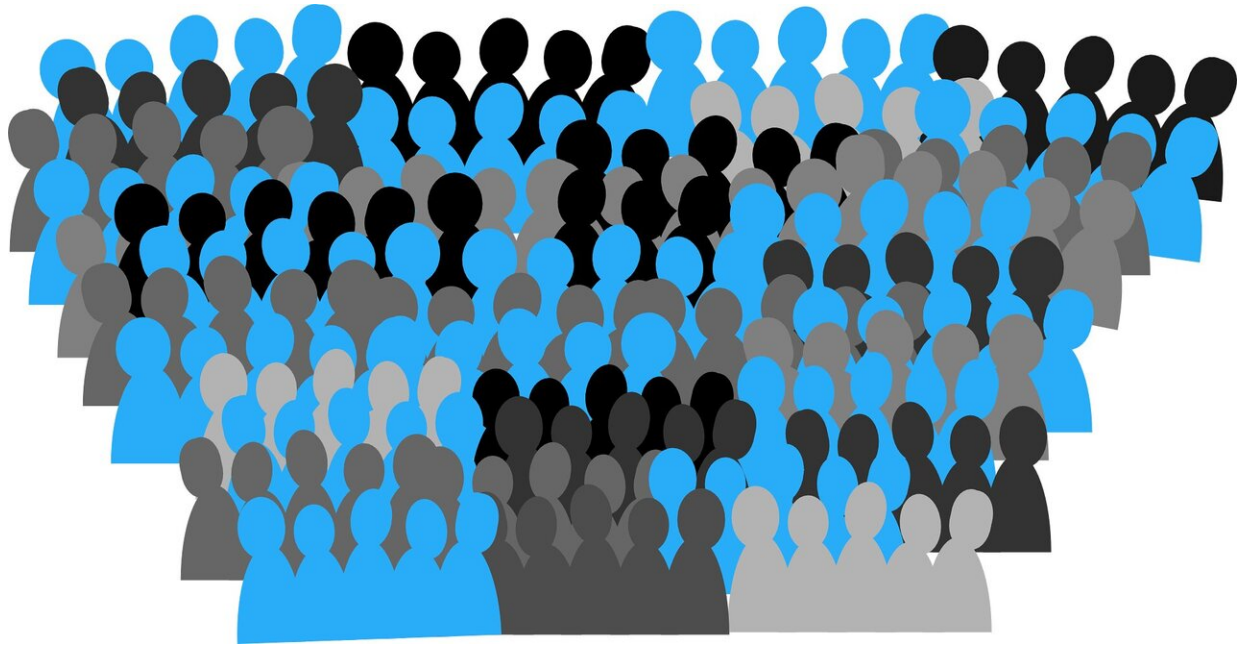


# Global dissatisfaction with democracy at record high, new report reveals

January 29 2020

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Dissatisfaction with democratic politics among citizens of developed countries has increased from a third to half of all individuals over the last quarter of a century, according to the largest international dataset on global attitudes to democracy ever made.

In fact, researchers found that across the planet—from Europe to Africa, as well as Asia, Australasia, both Americas and the Middle East—the

share of individuals who say they are "dissatisfied" with democracy has jumped significantly since the mid-1990s: from 47.9% to 57.5%.

The research team, from the University of Cambridge's new Centre for the Future of Democracy, say that the year 2019 "represents the highest level of democratic discontent on record". Detailed stocktaking of global political sentiment began in 1995.

The report used a unique dataset of more than 4 million people. It combines over 25 international survey projects covering 154 countries between 1995 and 2020, with some dating back as far as 1973, and includes new cross-country surveys.

The report, along with the new Centre, which will be based at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, will be launched in Cambridge on Wednesday 29 January.

"Across the globe, democracy is in a state of malaise," said the report's lead author Dr. Roberto Foa, from Cambridge's Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS). "We find that dissatisfaction with democracy has risen over time, and is reaching an all-time global high, in particular in developed countries."

Professor David Runciman, head of the new Centre, said: "We need to move beyond thinking about immediate crises in politics and take a longer view to identify possible trajectories for democracy around the world. This means distinguishing what is essential to democracy, what is contingent and what can be changed.

"The Centre for the Future of Democracy will be looking at the bigger picture to see how democracy could evolve," he said.

The downward trend in satisfaction with democracy has been especially

sharp since 2005, which marks the beginning of what some have called a 'global democratic recession'. Just 38.7% of citizens were dissatisfied in that year, but this has since risen by almost one-fifth of the population (+18.8%) to 57.5%.

Many large democracies are now at their highest-ever recorded level for democratic dissatisfaction. These include the United Kingdom, Australia, Brazil, Mexico, as well as the United States—where dissatisfaction has increased by a third since the 1990s. Other countries that remain close to their all-time dissatisfaction highs include Japan, Spain and Greece.

However, researchers uncovered what they call an "island of contentment" in the heart of Europe: Denmark, Switzerland, Norway and the Netherlands are among nations where satisfaction with democracy is reaching all-time highs. "We found a select group of nations, containing just two per cent of the world's democratic citizenry, in which less than a quarter of the public express discontent with their political system," said Foa.

Other regional "bright spots", where levels of civic contentment are significantly higher, include Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent the democracies in South Asia and Northeast Asia. "For now, much of Asia has avoided the crisis of democratic faith affecting other parts of the world," said Foa.

The research team found that shifts in democratic satisfaction often responded to "objective circumstances and events" such as economic shocks or corruption scandals. "The 2015 refugee crisis and the 2008 [financial crisis](#) had an immediately observable effect upon average levels of civic dissatisfaction," said Foa.

Following the onset of the global financial crisis in October 2008, for

example, global dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy jumped by around 6.5 percentage points—an increase that "appears to have been durable", say researchers.

On a more hopeful note, the team also found the opposite: democracies working together to resolve policy crises have a positive effect. After the European Council agreed to a European Stability Mechanism to stem the sovereign debt crisis, dissatisfaction with democracy fell by 10 percentage points in Western Europe.

"Our findings suggest that citizens are rational in their view of political institutions, and update their assessment in response to what they observe," said Foa.

In the UK, the report shows democratic satisfaction rose fairly consistently for thirty years from the 1970s, reaching a high-water mark during the Blair years at the turn of the millennium. The Iraq War and parliamentary expenses scandal caused dips, but satisfaction plunged during the political stalemate following the EU Referendum. By 2019, for the first time since the mid-1970s, a clear majority of UK citizens were dissatisfied with democracy.

The US has seen a "dramatic and unexpected" decline in satisfaction, according to researchers. In 1995, more than three-quarters of US citizens were satisfied with American democracy, a figure that plateaued for the next decade. The first big knock came with the 2008 financial crisis, and deterioration has continued year-on-year ever since. Now, less than half of US citizens are content with their democracy.

"Such levels of democratic dissatisfaction would not be unusual elsewhere," said Foa. "But for the United States it may mark an end of exceptionalism, and a profound shift in America's view of itself."

The report's authors suggest that the 1990s were a better time for democracy, as the West emerged from the Cold War with renewed legitimacy, while multi-party elections spread across Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. However, repeated financial and foreign policy failures in established democracies, along with endemic corruption and state fragility in the Global South, have eroded trust in democracy over the last 25 years.

"The rise of populism may be less a cause and more a symptom of democratic malaise," said Foa. "Without this weakening legitimacy, it would be unthinkable for a US presidential candidate to denounce American democracy as rigged, or for the winning presidential candidate in Latin America's largest democracy to openly entertain nostalgia for military rule."

"If confidence in [democracy](#) has been slipping, it is because democratic institutions have been seen failing to address some of the major crises of our era, from economic crashes to the threat of global warming. To restore democratic legitimacy, that must change."

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Global dissatisfaction with democracy at record high, new report reveals (2020, January 29) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-01-global-dissatisfaction-democracy-high-reveals.html>

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