these surveys, Americans were asked a question which dives to the heart of this lack of confidence in democratic institutions: whether they have "trust and confidence in the wisdom of the American people when it comes to making political decisions".[61] The results are as illuminating as they are disconcerting: fully 76% of respondents said they have either not much or no such trust. This is polarization in action: a divided population has utterly lost faith in their fellow citizens. This has serious ramifications for the ability of a democratic society to function. If democracy is understood to refer, at its most basic, to the principle of "rule by the people", then what happens when that people no longer trusts itself to do so? Indeed, if the legitimacy of a democratic government is supposed to come from the people, then how does this

Trust in the wisdom of the American people declines

% who say they have ____ (of) trust and confidence in the wisdom of the American people when it comes to making political decisions
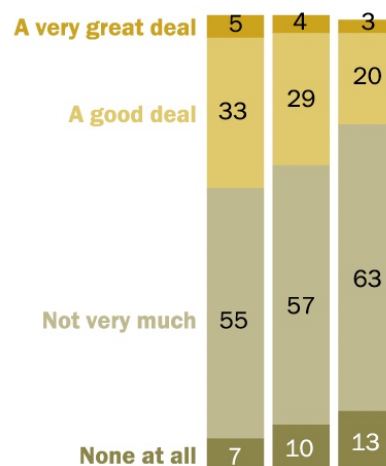

Figure 5: Trust in the American People
Source: Pew 2021 (Nadeem)

work if the people themselves are viewed as lacking it? While these are theoretical questions, they are critically relevant to how democracy is put into practice. It is this central fact which transforms an unfortunate situation of dissatisfaction with government into a true crisis of democracy. For this reason, it is imperative to explore possible reasons behind these trends.

While the stark growth of polarization and mistrust are complex issues, many point to the rise of both social media[62] and a consolidated media sector as contributing factors. The latter is particularly singled out for prioritizing ratings and profitability over information accuracy.[63] This attention is well-deserved; although media represents only one sector of a broad and diverse modern society, it plays a central role in democracy's operation. Decisions in a democracy require a citizenry with sufficient knowledge to make them–and so it is the duty of information providers to do so diligently and accurately. Failure to do so threatens the entire process. The George W. Bush-era paper makes the case that this is precisely what has occurred, stating that U.S. corporate media conglomerates had abrogated this

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[61] Nadeem, "2. Views of Congress, the Supreme Court and the Political System."
[62] Beam, Hutchens, and Hmielowski, "Facebook News and (de)Polarization."
[63] "The US News Media, Polarization on Climate Change, and Pathways to Effective Communication."

responsibility in a manner which undermines the democratic process.[64] If this is the case, it is compelling evidence that these actors contributed to the crisis' development. Different segments of the population being provided with contrary information would almost certainly feed social divisions. Nevertheless, it would be an error to lay the blame solely at the feet of media or social media. A focus on these actors supplies the crisis story with a *who*, but does little to explain *why*. These organizations are comprised of citizens living within the same democratic framework as everybody else, so it is critical to understand how they may end up undermining it–even unintentionally. The answer may even help to make sense of Americans' growing mistrust of their fellow citizens.

The author of the same paper, writing in 2004, traces the crisis' origins deeper. While the media play a crucial role, he explains, they are ultimately governed by something even more powerful–a set of institutional incentives which structure their decision-making. These incentives are not geared towards the provision of accurate and reliable information but rather to wielding their social and economic influence to maximize their own growth and profitability. While this incentive structure had long existed, media companies' activities were previously restrained by a strong regime of public regulation. This all changed in the late 20th century when successive governments embarked on a push to deregulate–leading to massive media consolidation and a shift to "tabloidization", or an information-as-entertainment model.[65] Critical to an entertainment model is a focus on viewer retention–it is the job of the entertainer to ensure people keep coming back for the entertainment. Consequently, media groups began to cater their information to different groups of consumers with greater intensity than ever before. Actors like Fox News, the most-viewed cable news channel in the U.S., and radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh, used their position to build loyal (paying) audiences through information distortion, fear tactics, and casting other sources as untrustworthy. The rise of social media companies like Facebook, operating based on the exact same incentives, built algorithms that ensured users kept returning to their platforms by segmenting them into informational echo chambers where disinformation spread unchecked. The key feature to understand in these cases is the relevant incentives. It is unlikely that individuals working in media or social media companies intend for their actions to harm democracy. Rather, their immense social and economic power–now unbridled from

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[64] Kellner, "The Media and the Crisis of Democracy in the Age of Bush-2," 31.
[65] Kellner, 30.

deregulation–meant that their mundane pursuit of profit was rendered capable of fomenting polarization and animosity as an externality. That the foundations of society can be so threatened by the actions of private actors is certainly concerning, but the case of the media is unfortunately far from the norm. As it will become clear, the threat is widespread.

1.4 – THE TRAJECTORY OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Analyzing the troubles now faced by American democracy, researchers have proposed a variety of different explanations. Some point to systemic factors like primary elections[66] or the inherent divisiveness of the two-party system, while others point to the Citizens' United Supreme Court Case which opened the door to widespread spending on private lobbying or the actions of various individuals, even politicians themselves. The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report lists a variety: polarization, government shutdowns, corruption, the Iraq war, and inequality, they say, "have all weighed against Americans' view of the ability of their democracy to deliver."[67] With the exception of polarization, each of these issues is related. Government shutdowns can be viewed as the product of politicians' disinterest in serving the public good. This, in turn, is seen as resulting from a pervasive deference to private lobbies and moneyed interests. Americans refer to this phenomenon as "money in politics", to which many attribute politicians' paradoxical resistance to domestic social spending yet enthusiasm for expensive war adventures abroad. But how do these observations align with political reality?

The problem of private interests' influence on government is hardly new. To the contrary, it is a defining feature–and source of conflict–in politics in general. With remarkable prescience, James Madison wrote in *The Federalist Papers* (Federalist 10, 1789) that the "various and unequal distribution of property" fomented "factionalism" by creating a divergence in different social groups' economic interests. If allowed to persist unchecked, he warned, this would inevitably lead to one group dominating the other–an inherent danger to democratic or republican governance. Preservation of the common interest therefore

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[66] Hirano, "Primary Elections and Partisan Polarization in the U.S. Congress."
[67] "Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020," 20.

mandated government regulation to ensure groups' interests were kept in balance.[68] Unfortunately, the intensity of factionalism (or polarization) in the modern U.S. indicates his words may not have been heeded. Americans may have valid reasons to be suspicious of whose interests are truly represented at the federal level.

In their innovative 2014 study "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens", Marten Gilens and Benjamin Page of Princeton University conducted a large-scale correlative analysis of policy outcomes compared to population preferences. The study's aim was to evaluate which political theories best reflected policy choices in practice. To do this, the researchers examined how support for various policies among various groups relates to policy outcomes. Summarizing their findings, they explain that "multivariate analysis indicates that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence".[69] Although the researchers must make certain simplifications for their analysis–such as defining 'economic elites' as those in the top 10% of the U.S. income distribution–their results nevertheless paint a clear picture. The policies ultimately chosen by the U.S. government correlate most strongly with a family of theories called 'Economic Elite Domination', or those which posit that "policy making is dominated by individuals who have substantial economic resources".[70] This is notably not a particularly democratic arrangement–and indeed this study has led some to begin labelling the United States an oligarchy.[71] At the same time, others caution, these results can be subject to interpretation, so although worrying, they may not warrant such alarmism.[72] In any case, the study's authors do not mince words, explaining near the paper's end: "In the United States, our findings indicate, the majority does not rule—at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes. When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose."[73] Whether or not these results should be taken at face value, the aforementioned Pew Research poll indicates Americans do not need further convincing; they already believe their

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[68] Madison, "Federalist 10."
[69] Gilens and Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics," 564.
[70] Gilens and Page, 576.
[71] "Study: US Is an Oligarchy, Not a Democracy - BBC News."
[72] Cassidy, "Is America an Oligarchy?"
[73] Gilens and Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics," 576.

government ignores their interests. In this light, the 2016 election of a candidate who vowed to "drain the swamp" of a corrupt, disconnected Washington D.C. seems less unprecedented after all.

Each of these facts prompts a rather obvious question: if the U.S. political situation is so dire–or at least, its people perceive it to be so–then why has nothing changed? Why, instead, has the situation seemingly gotten worse over the past several decades? This question drives to the heart of the American model of democracy. In concluding their study, Gilens and Page reference a "strong status quo bias built into the U.S. political system" to explain why "even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it."[74] Richard Albert, writing in 2022 for the California Law Review, confirms this fact by explaining that the American constitution is among the world's most difficult to amend. Consequently, foundational political reform lies almost entirely out of reach.[75] He notes that the success rate of proposed constitutional amendments is 27 out of some 12,000, or 0.002%–and this number is dominated by amendments early in U.S. history. Reformists have largely given up attempts at deep structural reform, instead turning to the court system–and especially the U.S. Supreme Court–to attempt to bring "reform" via novel interpretations of existing text. This process is called 'Judicial Review' and it has played an increasingly powerful role in shaping modern American politics.[76] This role is a double-edged sword, however, as the "reforms" brought by court interpretations can be rolled back at any time–just as recently occurred when the Supreme Court, now packed with loyal right-wing ideologues, overturned Roe v. Wade. The court's dwindling approval, paired with an ongoing corruption scandal involving one of its members[77] and its steadfast refusal to increase transparency, do not bode well for future attempts at reform via this avenue.

The crisis in American democracy runs deep. At the surface level, Americans are widely discontent with the direction their society is heading. Majorities agree that the U.S. government does little to represent the general population's interests, and it is no longer uncommon to hear the U.S. described as an 'oligarchy' instead of a 'democracy'. If "rule by the people" is taken as democracy's most important value, then these Americans might have a point. At the same time, Americans' unity in desiring change is stymied by an intense

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[74] Gilens and Page, 576.
[75] Albert, "The World's Most Difficult Constitution to Amend?"
[76] Schneier, *Crafting Constitutional Democracies: The Politics of Institutional Design*, 225–26.
[77] Pengelly, "US Ethics Watchdog Calls on Clarence Thomas to Resign over Undisclosed Gifts."

polarization in their views of what those changes should be. This is an irresolvable contradiction which manifests in paralysis at the federal level. The American political system, stubbornly resisting change, is no friend in this process–a fact reflected in Americans' steadily-dwindling confidence in its institutions. This is reflective of a profound crisis–not merely of political institutions, but of the democratic society they are meant to represent. As will become clear, while the U.S. faces unique difficulties, it is not alone. The case of France, a country mired in many similar difficulties, proves that the crisis knows no borders. Only by considering the two together will it become clear why this is.

THE FRENCH REPUBLIC

2.1 – ROLLERCOASTER REPUBLICANISM

The history of democracy in the French Republic provides a unique foil to that of the United States. On their face, the two share much in common: both are liberal republics which trace their origins to revolutions in the late 18th century, both consider a democratic culture as integral to their national identities, both have been broadly influential in shaping modern discourse on democracy, and both have a history as global powers which helped spread their ideals far and wide. Despite this, differences between the two could not be more stark. In contrast to the slow reformism of the American political system, defined by a near-religious devotion to the will of the country's founders and their written legacy, France is a country of rapid and tumultuous change. In France, the constitution is important, but even more important is the people's capacity to change it. Although France's official title is the *French Republic,* it is also referred to as the *Fifth French Republic*–a reference to the fact that the country has been governed by four other republican constitutions since the original republic's founding following the French Revolution. Each of these has resulted from some form of tumult such as another revolution, loss of a war to an external power, or both–and periods between republics were interspersed with a variety of monarchies, attempts at empire, and even a short-lived communal experiment in Paris. In each case, however, France would return to liberal republicanism and with it, the ideals of the revolution.

Just as the Constitution is a powerful symbol of the American national identity, the Revolution is an equally-powerful symbol of the French one–a defining feature of the country's political culture. Indeed, the case of France illustrates something fundamental about revolution: its cyclical nature. While nowadays the term has generally come to refer to political shifts brought about by popular revolt, it is not coincidental that the word can also refer to an object's return to an original state. Like a cyclical rollercoaster, France departs and returns to the ideals which animated the original revolution in 1789. These ideals are today marked by three words which are routinely emblazoned across many public locations: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.[78] Sourced from the first revolution, the trifecta represents the three

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[78] *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* [FR]

perpetual demands of the French people towards their government. France has the first word, liberty, in common with the United States, but it would be difficult to claim that either equality or brotherhood features so heavily in American popular consciousness. The addition of the latter two principles illustrates one crucial difference which renders French democracy distinct from the American model: instead of employing a purely negative conception of liberty–freedom from outside intrusion–the French insist it is the sovereign responsibility of their government to pursue social equality and safeguard solidarity. This is the manifest result of one crucial difference between the two countries' revolutions, one which continues to play out in their modern politics: although both were *liberal* revolutions, that in the United States was far less ideologically radical than its counterpart in France. Unlike in the United States, where material motivations for revolution principally lay among property-owners resentful of British interference, the French Revolution was driven by the demands of desperate masses against the indulgent nobility of the *ancien régime.*[79] Ultimately, the two revolutions would diverge less in their dedication to "liberty" as such, but rather in their perception of how to practice it–and what measures were necessary to secure it. Writing his *Oeuvres* in 1847, the Marquis de Condorcet explained that the French Revolution was "fuller and more prompt, but stormier" whereas the American Revolution was "slower and more incomplete, but more tranquil".[80] In the former, "one had to buy freedom and happiness with temporary troubles", while in the latter, "these troubles were avoided, but perhaps by delaying for a long time enjoyment of a part of these goods which it would have infallibly produced".[81] This tradition is the mantle which today's French Republic carries the historical duty to uphold.

Among the four republics which preceded it, the Fifth French Republic (*Cinquième République française*) is unique. While all prior French Republics were parliamentary republics, with the bulk of national power lying in the elected legislature, France is today a presidential republic highly centralized around the figure of the president. This structure was born of the vision of one man: General Charles de Gaulle, the French hero of the Second World War who would go on to serve two terms as the country's president from 1959-69. Charles de Gaulle oversaw a France facing a combination of significant domestic unrest and a precarious

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[79] Losurdo, *Liberalism*, 135.
[80] Condorcet, *Oeuvres*, 6:197 [FR].
[81] Condorcet, 6:197 [FR].

geopolitical environment–problems which legislative authorities were incapable of addressing with sufficient speed or firmness. Indeed, this state of affairs could be considered a crisis in its own right–one which the existing French Republic was no longer capable of remedying. Steadfast in his belief that France required a strong leader capable of ensuring stability through direct and rapid action, de Gaulle sought to centralize power within his own office of president. He proposed a new constitution based on these principles which passed narrowly in a national referendum, thus founding the Fifth French Republic.[82] For de Gaulle, the preservation of internal stability was paramount and overrode concerns about public accountability, representation, or democratic governance–and the institutions of the Fifth Republic reflect this.[83] This republic has since become the third longest-lasting regime in French history, after only the original *ancien régime* monarchy and the 1870-1940 Third Republic. Whether it will stand the test of time to become France's longest-lasting republic in August 2028, or fall to the same instability it sought to overcome, remains to be seen. Whatever its fate, it has become clear that the current French Republic finds itself in dire straits.

At the time of writing, not long has passed since an event which thrust this fact firmly into the French national conversation. On Thursday March 16th, 2023, French president Emmanuel Macron opted to force through a deeply unpopular reform of the country's pension system, raising the retirement age from 62 to 64–a decision which provoked an outpouring of opposition and protest.[84] He did this by invoking article 49.3 of the French constitution, which grants him the ability to bypass parliament once per legislative session–a fact which illustrates the sweeping powers wielded by French presidents. This marked the twelfth time his administration has invoked it since his first election in 2016. Although a series of governments in the 1990s invoked the article significantly more than Macron,
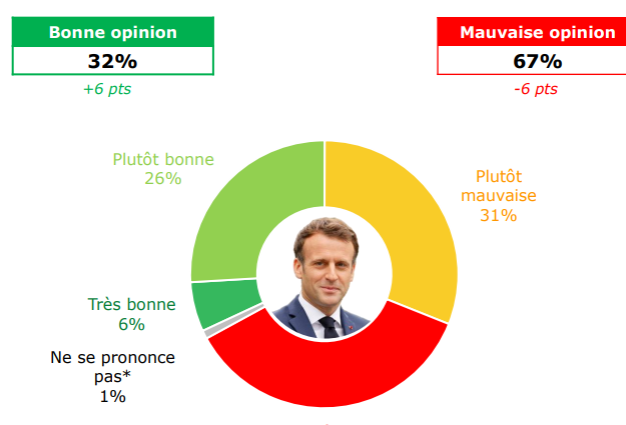

Figure 6: Emmanuel Macron Approval Ratings
Source: RTL 2023

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[82] Rosanvallon, *Le bon gouvernement*, 135–37, 142 [FR].
[83] Shields, "Political Representation in France: A Crisis of Democracy?," 130.
[84] Goar, "French Pension Reform."

his willingness to force his agenda past parliament does mark a departure from the past two decades in which administrations were comparatively hesitant. In fact, new restrictions were placed on the article's use in a constitutional amendment in 2008, in part due to its deep unpopularity.[85] In this context, Macron's actions have been widely perceived as undemocratic, though technically legal. Macron has not helped himself, as his declaration that France requires a "Jupiterian" president and his apparent disregard for popular opinion have led many to label him "arrogant" and "brutal".[86] Today, he is deeply unpopular, with a full two-thirds of those surveyed in a May 26 RTL poll expressing a negative opinion.[87] As will become clear, Macron's predicament is only the tip of a profound iceberg. French democracy, like that in the United States, faces major challenges.

2.2 – LE GRAND MÉCONTENTEMENT

Just as in the United States, the present situation has been met with a chorus of concern in the French popular discourse. The declaration that France faces a 'crisis of democracy' has become commonplace. Media from across the political spectrum have raised the subject; one can find it discussed in the pages of *Le Monde*[88]*, Le Figaro*[89]*, Libération*[90]*, L'Humanité*[91]*,* and *FranceInfo*[92]*,* among others. The collapse of the traditional centrist parties, the Socialists and the Republicans, and the associated rise of figures to their right and left alike emblematize this trend. In particular, the far-right leader Marine Le Pen has garnered a massive following on promises of national rejuvenation through stricter controls on immigration. To a lesser extent, the left-wing Jean-Luc Mélenchon has built a sizeable coalition while arguing that the Fifth Republic is unreformable and must be replaced with a Sixth based on decentralization and a return to parliamentarism. Although Macron managed to best the former in the second round of France's 2022 presidential election, this is widely

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[85] Imbach and Geoffroy, "Comment fonctionne l'article 49.3, utilisé pour la onzième fois par Elisabeth Borne ?"
[86] Diallo, "If Macron Doesn't Know Why He's Despised, He Hasn't Been Listening."
[87] RTL, "La popularité d'Emmanuel Macron remonte de 6 points."
[88] Goar, "Réforme des retraites."
[89] Tell and Germain, "Crise démocratique."
[90] Legrand, "Crise démocratique."
[91] Chaillan, "Pourquoi notre système démocratique est-il en crise ?"
[92] Le Meneec, "GRAND ENTRETIEN. 'La crise démocratique est à son apogée.'"

considered to reflect opposition to Le Pen's extremism rather than a true mandate. The president's decision to govern as if he had a mandate anyway has earned him little sympathy. With the next presidential election slated for 2027–one year before the Fifth Republic becomes France's longest-lasting–and Macron ineligible to run again, it remains to be seen what will come to pass. Present indications, however, give cause for worry.

The idea that French democracy faces crisis is not particularly new. Rather, current events have given a new salience to an idea that many have discussed before. In fact, unlike American democracy, one could argue that 'crisis' is a relatively natural state for French politics given its comparatively frequent regime shifts. France did not arrive at its fifth republic due to a predisposition for stability, after all. At the same time, though, these historical factors do not detract from the significance of the present moment–they simply provide context with which to understand it. In any case, diagnoses of the present crisis long predate the election of Emmanuel Macron. Writing in 2006, J.G. Shields warned of an emerging crisis in French democracy, and its 'canary in the coal mine' was the result of the first round of the 2002 presidential election.[93] That year was the first time that far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen, representing the National Front (*Front national,* or FN) gained enough votes to qualify for the definitive second round of elections. In the French system, there are typically two rounds of votes for president, both employing a first-past-the-post system. The first round includes all candidates from all parties, while the second only includes the top two candidates from the first round, assuming no candidate had won an outright majority. Typically, these two candidates came from the center-left Socialist Party and the center-right Republicans. With 16.9% of the vote, however, Le Pen overtook the socialist candidate and proceeded to face the center-right Jacques Chirac in the second round–a series of events which would repeat themselves a decade later when Le Pen's daughter Marine faced off against Macron. Unlike the most recent French elections, however, Jean-Marie Le Pen was utterly trounced (17.8% to Chirac's 82.2%) in the second round, as the French broadly united to oppose his extremism and xenophobia. Slowly but surely, his daughter has been reversing this trend, winning 41.45% of the vote in 2022.

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[93] Shields, "Political Representation in France: A Crisis of Democracy?," 118.

While the 2002 presidential election sounded the alarm, Shields explains that all was not previously well with French democracy. He explains that Le Pen's rise was "only one symptom among several of the political malaise laid bare by the 2002 presidential election", a fact which points to a "widening gulf between electors and elites in France."[94] This was reflected in a trend towards "volatility" in voting patterns, as voters were increasingly voting to express rejection of the political *status quo* rather than alignment with a particular viewpoint. For Shields, this was exemplified by the 2006 EU Constitutional Treaty referendum, but it marks a broader "disjuncture between electoral demand and political supply"[95]. In other words, French voters were no longer buying what French politicians were selling–and disaffection was steadily mounting. Unfortunately, these trends have only grown in saliency since then–and recent data provide evidence that Shields' claims remain true almost two decades later.

Paralleling its cousin across the Atlantic, the available quantitative data on the French people's outlook is disconcerting. In their Spring 2021 Global Attitudes Survey, Pew Research polled the French, alongside citizens of a variety of other developed countries, on their assessment of how democracy was working in their country. The French response was remarkably similar to that of the United States, only slightly more positive. Overall, the French results indicate a net satisfaction of -11%, positioning the country far below the median score of +16%–a fact which renders it more consistent with Southern European countries than with its northern neighbors.[96] Just as in the United States, these results are indicative of a broad dissatisfaction with the political *status quo*. Indeed, fully three-fourths of the French
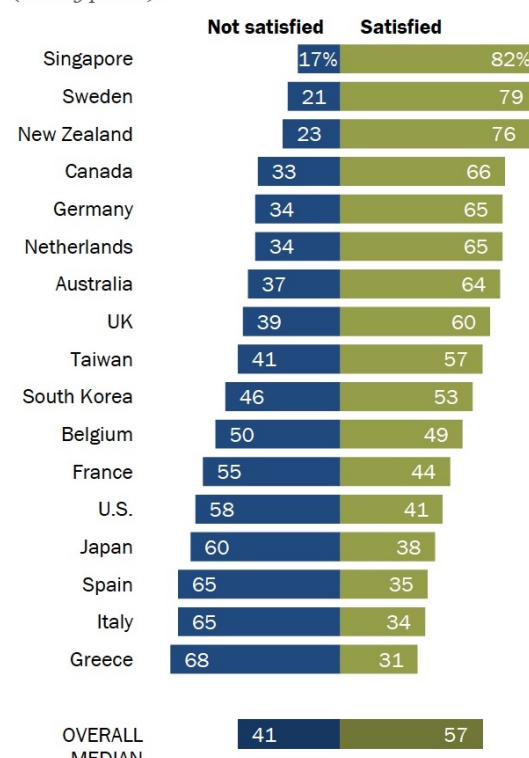

Figure 7: Assessments of Democracy
Source: Pew 2021 (Wike)

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[94] Shields, 118.

[95] Shields, 118–22.

[96] Wike et al., "Many in U.S., Western Europe Say Their Political System Needs Major Reform."

population polled by Pew in 2021 stated that their country either needed "major changes" (50%) or even "complete reform" (23%). Once again, the situation in France is less dire than that in the United States where the ratio is over 6-to-1, but the difference is a matter of degree; ultimately, the two countries share the same overall trend.

Figure 8: Support for Reform
Source: Pew 2021 (Wike)

Pew's data are corroborated by that gathered by other sources. The 2021 "Global Satisfaction with Democracy" report notes a "growing divide" across Europe, between a "zone of despair" comprised of France and numerous Southern European countries, contrasted with a "zone of complacency" to its north.[97] Another poll conducted by *France Bleu* in December 2021 found that 6 in 10 French people felt that democracy was "in danger", though this stands in interesting contrast to the over 8 in 10 who expressed support for a democratic system.[98] More recently, an April 2023 poll conducted by *Cluster 17* on behalf of French magazine *Le Point* found that only around 1 in 2 French people expressed belief that voting was effective at making political choices, and when asked to grade French democracy on a 1-10 scale, the average score was only 4.5.[99] Unlike the previous data, the most recent notes another factor which eerily parallels the problems facing democracy in the United States. Specifically, the surveyors note that the data point to a growing "democratic divorce" between polarizing segments of the population.[100] Key factors like socioeconomic status and age mark the crucial faultlines within French society. The data indicate that those with greater wealth tend to have the most confidene in the political process, while youth strongly correlates with disenchantment. Self-declared centrists and liberals gave French democracy the highest overall grades of 7.6 and 6.3 out of 10, respectively, whereas those to both their right and left, perhaps unsurprisingly, have much

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[97] "Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020," 23.

[98] France Bleu, "SONDAGE - Près des deux tiers des Français estiment que la démocratie est en danger."

[99] Cluster17, "Sondage pour Le Point."

[100] Cluster17.

less charitable views of the status quo–giving the current French system an average score of 2.6 out of 10.[101]   Interestingly, such divisions have broader implications than merely pointing to political disagreement. Pew's results indicate that perspectives on polarization itself correlate with those on democracy's function–citizens which percieve their country as more polarized are uniformly more likely to say political reform is necessary.[102]   In the case of France, the difference is slightly more muted than the average–only 10%–but this is related to the fact that a massive percent of the population believe such reform is necessary regardless. In any case, the presence of such polarization indicates that different segments of the French population are not merely diverging in their political beliefs, but also in their perspectives on French democracy writ large.

Figure 9: Reform Support by Polarization Perceptions
       Source: Pew 2021 (Greenwood)

        The parallels between French and American experiences of polarization are undoubtable. In fact, Pew notes separately that France is the only country where respondents view their own country as divided in similar proportion to the U.S.[103]   At the same time, however, the French data indicate a somewhat different situation to that across the Atlantic. In the United States, the two entrenched political parties represent the key political 'poles', with the Republicans steadily radicalizing further rightward– fuelling figures like Trump and his acolytes–while Democrats attempt to consolidate a broad but disenchanted coalition to oppose them. In contrast to this bipolar situation, France's divisions are less clean- cut and not based purely on party affiliation. Instead,
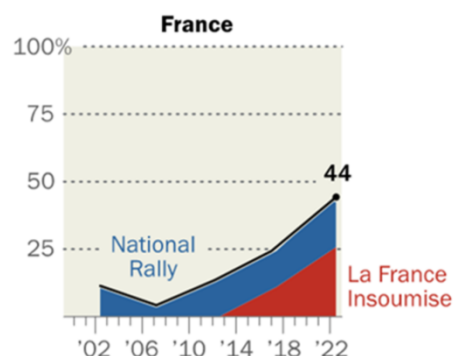

Figure 10: Growth in French Left & Right Parties
       Source: Pew 2021 (Silver)

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[101] Cluster17.

[102] Greenwood, "Citizens in Advanced Economies Want Significant Changes to Their Political Systems."

[103] Silver, "Most across 19 Countries See Strong Partisan Conflicts in Their Society, Especially in South Korea and the U.S."

the data points to a developing tri-polarization of French society. Centrists and liberals find themselves in an unenviable position in a tug-of-war between the right and left, represented by the growing popularity of Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon.[104] Their supporters are roundly dissatisfied with the *status quo* but hold radically-divergent and irreconcilable views on how it should change. Up to now, centrists and liberals have been able to profit off of this situation, as the smaller left-wing consistently viewed Macron as preferable to the right. Following the president's recent crusade to raise the French retirement age to 64, however, it is unclear that France's centrists will retain their position as the relied-upon 'lesser evil'. Instead, this episode threatens to leave his dwindling coalition permanently branded as extemists in their own right, hell-bent on dismantling France's social system and unafraid to disregard public opinion to do it.[105] Regardless of whether one subscribes to this assessment of Macron or not, it is clear that many in France have already come to believe it. Every indication is that political instability has been brewing in France for some time, and it looks likely that Macron's legacy will exacerbate it.

2.3 – LIBERTÉ, INEGALITÉ, FUTILITÉ ?

Although France's instability–or as Shields referred to it, "volatility"–has clearly been mounting for some time, less clear is where it ultimately comes from. One could make the argument, informed by France's history of tumultuous political change, that volatility is simply natural in the country's politics. This is the common refrain of foreigners when French protests once again make the news: "the French are at it again". Absent from this framing, however, is acknowledgement that France's historical episodes of instability always had a catalyst. The current situation is particularly notable considering the current French Republic's origins, which lie in Charles de Gaulle's desire to ensure stability above all. Although the Fifth Republic may soon become France's longest lasting, it is increasingly unclear whether de Gaulle's republic succeeded or failed in its principal mission. It is therefore critical to examine which factors have contributed to France's present woes. Once again, these factors offer striking parallels between the French and American situations.

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[104] Silver, "Populists in Europe – Especially Those on the Right – Have Increased Their Vote Shares in Recent Elections."
[105] Barbero, "To Save His Pension Reform Bill, Macron Has Lost France."

Nowadays, French society is riven with a plethora of political disputes which have emerged in recent years–all of which could be viewed as relevant to mounting dissatisfaction. In general, those on the left point to systemic social and economic inequalities, unresolved discrimination, and insufficient public services as among their key concerns. Those on the right, by contrast, are frequently concerned with changing demographics, immigration, and a perceived loss of "traditional" values. More often than not, these matters feature contrasting and ultimately irreconcilable disagreements which manifest in a broader social phenomenon many refer to as a "culture war". Although this term first came to prominence in the United States, it has become relevant to discuss the situation in France as well.[106] This sense, of politics as being reduced to endlessly fighting unwinnable social conflicts has undoubtedly taken its toll on the public's perception of the political process. Indeed, many now perceive the political process as ultimately incapable of achieving meaningful public representation. Nevertheless, cultural conflict is not alone in producing this sentiment. Pew's data provide further context here, and point to a further issue: a perceived gap between politicians and those they ostensibly represent.

Americans more likely than others to say most politicians are corrupt

% who say the statement "most politicians are corrupt" describes their country **well**

U.S.	67%
France	46
UK	45
Germany	29

% who say the statement "elected officials care what ordinary people think" **does not** describe their country well

France	58%
U.S.	56
UK	52
Germany	32
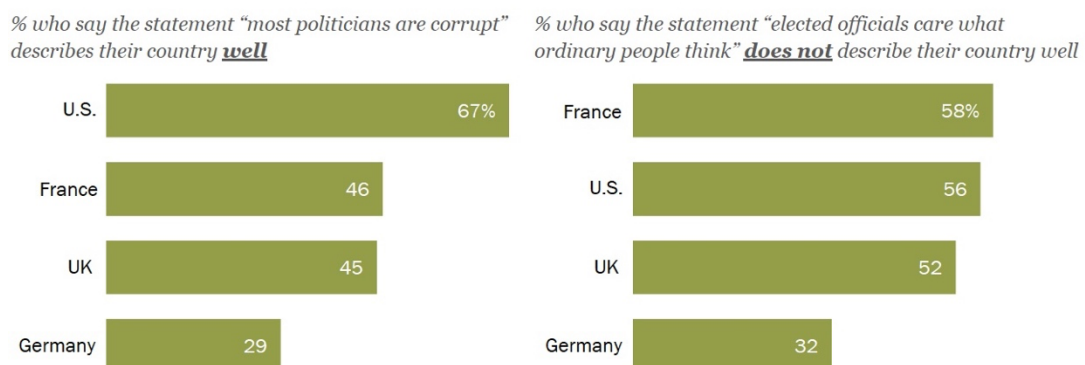
Figure 11: Corruption Perceptions by Country
Source: Pew 2021 (Wike)

While pointing out that Americans were the most likely respondents to view politicians as corrupt, Pew's data note that the French come in decidedly second place. At the same time, they note striking divisions between various social groups and corruption perceptions. While French respondents above 65 years old were consistently the least likely to agree that politicians were corrupt (37%), a full majority of those between 18 and 29 (57%) agreed with the statement. A similar divide played out between those in higher versus lower

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[106] Faure, "La guerre culturelle, une politique aux effets délétères."

income groups.[107] This is plainly problematic for perceptions of democracy; as Transparency International noted in 2019, corruption has a distinctly corrosive effect on populations' trust in political institutions and can even "contribute to destabilizing phenomena like voting for anti-establishment parties and the spread of fake news", which it does by "undermining the fragile balance between institutions, and rules and norms that provide trust and legitimacy of the system."[108] As such, corruption, or the mere *perception* of corruption, can reduce public trust to such an extent that it encourages other activities which harm democracy. This can lead to a vicious cycle, reinforcing and deepening democracy's crisis.

Although the French managed to avoid the worst score for corruption perceptions, the country nevertheless topped the list of countries who believe that elected officials are indifferent to the views of "ordinary people". Furthermore, France came in dead last in the perspective that such people could "influence the government"[109]. This confirms Shields' diagnosis of a "widening gulf between electors and elites in France" which has contributed to a perception of government as dominated by a "remote cartel of parties and politicians who have come to monopolise the institutional space".[110] This "remoteness" is crucial to understanding the French crisis of democracy and its relation to the current difficulties plaguing Emmanuel Macron's government. Although successive French governments have continued to assume power via electoral support, this process has ceased to provide any useful degree of a public mandate. Shields notes that despite a variety of candidates who presented themselves for election, the "perceived problem…lay paradoxically in the lack of choice on offer."[111] In other words, although people indeed cast their votes for Macron and his predecessors, this was principally the result of a lack of better options rather than support for them. Today, the mainstream parties of Shields' era have been all but usurped by newcomers, but this rotation of politicians has not alleviated the underlying discontentment. The complaint about a "lack of good choices" has remained persistent despite new parties and figures coming to the fore. For all things have changed, they appear to have remained the same–or even worsened. What could explain this seeming paradox?

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[107] Wike et al., "Many in U.S., Western Europe Say Their Political System Needs Major Reform."
[108] Drapalova et al., "Corruption and the Crisis of Democracy," 1, 7.
[109] Wike et al., "Many in U.S., Western Europe Say Their Political System Needs Major Reform."
[110] Shields, "Political Representation in France: A Crisis of Democracy?," 118, 133.
[111] Shields, 124.

The complaint of a "lack of good choices"–in spite of apparent shifts in the electoral options on offer–may be indicative of larger concerns about the trajectory of French politics. Broadly speaking, politicians and their parties chiefly represent the face of political programs; changes in such individuals may be superficial while the true "choices" which underly them remain unchanged. This ultimately seems to reflect French citizens' perceptions. In the aforementioned Pew study, French citizens were asked whether they believe the French government respect their personal freedoms–with worrying results. In fact, the

French less positive on government's respect for freedoms than in the past

% who say the government of France ___ the personal freedoms of its people

Figure 12: French Perception of Government Respect for Freedoms
Source: Pew 2021 (Wike)

number of French who say the government disregards their freedoms has nearly doubled since 2008, marking a consistent trend with only minor interruption between 2014-17. In other words, despite the numerous electoral shifts which occurred in this timeframe, the French did not perceive the trajectory of their society as meaningfully changing. Other metrics validate their perceptions; for example, the organization *Observatoire des Inegalités* reports that inequalities in income have remained persistent over the same period, again regardless of governmental shifts.[112] Ultimately, therefore, it comes as little surprise that voter abstention reached the highest point in five decades, as more and more of the French perceive the act of voting as an exercise in futility.[113] Such a perspective does not bode well for French democracy.

As it has become clear, French democracy hardly finds itself in a more enviable position than its American counterpart. Like the Americans, the French increasingly perceive their elected officials as distant, unaccountable, and unrepresentative of the popular will–a fact reflected in both quantitative survey data and qualitative reporting. Just as in the United States, France's political institutions appear ill-equipped to handle the current wave of discontent and instability–in spite of Charles de Gaulle's ambitions when creating them. The current French president, Emmanuel Macron, has only served as a lightning rod for this

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[112] Observatoire des inégalités, "Comment évolue la répartition de la richesse en France ?"
[113] FRANCE24, "As It Happened: Voter Abstention at 28% in French Presidential Run-off, up 2.5% from 2017."

sentiment; his air of aloofness only further fuels an already-spreading fire. Once-marginal figures to Macron's left and right have only grown in popularity while the French remain paradoxically discontented with a lack of political options–a perception which seems validated by the persistence of a variety of long-term trends. Each such factor contributes to what can only be characterized as a crisis of French democracy. Like its cousin across the Atlantic, the French political *status quo* appears increasingly unsustainable. Once again, the key question arises: how did things get this bad? Only by considering the crisis' persistence across both contexts will key features of its development be revealed.

A CRISIS ACROSS BORDERS?

3.1 – TRANSATLANTIC CONVERGENCE

As it has become clear, the 'crisis of democracy' poses a challenge which is not limited to merely one country. In fact, both the United States and France find themselves mired in a variety of difficulties which fall under the crisis' auspices. The fact that the two countries have arrived at similar crises within a similar timeframe–and despite their many differences– points to the crisis' nature. Were the crisis merely limited to one country, its origins would likely lie in factors particular to its national context–such as the complexities of constitutional reform in the United States or the centralization of power in France. Indeed, the two countries exhibit such a variety of differences that the shared nature of the crisis is rendered all the more interesting. From the slow reformism of the United States to the revolutionary rupture of France, from the quintessentially-divided American federalism to France's stability-first unitary state, from a national culture centered on liberty alone to one which pairs it with equality and brotherhood, the countries' differences are undoubtedly many. At the same time, they share certain foundational similarities: both view democracy as integral to their national identities, both broadly adhere to the tenets of liberalism in government and economics, and both view government's respect for individual liberties as a paramount concern. Crucially, both find themselves mired in remarkably similar difficulties today–a fact which offers clues to the crisis' origins.

In both the United States and France, the present crisis can be linked to a specific, concrete trend: declining popular confidence in government which continues to deepen and persist despite multiple rotations of the individuals who occupy seats of power. Therefore, disenchantment is growing not merely with specific governments, but rather with the two countries' political institutions in general. This is substantiated by survey data which demonstrates mounting discontent over several decades, and a shift in popular opinion towards viewing politics as ineffective at best, or worse as wantonly disregarding the public interest.[114] Citizens of both countries increasingly share the belief that their governing bodies are untrustworthy or even corrupt. Such perceptions have, in turn, bolstered calls for

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[114] "Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020," 42.

structural reform. Nevertheless, such reform has yet to materialize, doubtless stymied by an irreconcilable social polarization in beliefs of what the necessary changes actually are. In short, the current American and French political systems appear to be losing legitimacy with society-wide ramifications. It is not difficult to see how such a crisis can instigate a snowball effect; legitimacy is central to governments' exercise of sovereign power. In liberal republics, legitimacy is theorized to arise from consent of the governed–and it seems those of France and the United States are in the process of withdrawing it. Without such consent, a government cannot be legitimate. An illegitimate government is, by definition, undemocratic. A crisis of legitimacy therefore de facto threatens a crisis of democracy, and the latter may portend the former. It is therefore critical to examine factors which may contribute to this withdrawal of popular consent–but from a lens which appreciates the global scale of the challenges they pose.

The fact that the crisis persists across borders, and features strikingly similar trends across contexts, is intriguing and presents a distinctly international conundrum. While national features may accentuate the 'crisis of democracy' or grant it a distinct character, the crisis must, to at least some extent, be rooted in factors which transcend national boundaries. It is therefore notable that the crisis comes on the heels of another novel international phenomenon which has engulfed the United States and France: *globalization.* Globalization is another tricky term which is frequently applied to a broad swath of tangentially-related phenomena, but at its core pertains to the growing interconnectedness of societies at the global level. For its seemingly universal relevance, however, the relationship between the crisis of democracy and globalization *as such* remains relatively underdiscussed outside academic circles. By contrast, references to globalization's particular impacts on national politics through phenomena such as migration, the offshoring of industrial jobs, multinationals and tax evasion, and the growth of rapid communication networks–are ubiquitous. This distinction is not merely semantic; the point is that globalization's effects on democracy are most often analyzed from a singularly national lens. David Held notes this fact in *Democracy and the Global Order,* where he cites it as a major issue for analyses of democracy in general.[115] The problem is that such analyses tend to focus on structural deficiencies at the national level to the exclusion of international factors. In Held's view, this fails to consider the deep implications that global interconnectedness has for democracy in

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[115] Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance*, 17.

general. Summarizing why, Held posits that "national communities by no means exclusively make and determine decisions and policies for themselves, and governments by no means determine what is appropriate for exclusively their own citizens."[116] In other words, in a globalized world, decisions made at the national level can have wide-ranging implications even for those outside national borders, and new centers of power–like multinationals–have emerged which elude national democratic accountability.

By creating new centers of social and political power, growing interconnectedness further complicates a perennial difficulty for political theorists: defining who 'the people' in a democratic arrangement are. From a theoretical perspective, globalization makes a discrete 'people' harder to locate, blurring the bounds of decision-making in democracies and making it harder to determine what is and is not democratic. In a globalized world, loci of social power may increasingly reside between or above the nation-state level, and therefore outside the reach of national collective deliberation. Consequently, citizens across countries may come to feel disempowered even while little has structurally changed with regard to the institutions which govern them. To what extent has this occurred in practice?

3.2 – Of the Experts and By the Experts

The idea that state institutions and their guiding principles have remained unchanged in recent decades is true only in the broadest sense–in certain specific ways, they have changed significantly. These changes are deeply related to globalization, and governments have hardly been passive actors in the process. To the contrary, administrations in both the United States and France played an instrumental role in facilitating it, particularly in the economic realm. Uncoincidentally, this occurred in conjunction with a broad ideological shift–in this case, towards neoliberalism. Neoliberalism came to dominate much of Western politics following the 1970s and 1980s, decades which marked the elections of figures like Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. and Ronald Reagan in the U.S. The two espoused a form of free-market fundamentalism which is often contrasted with Keynesianism, as they viewed state interventionism less as a means to correct markets than as a vehicle to facilitate their development. Neoliberalism encompasses more than a set of economic doctrines, however; it is a wide-ranging school of political thought with notable implications for how states

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[116] Held, 17.

operate–and therefore how democracy can manifest through state institutions. Summarizing key neoliberal theorist Friedrich Hayek, David Held explains that the former viewed democracy "not as an end in itself [but as] a means – 'a utilitarian device' – to help safeguard the highest political end: liberty", which chiefly entails avoiding "enactment of rules which specify how people should use the means at their disposal."[117] In the neoliberal view, this is only possible through the free market, and therefore state interference in economic affairs should be minimized to preserve individual liberty.[118] This, however, creates a problem: insofar as 'the state' represents a key institutional manifestation of democracy, then restrictions on its capacity to regulate economic affairs implies a reduction in that sphere's public accountability. In other words, it reduces collective checks on the exercise of economic power, and therefore of the potential scope of democratic governance. Although the United States would ultimately implement these doctrines more completely than France, both countries would ultimately tread a similar path along these lines–towards a reconceptualization of such governance itself.

In *Le Bon Gouvernement,* Pierre Rosanvallon offers an account which is useful to understand how this reconceptualization came to pass. He notes the United States and France have historically proven susceptible to a dangerous "temptation" of governance which he terms the "technocratic ideal", or the pursuit of governance according to the principles of technocracy.[119] Technocracy refers to a school of political thought which originated in the late 19th century and encompasses a variety of concepts, but chief among them is a prioritization of expertise in public administration.[120] Broadly speaking, technocrats advocate distributing power according to technical specialization and based on meritocratic principles. Technocratic perspectives have seen a resurgence in recent decades but have come to encompass a more specific set of practices in modern times. Writing in 1993, Miguel Angel Centeno notes that the ideal of 'technocracy' has come to refer to "an ideology of method: a belief in the ability to arrive at the optimal answer to any discussion through the application of particular practices."[121] Instead of being based in a particular political program, such practices take the form of a methodology which seeks to apply "rationalist" or "pragmatic"

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[117] Held, 259.
[118] Held, 260.
[119] Rosanvallon, *Le bon gouvernement*, 89.
[120] Rosanvallon, 90–99.
[121] Centeno, "The New Leviathan," 312.

principles to policymaking. From this perspective, policy choices are less important than the methods used to reach them because rational outcomes may only be reached through rational processes. For Rosanvallon, this necessarily implies the "banalization and depoliticization of the executive".[122] This refers to a tendency among technocratic governments to view their role as chiefly administrative–employing rational methodology to manage exogenous phenomena. But what implications does such an approach have for democracy?

For Rosanvallon, technocratic approaches are not merely problematic for democracy, but the two are ultimately irreconcilable. Referencing Frank Goodnow, one of technocracy's early theorists, he notes that "if the essence of politics consists, by construction, in an attempt to express a general will, the essence of administration resided for [Goodnow] in the pursuit of efficiency and rationality."[123] This manner of thinking is "tempting" because it absolves state actors of political obligations, namely enacting policy programs to achieve goals associated with coherent political worldviews and based in popular support. It substitutes this results-oriented approach with a means-oriented one; instead of the ends justifying the means, the employment of sufficiently scientific means justifies whichever ends are achieved. Beyond avoiding responsibility for political outcomes, this temptation also poses an ironic danger by encouraging ideological blind spots. Because "scientific" methodologies are assumed immune to ideological influence, adherents to technocratic perspectives tend to view themselves as post-ideological or uniquely clear-eyed in comparison to other political actors who cling to dogma.[124] This may lead to unwillingness to work with or learn from those who hold alternative political perspectives–and may thereby fuel polarization. Engagement with the political process in general may even be viewed as hopelessly "inefficient" if that process fails to follow the prescriptions of a "rational" methodology, encouraging detachment from popular sentiment.

The relationship between technocratic approaches and democracy may be even more deleterious; Centeno builds on Rosanvallon's insights by comparing technocrats' devotion to calculation and rationality to that of theocrats or ideologues to their own dogmas–noting eerie parallels. However, although such parallels exist, there are crucial differences; while ideologues of many stripes are adept at using politics to further their own projects,

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[122] Rosanvallon, *Le bon gouvernement*, 89.
[123] Rosanvallon, 92.
[124] Centeno, "The New Leviathan," 313.

technocrats operate from the presumption of being *above* politics. From a technocratic lens, democratic deliberation on policy matters (in other words, politics) is ultimately problematic, as it may introduce dangerous inefficiencies to otherwise rational processes.[125] It is here that technocracy begins to draw notable parallels to Hayek's vision of a minimalist state–and therefore becomes relevant to contemporary politics in both the United States and France. It is not coincidental, Centeno notes, that technocratic approaches find their strongest contemporary adherents among neoliberals, whose ascendency since the 1980s has involved a reconceptualization of the relationship between the state and society. Prior to the election of figures like Ronald Reagan in the United States, neoliberal doctrines were considered relatively fringe. Nowadays, however, they are most upheld by those in the vicinity of the political center, particularly the American center-left within the Democratic Party and the French center-right of Macron's circle. The decline of their own popularity to the benefit of political movements to their left and right, and the polarization which has accompanied it, is frequently interpreted as a sign of a deepening discontentment with democratic governance. However, this assumption may well be too hasty, and the relationship between centrism, polarization, technocracy, and the 'crisis of democracy' will prove yet more complex.

Writing in 2018, political scientist David Adler sought to provide context for the 'crisis of democracy' by evaluating which groups along the political spectrum actually expressed the most belief in–or disdain for–democratic principles. In a metanalysis of survey data from the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey, he charted respondents based on their self-declared political alignment on a left-right scale and compared it to their support for a number of key
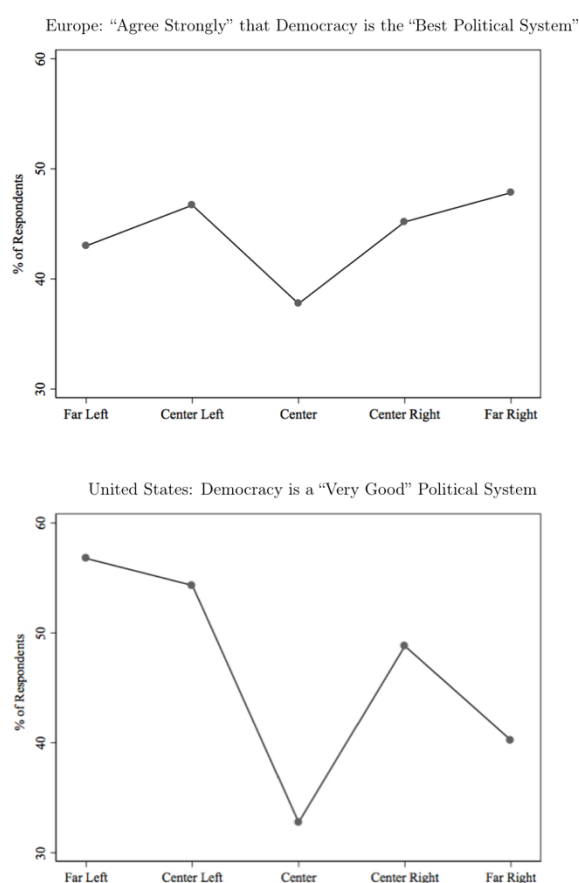

Figure 13: Support for Democracy by Political Orientation, U.S. & Europe
Source: Adler 2018

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[125] Centeno, 313.

democratic propositions. The results were striking: across the board, those in the political center expressed the least support for democracy and associated principles like civil rights and free and fair elections.[126] This held true in both the United States and Europe, but it was in the former case where the trend held the strongest. On its face this seems surprising–in democratic societies, it would be expected that political moderates would be *least* likely to support antidemocratic principles. Upon closer examination, however, the pieces begin to fit together; it is no coincidence that the greatest complaints about Emmanuel Macron are detachment and disregard for popular opinion. Neither the prioritization of methods over outcomes, the dogmatic commitment to rationalism, nor the Hayekian tendency towards skepticism of collective decision-making mesh easily with democratic convictions. In theory, these problems should lead to electoral defeat for figures like Macron. If change were so simple, however, it would have likely already occurred. Indeed, while it seems clear that technocratic preferences seem to correlate with lower receptiveness to democratic principles, it should be clarified that this relationship is not necessarily unidirectional. To the contrary, it is far from clear which side of the equation has greater causal power. While preferences for technocratic approaches may discourage democratic procedures, such preferences may develop most strongly in cases where democracy already faces difficulty. Specifically, Rosanvallon explains that technocracy may prove most tempting in cases where the "impotence of a partisan executive has nourished democratic disenchantment."[127] The relationship may therefore be more cyclical: technocratic approaches may be most tempting in cases where democracy already faces crisis, but by dampening the influence of democratic accountability on executives, such approaches can deepen that crisis reciprocally.

Regardless, the relationship between executives and democratic accountability is critical. Within a liberal republican framework, the election of executives like the American and French presidents is theoretically meant to manifest the popular will, as they are tasked with translating legislative texts into concrete action. Limitations to the scope of their activity–such as in the economic realm–thereby implies a similar reduction in the scope of democratic decision-making. This is undoubtedly necessary to some extent; a lack of checks and balances on state power is a well-known recipe for democratic deterioration. At the same time, excessive restraints on the ability of a government to execute the "will of the majority"

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[126] Adler, "The Centrist Paradox," 4.

[127] Rosanvallon, *Le bon gouvernement*, 107.

also creates difficulties. While this poses few issues in Hayek's arrangement, where majority rule is viewed as dangerous and democracy is principally a means to an end, it creates challenges for those who view democracy as more fundamental. Although true that absolutist commitments to 'majority rule' pose dangers, moving too far from it threatens something arguably worse: minority rule. Therefore, it is necessary that state executives remain accountable both to the will of the majority and the principles of democracy which underpin it. Rosanvallon notes the importance of this fact in the modern context, explaining that "in the age of the predominance of executive power, the key to democracy resides in the conditions by which society may control it."[128] In other words, at a historical moment when technocratic administration has become many governments' *modus operandi,* it is essential to ensure those charged with its execution are democratically accountable. He continues by pointing out that this raises a key difficulty: "the problem is that the only solution which has so far been posed to this imperative is limited to the election of the head of that executive."[129] In this statement, Rosanvallon neatly encapsulates the frustration now felt by so many French and Americans: democratic accountability only extends so far as rotating in and out different individuals at the top of the hierarchy; mechanisms for more fundamental change remain elusive. It is therefore the task of those concerned with the present crisis to imagine–what could such mechanisms entail?   It is here that the broader "reconceptualization of governance" once again becomes relevant.

3.3 – FINDING OPPORTUNITY IN CRISIS

The fact that the term we use to describe the 'crisis of democracy' finds its origins in the Greek *krisis* is not coincidental–and neither is the implication that the present situation offers potential as a turning point if only it could be seized decisively. As we have seen, the 'crisis of democracy' manifests in a wide array of different ills, from social polarization to political disengagement, from widespread pessimism to allegations of corruption. Taken together, the evidence is mounting that the *status quo* of the American and French political systems is unsustainable. Just what might be done about it, however, is far less clear; the many problems associated with the crisis will require a broad and multifaceted response to address.

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[128] Rosanvallon, 20.
[129] Rosanvallon, 20.

In any case, both countries' recent tendencies towards neoliberal technocratic governance cannot be relied upon to find adequate solutions. To the contrary, as Emmanuel Macron's recent decisions demonstrate, they seem increasingly likely to exacerbate the situation. Ultimately, the crisis cuts to the heart not just of American and French society, but to the liberal representative articulation of democracy in general.

While the crisis poses a plethora of challenges, a variety of measures have been proposed to address it. Critical to doing so is acknowledgment that a crisis in democracy offers more than one path out; while democracy's *status quo* may be unsustainable, it is not inevitable that this leads to democratic backsliding. To the contrary, it is equally possible that the present moment be seized as a chance to deepen democracy and expand it to previously excluded areas of life. In fact, survey data indicates that a desire for such measures–rather than a widespread preference for authoritarianism–is what truly lies behind the emerging 'crisis'. In its Fall 2020 Global Attitudes Survey, Pew Research asks respondents in a variety of countries about their preferred ideas for addressing democracy's problems, and found that in all of them, citizens desired greater engagement with democratic processes rather than reductions in them.

Citizen assemblies and referendums are popular ideas in all four countries

% who say it is ___ important for the national government to take the following actions

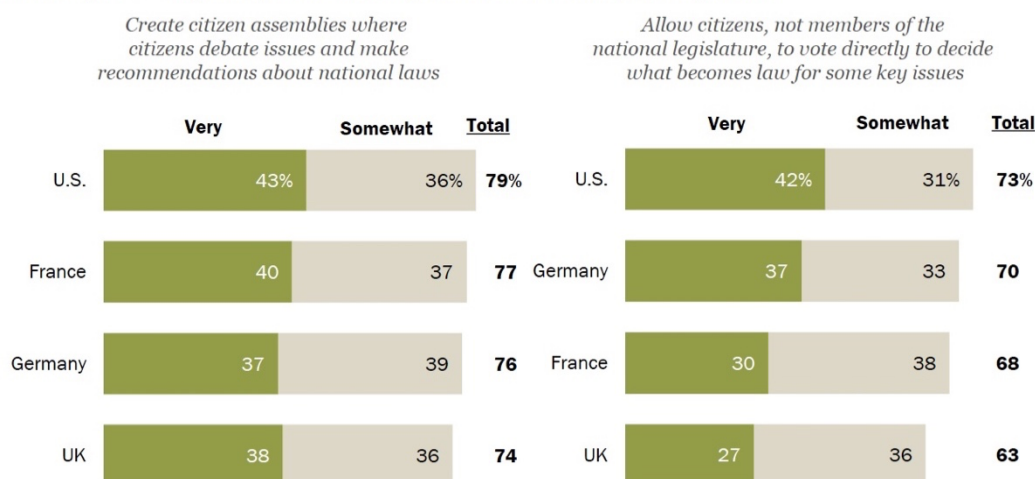|	Create citizen assemblies where citizens debate issues and make recommendations about national laws				Allow citizens, not members of the national legislature, to vote directly to decide what becomes law for some key issues		
	Very	**Somewhat**	**Total**		**Very**	**Somewhat**	**Total**
U.S.	43%	36%	**79%**	U.S.	42%	31%	**73%**
France	40	37	**77**	Germany	37	33	**70**
Germany	37	39	**76**	France	30	38	**68**
UK	38	36	**74**	UK	27	36	**63**

Figure 14: Support for Citizen Assemblies & Referenda by Country
Source: Pew 2021 (Wike)

The survey found that nearly 8 in 10 American and French respondents agreed that it was either 'very' or at least 'somewhat' important for their governments to establish participatory assemblies to offer citizens greater opportunities to engage with the political process, while

around 7 in 10 said the same for expanded use of referenda.[130] The simple fact that support for such measures is so widespread–a supermajority in both countries in both cases–is particularly notable at a time when both countries face widespread polarization. These results ultimately support the hypothesis that discontentment is not growing with the idea of democracy *per se*; instead, it is growing more specifically with the existing political model of democracy–something fundamentally different. As previous data indicated, people seem less and less convinced that their current governments are even democratic at all. If this is true, then the key concern would seem less about preserving the existing model of democracy at all costs, but rather how to channel this raw desire for alternatives into a productive force capable of generating something meaningful.

On this subject, David Held offers key insights. While solutions like citizens' assemblies and referenda may be useful, they may not be sufficient to address the breadth and depth of the crisis at hand. This is because, fundamentally, they are oriented towards supplementing existing institutions rather than reshaping them into something more democratic. For Held, the crisis poses a challenge to the very idea that democracy can be manifested solely through state institutions. He explains that "what is at issue is […] the relation between the idea of the state as an independent corporation or basic structure of law and institutions, and the idea of democracy as the autonomous determination of the conditions of collective association."[131] In other words, for Held, there exists a fundamental tension between the state's capacity to act as an consolidated entity with its own interests and prerogatives, and the assumption that it represents the totality of the collective will. The proliferation of new power relations and forms of social organization brought by globalization have only rendered this tension more acute. While manageable in the past, changing social conditions in the contemporary era have led alternative actors to wield increasingly large degrees of power over society and people's lives. For example, certain actors including multinational firms, media conglomerates, energy resource companies, and increasingly technology and social media giants, wield a degree of social, political, and economic power that increasingly lies beyond the reach of any individual state actor–and therefore of any democratic authority limited to the nation-state level. So how does he propose this situation be addressed?

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[130] Wike et al., "Many in U.S., Western Europe Say Their Political System Needs Major Reform."

[131] Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance*, 146.

Held explains that core to liberal conceptions of democracy is the "principle of autonomy", or the idea that, within a democratic framework, individuals share rights and obligations in equal proportion to ensure a balance between their own capacity for self-determination and the collective capacity to determine the community's direction.[132] The project of the liberal democratic state has been to strike such a balance within their own national context. Doing so therefore depends on a degree of political isolation from other nation-states which permits the autonomous development of democratic power arrangements in each one. This, however, has become complicated in the modern context in which growing global interconnectedness has made it more difficult to isolate national politics from global power relationships. The cases of both the United States and France illustrate this, as their people have become steadily less confident in the ability of their institutions to meaningfully represent them. Achieving a new balance is more complicated than merely strengthening state power–it requires reconceptualizing how we implement democracy in general.

Usefully, Held proposes an alternative paradigm for such reconceptualization which he terms "cosmopolitan democracy". Such a paradigm would be "based upon the recognition that democracy within a particular community and democratic relations among communities are interlocked [and] absolutely inseparable."[133] This necessitates recognition that democracy cannot be sequestered to merely one sphere of activity. If democracy is limited to the public, political sphere and ends at national borders, then in Held's view it will be insufficient to render society meaningfully 'democratic'. This is because formal public elections, limited to these areas, are incapable of producing accountability in either the relationships between states or spheres cordoned off as 'private', so both are functionally immune to democratic checks and balances.[134] This is not to say that national authority should be fully ceded to supranationalism or that all 'private' activities should be subordinated to state regulation; rather, it is the simple point that state institutions should not be viewed as the only ones relevant to democracy. While this is a relatively-simple theoretical point, it has wide-ranging implications. By challenging the core of current models of democracy, it may well border on the revolutionary.

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[132] Held, 147.
[133] Held, 235.
[134] Held, 248.

Crucially, the wide-ranging implications of Held's ideas necessitate similarly wide-ranging reforms to fully implement. It is difficult to imagine such fundamental changes coming to pass–particularly across such different contexts as the United States and France. While the latter is no stranger to revolutionary shifts of paradigm, they are relatively foreign in the former. What is clear, however, is that appetites for change are growing in both countries, fueled by dissatisfaction with governments no longer viewed as representative or accountable. These appetites will hardly be sated by moves towards authoritarianism; to the contrary, a key feature of both the French and American crises of democracy seems to be demand for greater democratic engagement rather than less. Polarization in both countries threatens this process but could be positively interpreted as indicative of public willingness to experiment with alternative models. In any case, dominant technocratic approaches are clearly falling out of favor. As such, the same factors which pose dangers to existing democratic societies may paradoxically offer hope for building more resilient ones in the future. Whether or not "cosmopolitan democracy" will be the path chosen, the task of the present is to return to the Greek roots of 'crisis', and make the decisive choice to channel this disoriented public will in a productive direction–and to imagine a democracy as international as the crisis which it faces.

CONCLUSION

A CRISIS FOR DEMOCRACY?

Fundamentally, Held's idea of "cosmopolitan democracy" represents only one possible way out of the 'crisis of democracy', and there are likely to be others. From the standpoint of the present, it is difficult to determine which approaches will be most likely to achieve success–reform of existing democratic institutions, supplementing them with additional ones, or reconceptualizing democracy itself. Expansion of citizens' assemblies and referenda mechanisms could be exactly what is needed or insufficient depending on one's perspective. What is clear is that the 'crisis' designation no longer seems so far-fetched. In both the United States and France, the political *status quo* appears increasingly difficult to sustain, and demands are growing for alternatives. Exactly how to achieve such alternatives from within the confines of the present context, however, is another question–and one without clear answers.

The cases of both the United States and France offer illustrative, if contrasting, examples of the crisis in action. Survey data points to growing discontentment with current political institutions in both countries which persists across elected governments. At the same time, this dissatisfaction is accentuated by national characteristics. The slow-moving reformism of the American system, amplified by a uniquely difficult process for constitutional amendments, presents serious challenges for those demanding change. By contrast, the long-established French tradition of rapid and tumultuous political shifts finds itself complicated by republican institutions designed to promote stability above all other concerns. Despite these differences, both countries are witnessing similar phenomena, including growing polarization as their populations search for alternatives, and mounting demands for experimentation with new means of practicing democracy. Each of these factors points not only to the existence of a crisis, but also crucially to pathways to channel it towards positive change. Whether existing institutions will seek to facilitate–or to stymie–such experiments will prove vital to how they play out. As John F. Kennedy famously quipped in a phrase which seems particularly relevant in the case of France, "those who make peaceful revolution

impossible will make violent revolution inevitable". The nature of the crisis' resolution, accordingly, lies in the decisions made by leaders in the present.

Ultimately, the fact that the crisis of democracy persists across national boundaries offers critical clues to its nature. Far from a problem unique to the United States or to France, these countries' convergence points to something deeper and distinctly international. In today's globalized world, where individual countries find themselves increasingly integrated into global society, governance is no longer the exclusive domain of individual states. The fact that the French and Americans have come to such similar conclusions, fueled by similar discontentment and within a similar timeframe–all in spite of their countries' many differences–stands as a testament to this fact. In order to thrive in this new environment, democracy must rise to the challenge and find new ways to manifest popular sovereignty. While this situation appears to constitute crisis, it is far from hopeless. Instead, it should be viewed as an opportunity–one which can be wielded to extend and reinforce democratic principles as far and wide as possible.

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