Chapter 12

Conclusions and implications

More than a decade ago, the original Critical Citizens study brought together a distinguished group of international scholars and seminal thinkers to consider the state of support for the political system at the close of the twentieth century. 1 The core consensus emerging from contributors to the volume was that citizens in many countries had proved increasingly skeptical about the actual workings of the core institutions of representative democracy, notably political parties, parliaments, and governments. At the same time, however, public aspirations towards democratic ideals, values, and principles, or the demand for democracy, proved almost universal around the globe. The tensions between unwavering support for democratic principles but skeptical evaluations about democratic practices, was interpreted in the study as the rise of ‘critical citizens’. The passage of time means that the argument and evidence presented in Critical Citizens needed to be updated, to see whether the central thesis continues to resonate today. The extensive anxieties which continue to be expressed about public support for democratic governance suggest that the core message from the earlier volume has not faded, but instead seems more relevant than ever to help understand contemporary developments. Updating and expanding the scope of the evidence, and developing more systematic insights into the causes and consequences of the democratic deficit, provides an important corrective to the misdiagnosis and exaggeration which is prevalent throughout so much of the literature. The conclusion recapitulates the standard concern about contemporary levels of political support, as expressed by numerous scholars and popular commentators over the years. It then summarizes the main arguments presented throughout the book, provides a series of reasons challenging the conventional wisdom, and finally concludes by reflecting upon the broader implications of democratic deficits for both theories and practices of democracy.

The conventional anxieties about established democracies

Concern about public support for the political system rises and falls periodically on the agenda, reflecting contemporary hopes and fears about real world events. Hence during the late-1950s and early 1960s, historical memories of the fall of the Weimar Republic, coupled with the failure and breakdown of many fledgling parliamentary democracies in post-colonial Africa, spurred the initial interest in cultural theories of democratization and regime stability among early scholars of political development. 2 Similarly during the late-1960s and early-1970s, the outbreak of urban riots, street protests and counter-culture movements in the United States and Western Europe revived conservative anxieties about the root causes of protest politics and the consequences of radical challenges to the authority of democratic governments. 3 Apprehension faded somewhat during the subsequent decade, although the mid-1990s again saw renewed disquiet about these issues, uniting diverse concerns about a supposed erosion of civic engagement occurring in established democracies; as evidence, observers pointed to the half-empty ballot box, shrinking party loyalties and membership rolls, and a long-term fall in social capital. 4 Today a new wave of deep concern has arisen about public mistrust of politicians and government in both established democracies and in younger democracies elsewhere in the world. 5 The standard view today is encapsulated by Dalton’s conclusions: “By almost any measure, public confidence and trust in, and support, for politicians, political parties, and political constitutions has eroded over the past generation.” 6

Anxiety about the root causes and consequences of any widespread erosion of political trust in Western societies resonates even more clearly outside of academe. Hence in the United States, much journalistic coverage assessing the early years of the Obama administration has focused upon signs of
public dissatisfaction with the federal government. Commentary has highlighted polls showing deepening political disaffection, notably low confidence in Congress, following partisan stalemate and gridlock in debate over health care reform, a deep economic recession characterized by eroding financial security, and collapsing home values. Increasingly populist anti-government rhetoric has emanated from the 'Tea Party' movement, echoed by some leaders in the Republican Party and in parts of the news media. Sporadic acts of domestic and foreign terrorism in America are commonly linked in popular commentary with dissatisfaction with government, although the precise underlying connection has not been fully established. In Europe, as well, events such as the Westminster expenses scandal in Britain have been thought to have exacerbated a culture of pervasive public anger and mistrust, where the motivation and ethical standards of politicians are widely discredited.

Elsewhere similar concerns echo about the declining image of the political class, for example in Japan and Germany.

Many reforms have been advocated to address public disaffection. Those who favor strengthening opportunities for collective deliberation and direct citizen engagement in decision-making processes have proposed expanding the use of citizen assemblies and juries, popular referenda and petitions, social audits, participatory budgeting, public consultation exercises, town-hall meetings, and deliberative polls. Other reformers concerned about strengthening governance transparency and accountability urge repeal of official secrecy acts and expanded rights to information, designing more open decision-making processes, reinforcing the independent news media, and utilizing e-governance. The role and powers of independent monitoring and regulatory agencies can also be strengthened, including anti-corruption institutions and electoral commissions, ombudsman institutions, human rights watch organizations, agencies regulating standards of public life, and budgetary auditors. More radical changes include constitutional revisions, reforming electoral processes and campaign funding, increasing the social diversity of legislatures, and decentralizing decision-making to local communities. Despite extensive popular debate, however, it remains unclear whether any of these strategies will actually achieve their desired long-term objectives. These may all be intrinsically worthy initiatives in their own right. Reforms will fail, however, if the assumed problem of democratic legitimacy, or any so-called crisis of trust in government, has actually been exaggerated or misdiagnosed.

Concern about a global democratic recession?

Outside of established democracies, developments around the world suggest more persuasive reasons for serious concern about the retrenchment of autocracy and an active push-back against the forces of democracy. Larry Diamond, a leading observer, suggests that the first decade of the twenty-first century is an era where democracy has experienced little further advance (at best), or even the start of a new reverse wave (at worst). Freedom House reports echo these worries. Each global region has differed in the pace and extent of the transition from autocracy and the process of democratic consolidation during the third wave era. In Latin America democratic governance made sustained progress during the 1980s, although studies suggest that even in this region, dissatisfaction with the performance of government has encouraged political disillusionment and cynicism. Others have detected evidence of a regional backlash against the way that liberal democracy and economic neo-liberalism works, although not a rejection of democratic ideals per se. For evidence of lack of progress, Venezuela experienced the return of strong-man populist rule under Hugo Chavez, Mexico and Colombia continue to be destabilized by violent drug cartels, while in the Caribbean, Cuba switched dictators from Fidel to Raul Castro, and fragile Haiti was devastated by the collapse of its buildings and government in the earthquake.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Freedom House estimates that human rights deteriorated in almost one quarter of all states in recent years, including in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Mauritania. Many traditional dictatorships, military oligarchies, and strong-man rulers continue to rule African states.
the continent, a series of bloody civil wars have led to the collapse of political disorder and failed states.\textsuperscript{18} Some of the world poorest nations on the sub-continent, including Mali, Liberia, Benin, and Ghana, experienced a series of multiparty competitive elections and real gains in human rights since the early-1990s, but states still lack the capacity to lift millions out of poverty and to deliver the targets for healthcare, education and welfare in the Millennium Development Goals.\textsuperscript{19} Among Arab states, some concrete but limited gains for human rights and freedoms have registered in recent years, yet the rhetoric of reform runs far ahead of realities.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover Carothers suggests that during the administration of President George W. Bush, the association of the rhetoric of democracy promotion with unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan depressed public support for reform in the region, and encouraged a more general push-back by oil-rich plutocrats.\textsuperscript{21} Overall most Middle East autocracies stagnated. In Eastern Europe, Russia has imposed renewed restrictions on human rights and challenges to the rule of law, Georgia has become less stable. Kyrgyzstan has experienced political turmoil but many Central Asian states seem frozen in Soviet-style dictatorships, seemingly isolated from global forces of regime change. The color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine were commonly framed as the triumph of democratic forces, but it remains unclear whether these movements actually reflected more deep-rooted and widespread democratic sentiments, or whether in fact they were triggered by elite contestation for power.\textsuperscript{22} Afghanistan has registered mixed progress, experiencing flawed presidential elections, and signs of renewed instability, which spill over its borders with Pakistan. Elsewhere occasional outbreaks of popular dissent seeking to topple autocratic regimes have also been brutally suppressed by the authorities, for example, most recently in Burma/Myanmar, Tibet, and Iran.\textsuperscript{23} In Asia-Pacific, democratically-elected leaders fell from power after military coups in Thailand (2006) and Fiji (2006). The Obama administration has downplayed ambitious neo-con talk of democracy-building in Iraq and Afghanistan, in a backlash against the rhetoric of President Bush, as realists reasserted more pragmatic leadership in the U.S. State Department.\textsuperscript{24}

Cultural attitudes towards democracy are expected to be important in all these cases but particularly so in those countries which have experienced the initial transition from autocracy during the third wave era, but which have not yet firmly established the full panoply of legislative and judicial institutions associated with liberal democracy.\textsuperscript{25} Many regime transitions have occurred in world regions lacking historical experience of democracy, as well as in low income economies, post-conflict divided societies, and fragile states, all providing unfavorable soil for the seeds of democratization to flourish.\textsuperscript{26} Theories of legitimacy suggest that regimes will prove most politically stable where they rest on popular support.\textsuperscript{27} Hence democratic constitutions built upon cultures which strongly endorse democratic ideals and principles are expected to weather shocks arising from any sudden economic crisis, internal conflict, or elite challenge more successfully than societies where the public remains indifferent, cynical, or even hostile towards the idea of democracy. Along similar lines, autocratic regimes are expected to endure where the general public endorses the legitimacy of this form of governance, for example where citizens express deference to the authority of traditional monarchs and religious leaders, or where they are suckered by the heady appeals of populist dictators. If public legitimacy is lacking, however, regimes are thought more susceptible to mass and elite challenge. Democratic states, in particular, remain most vulnerable to this risk, as they rely upon a reservoir of popular legitimacy and voluntary compliance to govern. By contrast, brutal autocracies, if threatened by mass movements, reform factions, and opposition dissidents, can always reassert their grip on power by calling the military out of the barracks.\textsuperscript{28}

Issues of regime change and progressive democratization, always difficult, have been compounded in recent years by the aftermath of the global financial crisis, which generated worsening economic conditions and poverty, falling employment and wages, and the largest decline in world trade
for eighty years. Even before this downturn, in the world’s poorest societies, democratic governments faced particularly severe obstacles in delivering basic public services such as clean water, health clinics, and schools. The U.N. documents enduring and deeply-entrenched poverty for the bottom billion in the least developed nations, raising doubts about whether the world can achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, as planned. Problems of climate change exacerbate problems of food security, clean water scarcity, and threaten new humanitarian disasters in low-lying coastal regions. In fragile or post-crisis states, the struggle to reduce conflict, build sustainable peace, and strengthen the capacity and legitimacy of democratically-elected governments cannot be underestimated. In this complex and difficult environment, it would be naïve to assume that the third wave era of democratization continues to advance steadily.

Explaining the democratic deficit

In this context, understanding the cultural drivers of sustainable processes of democratization represents one of the most fundamental challenges facing the international community, advocacy agencies seeking to advance universal human rights, and domestic reformers working to strengthen democratic governance. Often separate disciplines and research sub-fields in the social sciences focus on one of the theoretical dimensions with partial empirical tests, without controlling for the full range of explanatory factors, or examining whether the effects of models are robust when utilizing alternative dependent variables. Like the proverbial blind men and the elephant, each part of the puzzle is usually treated separately in the research literature. Survey analysts focus upon public opinion. Communication scholars scrutinize the news media. Policy analysts monitor government performance. And institutionalists examine power-sharing structures. A more comprehensive general theory provides a more satisfactory way of understanding this phenomenon. Multilevel analysis, with evidence derived from surveys of public opinion, media coverage of public affairs, and aggregate indicators of government performance, is the most appropriate technique to determine the most important causes for any democratic deficits. This book examined a wide range of empirical data, using a series of multilevel models, to analyze the strength of each of these potential explanations. This study seeks to integrate the separate approaches into a more coherent sequential framework where citizens, media, and governments interact as the central actors. The analysis presented throughout this study lead to several main conclusions, which deserve recapitulation here.

Trendless fluctuations in system support

Perhaps the most important simple message, challenging the conventional wisdom, is that public support for the political system has not eroded consistently in established democracies, not across a wide range of countries around the world. The ‘crisis’ myth, while fashionable, exaggerates the extent of political disaffection and too often falls into the dangers of fact-free hyperbole. In general, following in the footsteps of David Easton, support for the political system is best understood as a multidimensional phenomenon ranging from the most generalized feelings of attachment and belonging to a nation-state, through confidence and trust in the regime and its institutions, down to specific approval of particular authorities and leaders. Chapter 4 scrutinized and dissected time-series survey evidence about public opinion within established democracies. The chapter concluded that it is essential to distinguish trends in public attitudes which operate at different levels, rather than treating ‘political support’ as though it is all of one piece. Careful attention to the precise timing and breadth of any trends is also critical for an accurate diagnosis of developments.

The most diffuse level of political support concerns the most fundamental orientations towards the nation state, exemplified by deep-rooted feelings of national pride and national identity. Globalization might be expected to have weakened these feelings but the survey evidence demonstrates
that nationalism remains strong and relatively stable, even among West European societies which are long-standing members of the EU. Trust in political institutions such as national governments, parliaments and parties display systematic and persistent contrasts among established democracies in Western Europe and the U.S. The longitudinal evidence clearly demonstrates that fluctuations over time usually prove far more common than straightforward linear or uniform downward trends. Notwithstanding all the headlines exaggerating the decline in trust, there is little actual evidence of a long-term decline, either in the United States or in Western Europe across the board.”

Contrasts are also evident in public attitudes towards different branches of government within each country; for example the U.S. has seen a long-term significant erosion of support for the legislature, but this has not affected public support for the Supreme Court or the Executive. Persistent differences in institutional trust can also be observed among relatively similar nations, such as between Italy and Spain, or Germany and France. A few European countries have experienced growing trust in state institutions, while a few have seen the reverse situation. Perhaps most importantly, in Europe diffuse support for the nation-state remains strong and stable, and European satisfaction with the performance of democracy has usually strengthened over time, not weakened.

*Democratic deficits*

Nevertheless the second major lesson arising from this study is that *in many states today, satisfaction with the performance of democracy continues to diverge from public aspirations.* This pattern was first observed in *Critical Citizens* and this book provides further confirmation about the persistence of the democratic deficit. The comparison of multiple dimensions of system support in contemporary societies worldwide, presented in chapter 6, showed that compared with other types of regimes, autocracies display stronger confidence in public sector agencies and also feelings of nationalism. Yet if we focus upon pro-democratic attitudes, in particular, it is clear that these are stronger among older liberal democracies which have experienced this form of governance over many decades, or even centuries, including levels of satisfaction with democracy, endorsement of democratic attitudes, and the rejection of autocracy. In terms of democratic aspirations, however, today these attitudes are almost universal, irrespective of the type of regime governing the state.

Building upon this foundation, the study compared the democratic deficit in each society, conceptualized as the tensions which arise from the imbalance between the public’s demand for democracy (measured by strong adherence to democratic values and rejection of authoritarian alternatives) and the perceived supply of democracy (monitored by public dissatisfaction with the democratic performance of governments in each country). The evidence demonstrated that people living in older liberal democracies expressed strong endorsement of democratic values, but also relatively content evaluations about how democracy works in their own country. States which have only democratized during the third wave era prove far more diverse in their orientations, with the greatest congruence between aspirations and perceived performance displayed in cases such as Ghana, Uruguay, and South Africa, which observers’ rate as relatively successful democracies. By contrast, larger disparities between expectations and perceived performance are evident in many post-Communist states, including in Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria and Serbia.

*The causes of the democratic deficit*

The ‘market model’ used for analysis in this book compared three distinct types of explanation for the democratic deficit. The most common account of rising aspirations towards democratic governance emphasizes long-term cultural developments among citizens, on the ‘demand-side’, associated with the structural expansion in cognitive and civic skills related to rising educational levels and societal modernization (Dalton), generational shifts towards self-expression values in post-
industrial societies (Inglehart and Welzel), and theories of social capital (Putnam). The role of the news media as the intermediary channel of information between citizens and the state is another common explanation for levels of democratic knowledge and for public perceptions of government performance. Moreover a range of ‘supply-side’ theories have also been suggested in the literature, emphasizing that public opinion is responding more rationally and instrumentally to the institutional context, including the enduring impact of historical political traditions on democratic cultures, government performance when delivering basic public goods and services, and the uneven distribution of partisan ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ arising from institutional structures. Each explanation generates a series of testable propositions which are scrutinized against the available empirical evidence in section III of the book.

Several main points arise from the autopsy. The book started from the premise that the democratic deficit could be best understood by a combination of rising aspirations (with the analysis suggesting that public demands are fuelled strongly by education), combined with the potential impact of negative news about government (although the evidence for this remains strictly limited), and perceived short-falls in government performance (particularly process rather than policy performance).

Cultural accounts emphasize that major changes in system support are driven primarily by sociological changes, whether glacial processes of value change eroding respect for traditional authorities and fuelling emancipative demands for democracy, or by the wearing away of generalized social trust and the face-to-face bonds of community associations. The extensive cross-national evidence examined in this study suggests no confirmation for the bolder claims in the societal modernization theory; in particular, democratic aspirations were not found to be associated with processes of human development nor with age effects. Contrary to theoretical expectations, democratic aspirations were slightly stronger amongst the older generation, not the young. Even more strikingly, these values were not related to contemporary levels of human development in each society; today both rich and poor nations emphasize the importance of living in democratic states. But the baby should not be throw out with the bathwater; cultural theories furnish a partial answer to some of the issues at the heart of this study; in particular, educational levels, self-expression values, social trust, and associational activism all help to predict higher democratic aspirations. Only the effects of education, however, actually widened the democratic deficit.

The study also reinforced the need for considerable caution when interpreting the almost universal support for democratic values, emphasizing that we need to establish what people understand by the complex concept of ‘democracy’. Procedural, instrumental and authoritarian notions of democracy can be distinguished. We develop the notion of ‘enlightened democratic knowledge’ which is defined and measured by awareness of some basic principles at the heart of democratic regimes – as well as the ability to distinguish those which are incompatible. Drawing upon socialization theories of political learning, chapter 8 confirmed that enlightened democratic knowledge was significantly strengthened at macro-level by longer historical experience of democratic governance in any state, by cosmopolitan communications, and by levels of economic development. At micro-level, the cognitive skills and knowledge derived from education, and access to news media information, also strengthened enlightened political knowledge.

Communications theories provide an alternative perspective on the democratic deficit, emphasizing the type of media and the type of coverage. Scholars differ in whether they expect that exposure and attention to TV news will encourage more cynical attitudes towards politics, government and democracy (the traditional video-malaise thesis), or whether they predict that this process will reinforce democratic orientations and civic engagement (the virtuous circle thesis). The analysis presented in chapter 9 provides further confirmation of the latter perspective; exposure to news and information from newspapers, television and radio news, and the internet was found to have
strengthened democratic values and aspirations, even after controlling for factors such as age, income and education which characterize news users. The effects on democratic satisfaction proved more mixed, but contrary to the core claim in the video-malaise thesis, users of television and radio news proved more satisfied with democracy, not less. Moreover regular use of all these media reduced the democratic deficit, or the gap between expectations and perceived performance. The study also tested the impact of the tone of coverage, with more negative news and scandal coverage expected to reduce public satisfaction with government. The evidence was limited to the cases of Britain and America, and the results of the analysis provided at best only limited and partial support for the tone thesis. Hence the amount of scandal coverage about Congress in the news media did reduce public confidence in this institution, but similar effects were not detected in the British case. Further research is required to rule in, or indeed to rule out, the media tone thesis with more confidence.

An alternative account is provided by rational choice theories which suggest that regime performance matters, at least at some level, for public satisfaction with the workings of democracy. The underlying assumptions and claims embodied in these accounts were considered in chapter 10, comparing the evidence supporting process accounts, which emphasize that judgments of regime performance are based primarily upon retrospective evaluations of the quality of underlying democratic procedures, policy accounts, suggesting that retrospective evaluations of the overall substantive policy record of successive governments are important, and institutional accounts, which theorize that regime evaluations are conditioned by the intervening effects of power-sharing arrangements, determining the distribution of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in any state. The results of analyzing a comprehensive range of measures suggest that process performance, including both indices of democracy and good governance, helps to explain satisfaction with the way that democratic government works. Among the policy indices, economic development and a subjective sense of well-being also proved equally important, although most of the other more specific economic, social and environmental performance indicators were not significant. Lastly among the institutional factors, satisfaction with democracy was indeed strengthened by support for the winning party. By contrast, the overall institutional arrangements in any regime did not appear to be important. Overall it appears that closing the democratic deficit is therefore largely about strengthening processes of democracy and the actual quality of governance so that the performance meets rising citizen expectations.

The impact of democratic orientations

Scholars continue to debate the potential consequences of any democratic deficits both for political behavior at individual-level and also for democratic governance in the nation-state. Critical Citizens concluded, somewhat cautiously and ambivalently, that the tensions between ideals and practices could be regarded in a positive light, if the diffusion of democratic aspirations around the world will eventually spread downwards to strengthen public confidence and generalized trust in the workings of representative institutions essential for democratic governance. Critical citizens may thereby be a positive force for reform in the world, fuelling popular demands that states with poor human rights records come to resemble democratic principles more fully. A degree of skepticism about the trustworthiness of government authorities is healthy for democracy; after all, classical liberal political theory was founded on the need for citizen vigilance about the potential abuse of power by the state. These ideas led the framers of the U.S. constitution to establish a set of institutions explicitly designed to limit government power. As Hardin emphasizes, trust should be reserved for trustworthy actors. Yet substantial and enduring democratic deficits are more commonly regarded with concern, however, triggering alarm that prolonged and deep disenchantment with the performance of particular political leaders, lack of confidence with governing parties, and disillusionment with core representative institutions will eventually spread upwards to corrode faith in democracy itself, like dry rot weakening
the foundations from below, with the capacity to undermine popular support for fragile democratic regimes.

Although multiple puzzles remain, this book provides a more detailed examination about many of these issues, allowing firmer conclusions to be offered in this volume. The results presented in chapter 11 demonstrate that democratic orientations matter – and matter a lot – including for patterns and types of political participation, for the willingness of citizens to comply voluntarily with the authorities (and thus for the capacity of states to implement decisions), and ultimately for strengthening processes of democratization. In particular, democratic aspirations played a significant role in bolstering indicators of citizen interest and protest activism, as well as reinforcing compliant behavior by citizens in accordance with the law. Lastly the lagged model monitored the effects of culture on subsequent processes of democratization, showing that democratic aspirations contributed towards sustainable democratic regimes. Therefore, as this book has demonstrated, democratic orientations are far from irrelevant to the real world; they matter for political participation, for the willingness of citizens to comply voluntarily with the authorities and thus to build capable states and rule of law, and ultimately for the process of strengthening democracy around the world.


31 Similar conclusions were reached in the review of the literature by Margaret Levi and Laura Stoker. 2000. ‘Political trust and trustworthiness.’ Annual Review of Political Science 3: 475-508.
