Chapter 2

The conceptual framework

Ideas such as ‘political trust’, ‘democratic values’, ‘political disaffection’, and ‘systems support’ are far from simple. Their measurement is not straightforward. And the thoughtful interpretation of the underlying meaning of the evidence is even more complicated. This chapter seeks to establish and clarify the conceptual framework, an important first step before examining both longitudinal trends and cross-national evidence. This chapter first identifies the idea of levels and components of systems support, drawing upon the seminal work of David Easton. It then builds and extends these concepts further by outlining the core idea of democratic deficits, reflecting the ambivalent tensions between aspirations for democracy and judgments about its performance. The deficit arises, in essence, because many citizens today believe that it is important to live in a democratic state, yet they remain dissatisfied when evaluating how democracy works. If this attitudinal syndrome translates into actions and behavior – an issue explored in the final section of this book-- then any deficit is potentially an important resource for mobilizing social movements seeking to deepen participation, accountability and transparency within liberal democracies, as well as encouraging popular demands for reform in autocratic states.

The conceptual framework of systems support

Ideas about support for the political system are too often muddied in the literature; for example when distinguishing citizens’ orientations towards government and parliaments, common language often skims over, or fails to acknowledge, important distinctions such as those concerning ideas of institutional confidence (which can be understood to represent belief in the capacity of an agency to perform effectively), trust (reflecting a rational or affective belief in the benevolent motivation and performance capacity of another party), skepticism (or suspended judgment), and cynicism (meaning jaded negativity). Moreover media commentary often exaggerates any signs, for example describing American dissatisfaction with the process of health care reform or with partisan squabbling in Congress as voter ‘anger’ or ‘disgust’, without any direct evidence for affective orientations.

Additionally, the normative implications of each of these concepts remain ambiguous. For example, commentators often assumed, at least implicitly, that trust by citizens is a desirable quality, irrespective of the trustworthiness of the object. If the reservoir of public trust in bodies such as the Norwegian Stortinget or the Swedish Riksdag has drained over time, then this should indeed be a matter of genuine concern. Yet if government ministers or legislators repeatedly prove venal, self-serving and corrupt, then trust would be foolish and naive. Similarly skepticism is usually regarded negatively; yet this could be the most appropriate stance, for example if policymaking processes are so complex in divided governments that citizens lack accurate information to evaluate institutional performance and to attribute praise and blame. In the first founding elections held after any transition from autocracy, many citizens may well know little about their elected representatives, as well as lacking information about how government decision-making processes work; in this context, agnostic skepticism may well be the most rational and suitable response.

Given the complexity of the ideas at the heart of this study, we need to establish clarity about the core concepts. The traditional theoretical framework of systems support was established during the mid-1960s by David Easton. The concept of ‘system support’ is understood in this study to reflect orientations towards the nation-state, its agencies, and actors. Where orientations are positive, citizens accept the legitimacy of their state to govern within its territorial boundaries. They do not challenge the
basic constitutional structure and rules of the game, or the authority of office-holders.\textsuperscript{3} Systems support is therefore understood as a psychological orientation.

Attitudes are commonly inferred from tacit actions, such as the voluntary acts of paying taxes, obeying the law, and casting a ballot. Hence numerous popular studies often regard eroding voting turnout or falling party membership as an expression of cynicism or disenchantment among the electorate.\textsuperscript{4} But it is often deeply problematic, indeed foolhardy, to infer psychological orientations from behavior; citizens may be acting from many complex motives, such as voting out of fear of reprisal or legal sanctions, habit, or a sense of duty, without necessarily supporting the regime. For example, when nine out of ten registered voters (93%) cast a ballot in the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus, few commentators would regard this as a legitimate and reliable sign of public affection for the repressive Lukashenko regime. It is similarly misleading to infer that the fall in voter turnout in European Parliamentary elections -- down overall from 62% in 1979 to 43% three decades later -- necessarily or automatically represents public disenchantment with the European Union; this decline could simply reflect growing indifference or even satisfaction with the status quo, as well as the changing composition and membership of the European Union.\textsuperscript{5} More reliable indicators of citizen’s psychological orientations towards government are derived from public opinion surveys conducted according to rigorous scientific standards. Common indicators are exemplified by a sense of belonging to, and identification with, the national community; positive attitudes towards the state and the core institutions governing the territorial unit; and approval of the incumbent office-holders within the state.

Citizens’ orientations towards the nation-state, its agencies and actors (systems support) thus need disentangling. It is worth underlining that the idea of systems support is not strictly equivalent to the related idea of political trust or institutional confidence, although these concepts are frequently conflated in the popular literature.\textsuperscript{6} The independence of these ideas is easily illustrated by a few simple examples; people can trust a particular party leader, for instance, without necessarily casting a ballot to actively support them (if they disagree with the leader’s ideology or policy positions). Conversely, people can support a leader (because they like his or her character and personality) without necessarily trusting them or having any confidence in their performance (for example, if skeptical about the ability of all politicians to deliver on their promises). Political support can be regarded as a dichotomy (citizens either do or do not reject the authority of the nation state) or more commonly as a continuum (with varied degrees and levels). Support for the nation-state is also rarely unconditional; instead it is usually directed towards particular components. For instance, Russians may approve of Vladimir Putin, but simultaneously disapprove of the actions and decisions of the Duma. Or Americans may be cynical and wary about the workings of Congress as an institution but still give high marks to their local senator. Or Mexicans may value the abstract principles of democracy, such as the importance of freedom of speech, tolerance, and respect for human rights, but still wish to ban certain specific publications or parties. Systems support has both affective and evaluative aspects. Citizens may accept the authority of the nation state, its agencies, and actors out of a deep sense of blind loyalty and strong feeling of patriotism (‘my country, right or wrong’). Or support may be more conditional, depending upon a more rational calculation of state performance.

Levels of system support

The Eastonian classification built upon the idea that the independent nation-state can be regarded as a political system.\textsuperscript{7} In this account, David Easton drew an important conceptual distinction between specific and diffuse levels of citizen’s support.

Specific political support focuses upon elected and appointed office-holders responsible for making and implementing political decisions within the nation-state. Indicators of such support include
the popularity of incumbent presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers, party leaders, and local representatives, as well as support for particular political parties (in government and opposition). It also covers attitudes towards leadership elites and authorities in other public sector agencies, such as confidence in high-ranked civil servants, judges, the military, and the police. Specific support for incumbent office-holders is expected to fluctuate over time when responding to short-term contextual factors, such as the performance of particular administrations, major shifts in public policy, or changes in party leadership. For elected officials, evaluations are also expected to be strongly filtered by partisan forces; the perception of government performance, for instance, is expected to vary sharply among winners and losers, defined by their party identification. Specific support is typically measured by regular opinion polls where approval of incumbents fluctuates over time as part of normal politics in democratic states. This suggests that specific support for office-holders should be explicable by short and medium-term factors, such as the government’s management of economic, social and foreign policy; fluctuations in financial markets; the impact of global events and international affairs; and regular shifts in party fortunes during the normal electoral cycle. A persistent lack of specific support is widely believed to have consequences for governance in all countries, but it does not thereby undermine the legitimacy of the nation-state or erode the fundamental authority of its agencies and actors.

By contrast, for Easton, diffuse or generalized political support represents more abstract feelings towards the nation state and its agencies. Political institutions persist even though incumbent leaders are removed from office. Generalized support towards the community and regime helps citizens accept the legitimacy of the state, its agencies and office-holders, even when people are highly critical about particular political processes, incumbent party leaders, or specific public policies and outcomes. In this regard, evaluations about the performance of the government are predicted to fluctuate over time, but generalized attachments to the nation-state are expected to prove more stable and enduring, providing office-holders with the authority to act based on a long-term reservoir of favorable attitudes or affective good will. Diffuse support represents more lasting bonds to the nation-state, as exemplified by feelings of national pride and identity, as well as by adherence to core regime values and principles. Diffuse support is expected to be particularly important for stability in fragile states emerging from deep-rooted internal conflict, as well as for processes of regime transition, by strengthening popular acceptance of the legitimacy of new constitutional arrangements and the authority of office-holders.

The conceptual distinction between specific and generalized support seems plausible theoretically, and worthwhile maintaining, especially if this is understood as a continuum rather than as a dichotomous typology. It implies, for instance, that particular scandals or a dramatic failure of public policy can bring down a president or prime minister, without damaging citizen’s belief in the legitimacy of their basic constitutional arrangements or, indeed, weakening deep feelings of patriotism about their country. In more fragile states, however, with shallower reservoirs of legitimacy, similar events could destabilize the government and trigger a regime crisis. In practice, however, it often remains difficult to match these concepts precisely to the available survey measures, for example satisfaction with democracy may reflect both approval of democracy as an abstract principle as well as positive evaluations of how democratic states perform in practice. Empirical research finds that support for elected officials can carry over to shape support for state institutions. Subsequent chapters focus upon the relationship among middle levels, including positive approval of democratic values and negative evaluations of the democratic performance of regimes.

**Components of political support**

Equally importantly, the traditional conceptual framework developed by Easton further distinguished among three distinct components of the political system, namely the nation, the state, and
the incumbent authorities. In this conception, the ‘nation-state’ represented the community to which people belonged. The ‘regime’ constituted the basic framework for governing the nation-state within its territorial boundaries. This includes the over-arching constitutional arrangements and the core government institutions at national, regional and local levels, reflecting the accepted formal and informal rules of the game. Regimes fall into distinct eras, for example with the breakdown of Communist rule in the Soviet Union and the transition towards democracy. In some cases, such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, the nation-state also dissolved, but in most countries the shift involved the adoption and revision of a new constitutional settlement within established territorial boundaries. Lastly, the ‘authorities’ represents the elected and appointed actors holding state office and the key decision-makers in the public sector. Of all these elements, the authorities change most frequently, in democratic states with the rotation of parties from government into opposition following electoral defeat. These elements can be understood to be related to each other, like Russian dolls, in an embedded model.

According to this conceptualization, people could not pick and choose between different state agencies, approving of some parts, while rejecting others. Yet in practice citizens do seem capable of making these distinctions. During the final years of the Bush administration, for example, Pew surveys report that Americans expressed deep dissatisfaction with the performance of the incumbent President, while views about the federal government and Congress deteriorated badly, and identification with the Republican party ebbed away. Nonetheless loss of faith in the Bush administration and the legislature did not spread to the judicial branch; the Supreme Court continued to be held in high regard. Discontent with the federal government also did not erode pride and patriotism in America, nor trigger any deep disaffection with the basic constitutional arrangements in American government, nor raise any serious doubts about basic democratic principles and ideals. Discontent was highly partisan, centered upon polarizing leadership of President Bush and the Republican Party, and attitudes were transformed by the election of President Barack Obama. The Eastonian framework for understanding components of political support in a political system provides the standard conceptual foundation for analysis. Updating the language to reflect contemporary usage, and greater refinement of these categories, are both important, however, to make these ideas relevant to modern concerns.

[Figure 2.1 about here]

Drawing upon these notions, the concept of ‘political support’ is understood broadly in this book as a multidimensional phenomenon ranging on a continuum from the most diffuse to the most specific levels. Moreover the middle category in the original framework is expanded conceptually to recognize five distinct components of support in a nested model, each with a series of operational empirical measures (see Figure 2.1):

(i) The most general and fundamental attitudes of citizens towards belonging to the nation-state, exemplified by feelings of national pride, patriotism, and identity;

(ii) Agreement with core principles and normative values upon which the regime is based, including approval of democratic values and ideals;

(iii) Evaluations of the overall performance of the regime, exemplified by satisfaction with democratic governance and also general assessments about the workings of democratic processes and practices;

(iv) Confidence in regime institutions, notably the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government, the security forces, as well as central, state and local governments; and lastly,
(v) **Approval of incumbent office-holders**, including attitudes towards specific party leaders, legislators, and public officials, as well as support for particular parties and for leadership elites and authorities in public sector agencies.

These components are regarded as ranging in a continuum from the most generalized support for the nation down through successive levels to the most concrete and specific support for individual actors.

**(i) National identities**

From this perspective, at the most diffuse level, support for the community represents general orientations towards belonging to a common nation, including enduring bonds typically expressed through feelings of patriotism, national pride, and a sense of national identity, as well as feelings towards people of other nations and towards multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations and European Union. The idea of ‘national identity’ is understood to mean the existence of communities with bonds of ‘blood and belonging’ arising from sharing a common homeland, cultural myths, symbols and historical memories, economic resources, and legal-political rights and duties.\(^\text{14}\) Nationalism can take ‘civic’ forms, meaning ties of soil based on citizenship within a shared territory and boundaries delineated by the nation-state, or it may take ‘ethnic’ forms, drawing on more diffuse ties based on religious, linguistic, or ethnic communities.\(^\text{15}\) In many countries, national identities are taken for granted, but they have particularly important consequences for social cohesion and state legitimacy in multicultural communities containing several distinct nationalities, especially in fragile states recently emerging from deep-rooted conflict.\(^\text{16}\) In the modern world, national identities underpin the nation-state and its institutions exercising legitimate political authority within a given territory, although there are many multinational states such as the United Kingdom, Belgium and Canada, as well as stateless national communities, exemplified by the Kurds and the Roma.

Although often assumed to reflect long-term, deep-rooted and stable orientations, in fact national orientations vary systematically in predictable ways, for example sudden spikes in national pride are often documented around the outbreak of war or external threat, in a commonly observed ‘rally-around-the-flag’ effect.\(^\text{17}\) National identities may also be gradually weakening as a result of processes of globalization, expanding networks of interdependence spanning national boundaries that follows the increasingly swift movement of ideas, money, goods, services, ecology, and people across territorial borders. By contrast to national identities, globalization is expected to strengthen cosmopolitan identities, understood as those outlooks, behaviors and feelings that transcend local and national boundaries.\(^\text{18}\) Typically, cosmopolitans are tolerant of diverse cultural outlooks and practices, valuing human differences rather than similarities, cultural pluralism rather than convergence, and de-emphasizing territorial ties and attachments.\(^\text{19}\) Nationalism and cosmopolitanism are usually regarded theoretically as oppositional, although it remains to be seen empirically whether these feelings could potentially coexist without contradiction, for example if people have strong feelings of national pride but also favor multilateral solutions to world problems. Using the World Values Survey, nationalism and cosmopolitanism can be analyzed through examining attitudes towards the state and institutions of multilateral governance, feelings of belonging and attachment to different communities, as well as support for policies that facilitate protectionism or globalization, such as attitudes towards free trade or open labor markets.\(^\text{20}\)

**(ii) Approval of regime principles and values**

The second level represents adherence to the principles and normative values upon which the regime is founded, reflecting beliefs about the legitimacy of the constitutional arrangements and the formal and informal rules of the game. Democracy remains an essentially contested concept, open to multiple meanings for alternative deliberative, representative and pluralist conceptions, so there is no
universal consensus about which values, procedures, and principles are most important. Schumpeterian notions emphasize a minimalist or ‘thin’ definition of representative democracy as an institutional arrangement for governing the state where all adults have opportunities to vote through free and fair competitive elections for their national legislature.\textsuperscript{21} From this viewpoint, representative democracies hold multiparty electoral contests at regular intervals which meet the essential conditions of an inclusive suffrage giving voting rights to all adult citizens, unrestricted rights by all citizens and parties to compete for elected offices, and transparent and honest processes for translating votes into seats. This parsimonious approach to defining democracy remains popular in the research literature. For empiricists, it has the considerable advantage of reducing the number of elements required for the accurate measurement and classification of electoral democracies.\textsuperscript{22} The most commonly-acknowledged danger of this conceptualization, however, is leaving out certain important dimensions of the richer concept of liberal democracy which are emphasized in more comprehensive measures. For example, minimalist definitions do not consider the quality of democratic performance, such as how far states achieve socially-inclusive representation, accountable leaders, freedom of expression, and equality of participation, in part because these factors are often difficult to gauge systematically with any degree of reliability and consistency.

By contrast, thicker or more maximalist understandings of the key structural framework of representative or liberal democracy have been strongly influenced by Robert Dahl’s body of work, including \textit{Politics, Economics, and Welfare} (1953), \textit{A Preface to Democratic Theory} (1956), and \textit{Polyarchy} (1971).\textsuperscript{23} Dahl argued that liberal democracies are characterized procedurally by two main attributes – contestation and participation. In practice, Dahl suggested that democratic regimes or ‘polyarchies’ can be identified by the presence of certain key political institutions: 1) elected officials; 2) free and fair elections; 3) inclusive suffrage; 4) the right to run for office; 5) freedom of expression; 6) alternative information; and 7) associational autonomy.\textsuperscript{24} This Dahl also emphasizes that competitive multiparty elections are used to fill offices for the national legislature and the chief executive. For electoral competition to be meaningful, however, he add a broader set of essential conditions, as polyarchies need to allow freedom of expression, the availability of alternative sources of information (freedom of the media), and associational autonomy (freedom to organize parties, interest groups and social movements). In short, in democratic states citizens must consent to their rulers, and public officials are accountable to those they govern. Democratic principles also involve support for the underlying values of freedom, opportunities for participation in decision-making, equality of rights and tolerance of minorities, respect for human rights, and the rule of law.

The Global-barometer surveys provide some of the most comprehensive evidence of attitudes towards each of these general democratic principles and values.\textsuperscript{25} An extensive literature has analyzed the distribution of democratic values, especially in post-Communist Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia, as well as the Middle East.\textsuperscript{26} Most commonly, surveys have tapped agreement with the idea of democracy as the most appropriate or ideal form of government for particular nations compared with alternative types of regime. Hence the Global-barometer surveys have asked respondents to choose among three alternative statements: ‘Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government’, ‘Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one’, and ‘For people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic or a non-democratic regime’.\textsuperscript{27} It is more difficult to find alternative items seeking to gauge support for autocratic principles, since these regimes are founded upon different forms of rule, such as the monarchies governing the emirates in Arab States, the military juntas controlling Thailand and Burma, the dynastic dictatorship in North Korea, one-party Communist states such as China and Cuba, and strongman populism in Venezuela and Zimbabwe. The World Values Survey measures whether the public approves of regimes based on having military rule, non-elected strong man rule, or government by experts, as well as having a democratic
political system. These items have been combined, with pro-democratic responses represented by
disagreement with the first three types of regimes and agreement with the last, and used as a
Democratic Regime Index. Most importantly, the fifth wave of the WVS survey also monitors which
characteristics are regarded as essential to democracy, which allows us to examine whether there is a
universal understanding to the meaning of this form of government in different parts of the world, or
whether meanings are culturally-specific.

(iii) Evaluations of regime performance

The third level concerns generalized support for the state, meaning support for how democratic
or autocratic regimes function in practice. This taps a ‘middle-level’ of support which is often difficult to
gauge. Many surveys, including the Euro-Barometer and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems,
have regularly measured 'satisfaction with the performance of democracy' or 'satisfaction with the way
democracy works'. The standard question in the EuroBarometer and many other surveys seeks to tap
these attitudes by asking: “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not
at all satisfied with the way democracy works in your country?” This item has been extensively analyzed in
the research literature, nevertheless responses are open to alternative interpretations. On the one
hand, the item can be seen to tap approval of ‘democracy’ as a value or principle. In this study, however,
we agree with Linde and Ekman that the phrasing of the question (by emphasizing how democracy is
performing) makes it most suitable to test public evaluations of the workings of democratic regimes and
assessments of democratic practices, not principles. Another related strategy compares evaluations of
the performance of the current regime against that of the past regime, a particularly effective approach
when used to analyze public opinion in countries with recent memories of regime transition, such as in
Central and Eastern Europe. This process is believed to provide a common standard rooted in people’s
concrete experience, rather than comparing the current regime against an idealized and therefore more
abstract notion of representative democracy.

In measuring how democratic regimes perform in practice, the 3rd and 4th waves of the World
Values Survey asked the following questions:

“I’m going to read off some things that people sometimes say about a democratic political system. Could
you please tell me if you agree strongly, agree, disagree or disagree strongly, after I read each one of
them? In democracy, the economic system runs badly; Democracies are indecisive and have too much
quibbling; Democracies aren’t good at maintaining order; Democracy may have problems but it’s better
than any other form of government.”

This battery of items allows respondents to express doubts about the broad way that democratic states
work in practice, without simultaneously rejecting democratic principles. Analysts have recoded these
responses in a consistent direction and then combined them to create a Democratic Process index. Using an alternative phrasing, the 5th wave WVS asks the following question:

“And how democratically is this country being governed today? Again using a scale from 1 to 10, where 1
means that it is “not at all democratic” and 10 means that it is “completely democratic,” what position
would you choose?”

The way that this question emphasizes evaluations of how democratically each country is being
governed makes the scale even more suitable to test public satisfaction with the perceived performance
of democratic governance in each nation.

(iv) Confidence in regime institutions
The fourth level concerns trust and confidence in the core institutions of state, including the legislature, executive and judicial branches of government, as well as other public sector agencies, such as the police, military and civil service. Studies seek to measure generalized support for the institution -- that is approval of the powers of the presidency as chief executive rather than support for President Barack Obama -- although in practice the precise dividing line between the office and the incumbent is often fuzzy. A conventional distinction is often made between 'public' and 'private' institutions, although this line varies depending upon the degree of state control in each country, for example whether a country has public service or commercial television broadcasters, and whether religious institutions are disestablished. Since 1973, for example, the U.S. General Social Survey conducted by NORC has monitored confidence in 'the people running' the executive branch of government, the U.S. Supreme Court and Congress, and the military, as well as private sectors agencies, such as major companies, medicine, banks and financial institutions, the press, television, and labor unions. Much can be learnt by examining the dynamics of support for particular agencies because evidence suggests that the public distinguishes among them; hence Americans consistently express considerable confidence in the Supreme Court, for example, while simultaneously increasingly disapproving of Congress and the executive branch. Institutions are large, impersonal, and broadly based, and the public's estimation of them is less immediately affected by particular news items or specific events than support for specific actors. Thus, loss of confidence in institutions may well be a better indicator of public disaffection with the modern world because they are the basic pillars of society. If they begin to crumble, then there is, indeed, cause for concern.

Public approval of the general performance of the governing party, as well as evaluations of the government's handling of major policy areas such as the economy, foreign policy, and social policy, are regularly monitored within particular nations in numerous election surveys and commercial public opinion polls. This facilitates longitudinal analysis within each country. Moreover the ISSP Role of Government cross-national survey module (conducted in 1985, 1990, 1996 and 2006) allows analysts to compare more detailed judgments about the government's past policy record, expectations about the appropriate scope of the government's role and responsibility, as well as approval of levels of public spending, on a range of major public policy issues, such as the economy, employment, education, the environment, housing, and health care.

**(v) Approval of incumbent office-holders**

Lastly, at the most specific level, orientations towards incumbent office-holders represent attitudes towards particular leaders in positions of authority. This is typified by levels of satisfaction with the performance of specific presidents or prime ministers, as well as support for particular parties, and confidence in leaders in other public sector agencies, such as the military or government bureaucracy. Loss of support for incumbent office-holders may have consequences, but no matter how grave or sudden any drop, (such as the Watergate crisis), in most long-established regimes, it is unlikely to pose a threat to the functioning or stability of the nation-state. In more fragile states, however, a leadership crisis, such as the death or over-throw of a president, may trigger broader processes of regime change. As Easton notes: "Typically, members of a political system may find themselves opposed to the political authorities, disquieted by their policies, dissatisfied with their conditions of life and, where they have the opportunity, prepared to throw the incumbents out of office. At times, such conditions can lead to fundamental political and social change. Yet at other times, in spite of widespread discontent, there appears to be little loss of confidence in the regime – the underlying order of political life – or of identification with the political community. Political discontent is not always, or even usually, the signal for basic political change."
To analyze support for incumbent office-holders, studies are heavily dependent upon national polls rather than cross-national surveys. We can examine longitudinal trends in popular approval of presidents or prime Ministers in particular countries, using monthly polls to analyze whether satisfaction with leadership has declined since the post-war period. More often, analysis has focused on trust in incumbent politicians, using the items developed by the ANES in 1958, and subsequently replicated in some other national election studies. The standard American National Election Study (ANES) items monitor how the public feels about the performance of public officials in terms of their ethical standards, efficiency, and integrity. The ANES asks Americans to assess whether the ‘government in Washington’ can be trusted to do what is right, an item which is understood here to tap the broader level of general confidence in the state, since the item refers to the federal agency collectively rather than the incumbent office-holders. In addition, the ANES survey asks whether ‘people running the government’ waste taxes, whether government is run for the benefit of a few big interests, or whether public officials are ‘crooked’. Separate items monitor a sense of how far people believe that the public sector is responsive to public opinion, representing the notion of ‘external efficacy’.

There are some important issues about interpreting all these measures, however, which need to be considered. Most importantly, they are not designed to tap into more generalized levels of support towards the community and regime. Thus the ANES does not regularly monitor public approval of the basic U.S. constitutional principles, adherence to democratic values and principles, or indicators of American pride and patriotism. The NORC US General Social Survey has also only asked sporadically about these matters, making it difficult to analyze long-term trends. The ANES standard ‘trust in government’ items are regarded as the canonical measures for analyzing trends in American public opinion, and although there is some ambiguity about the specific branch of government, the referent of these items are clearly worded to be incumbent-oriented (“the people in the government”, “the government in Washington”, “the people running the government”). Moreover as Levi and Stoker point out, although commonly assumed to reflect trust in government, in fact the measures tap other related dimensions, such as the ability and efficiency of public officials (to do ‘what is right’), as well as their ethical qualities (to be honest or crooked), and the responsiveness of government (towards special interests or the general good), all of which generate favorable or unfavorable evaluations. The concept of trust, Levi and Stoker note, never featured in the original design of these survey items by Donald Stokes. In addition, in the ANES questions it is unclear what American respondents understand when they are asked to evaluate the performance of ‘the government’ or ‘the people running the government’, since U.S. decision-making is divided horizontally among the executive, legislative and judicial branches, as well as vertically among districts, states and the federal levels.

The idea of democratic deficits

All these elements of system support are important but not all are central to the idea of democratic deficits. The second and third elements derived from the general conceptual framework are useful to understand the links between the demand and supply of democracy, in the theory developed in this volume. The size of any democratic deficit derives from the overwhelming approval of democratic values and principles, which are widely expressed in most societies today, and yet the more skeptical evaluations of the democratic performance of governments, which are also relatively common. The informational basis of any evaluations is also important, for the accuracy of any judgments about the performance of democracy. In emphasizing these dimensions, this study returns to the classic framework at the heart of the Almond and Verba’s original Civic Culture study. This focused upon “(1) ‘cognitive orientations’, that is, knowledge and beliefs about the political system... (2) ‘affective orientations’ or feelings about the political system...and (3) ‘evaluational orientations,’ the judgments
and opinions...that typically involve the combination of value standards and criteria with information and feelings."44

**Democratic Aspirations**

The first aspect concerns democratic aspirations and values, which can be understood to reflect the demand for democracy. Aspirations and values reflect desirable goals – whether for the individual, household, community, nation-state, and indeed the world. Aspirations concern what people want out of life, or what they regard as most important. People typically juggle a variety of competing aspirations – such as the desire for physical security, social status and material affluence, autonomy and freedom, or self-expression and creativity. The relative ranking of these goals determines priorities. As such, aspirations are understood to tap into relatively durable aspects of social psychology that orientate people towards specific attitudes and cognitive beliefs. Aspirations may concern personal goals, such as the importance of family, self-fulfillment through work, or the acquisition of material goods. Or they may concern the goals for society as a whole. People living within Scandinavian cultures, for example, which typically display socially egalitarian values, are expected to express strong support for public policies strengthening the role of government, a comprehensive and universal welfare state, and redistributive taxation designed to reduce income differentials. On the other hand, Americans, who usually give greater importance to the values of rugged individualism and the free market, can be expected to oppose these types of policies. Political values reflect the desires which citizens express towards the ideal type of principles for governing their own state, irrespective of the type of regime actually in power. Unlike political attitudes, values and aspirations can be understood to transcend specific cultural contexts, institutional arrangements, and particular situations. Hence general preferences for competition or cooperation, social equality or individual success, for example, can be applied to the different spheres of work, school, business and politics.45 The diffuse nature of values also facilitates wide-ranging comparisons across diverse countries and cultures.

One counter-argument, suggested by Schedler and Sarsfield, is that instead of asking about values, surveys should monitor more concrete attitudes towards specific democratic procedures, for example whether respondents support the use of referenda and plebiscites, the adoption of proportional representation or majoritarian electoral systems, freedom of speech and equal rights for political minorities, or the decentralization of decision-making through federalism. Yet it makes little sense to ask about people technical issues where citizens lack experience or awareness, as Converse argued. Even in established democracies where political elites have long debated the pros and cons of alternative electoral reforms, such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand, citizens’ preferences for proportional or majoritarian types of electoral systems have been found to be strongly conditioned by the precise wording, order, and framing of survey questions, with successive polls generating unstable and unreliable insights into public opinion, rather than reflecting deep-seated prior attitudes.46 In these circumstances, a more effective strategy for tapping public opinion is to monitor more general values which are applicable to multiple institutional contexts and life experiences. Political values can be regarded as a trade-off. When considering the risks and benefits of becoming actively engaged in democratic reform movements, for example, citizens living under long-standing autocracies, such as Saudi Arabia, China, and Iran, need to weigh the importance of maintaining traditional sources of political authority, social stability, and security against the dangers and uncertainties which flow from regime transitions. When measuring values, citizens who endorse the importance of living in a democracy, and who also reject authoritarian principles, are regarded in this study as holding democratic values.

**Evaluations of democratic performance**
The second dimension concerns the supply of democratic governance, representing citizen’s evaluations or satisfaction with the performance of democratic governance in their own country. Where there is congruence between supply and demand, this implies a close fit between the public’s aspirations for democratic governance and their satisfaction with how far this is being met in each country. Eckstein’s congruence theory suggests that where demand matches supply, this should reinforce regime stability and the political status quo.47 The public will be content with how far government reflects their expectations. Where demand and supply fail to balance, however, then Eckstein predicts that regimes will prove more fragile and open to challenge. Where the public demand for democracy outruns its perceived supply by the regime, this has important implications for the potential mobilization of reform movements. In contrast, where the perceived supply of democracy runs ahead of public demand for this form of governance, for example if the international community insists on holding multiparty competitive elections in deeply-traditional societies such as Afghanistan which lack any democratic traditions, then electoral democracies are also expected prove fragile, as they lack mass legitimacy. To measure these ideas, citizens’ aspirations can be compared against satisfaction with democratic performance in each country.

Cognitive awareness of democratic procedures

Lastly, citizens may be well or ill informed about the core characteristics of liberal democratic procedures and principles. When seeking to understand whether people support democracy or whether they believe that their own government follows democratic principles or respects human rights, survey often ask direct or overt questions which fail to monitor what people actually understand by the complex concept of democracy. In response to the interviewer’s questions, ‘manufactured’, ‘top of the head’ ‘non-attitudes’ can always be offered by survey respondents. But such responses are unlikely to prove stable, deep-rooted, well-structured, or reliable indicators of public opinion.48 Converse first noted that people often try to give some response to survey questions, when asked to do so, despite having no prior attitudes towards the issue.49 Zaller also emphasizes that people often try to generate opinions from the cues provided by the questions asked during the interview, especially when they lack information or prior experience concerning the issue. However these responses should not be regarded as recording attitudes or preferences that existed prior to the start of the survey.50 For example, if respondents are asked about whether their country should adopt proportional representation, people may offer an opinion even where they lack any detailed experience, knowledge, or information about how this type of electoral system works.51 This issue is least problematic in survey questions where most people can draw upon direct personal experience, for example when respondents are asked about the priority which they give towards their family, work, or religion. Relatively technical and abstract issues about which the public has little cognitive knowledge or direct experience, however, are particularly vulnerable to these problems, such as the issue of climate change, concern about the size of the federal deficit, or questions about constitutional reform. Opinions about these matters can always be offered by respondents, but in the absence of full information, these are not necessarily well-grounded or stable. For these reasons, cognitive awareness of at least some of the basic procedures associated with liberal democracy is therefore essential as a filtering condition for the meaningful expression of democratic values and for informed evaluations of the quality of democratic governance by citizens. The most informed critical citizens, using these concepts, are those who grasp some of the basic procedures of liberal democracy, who hold democratic values as important to their lives, and who are simultaneously dissatisfied by the performance of democracy in their own country.

What is excluded from this framework?

The five-fold classification of system support, expanding upon Easton, provides a coherent way to understand citizen’s orientations towards the nation state, its agencies and actors. The selective focus
on discrepancies between widespread adherence to democratic values and endemic doubts about democratic practices is in accordance with others who have emphasized these tensions. Nevertheless it is worth emphasizing what this conceptual framework excludes and the reasons why.

**Partisan identification and membership**

One issue concerns indicators of public support for political parties. A wealth of evidence derived from successive national election studies since the 1960s and 1970s demonstrates the long-term erosion of party loyalties which has occurred in many established democracies.\textsuperscript{52} Dealignment has progressively weakening the social psychological attachments binding loyalists to the same party over successive elections, contributing towards aggregate electoral volatility and more individual vote switching, facilitating the sudden break-through of new parties and restructuring party competition, as well as more generally weakening linkages between citizens and the state.\textsuperscript{53} In a related but distinct development, there is also solid evidence that official party membership rolls have dropped markedly in West European societies, eroding the basis for grassroots voluntary party work and financial contributions.\textsuperscript{54} Parties in the electorate, as organizations, and in parliament play an essential role in representative democracy. Parties serve multiple functions: simplifying and structuring electoral choices; organizing and mobilizing campaigns; articulating and aggregating disparate interests; channeling communication, consultation and debate; training, recruiting and selecting candidates; structuring parliamentary divisions; acting as policy think tanks; and organizing government. Not only are parties one of the main conduits of political participation, they also strengthen electoral turnout. If mass membership is under threat, as many suspect, and if party loyalties are eroding, this could have serious implications for representative democracy. Many European commentators have seen these changes as posing severe legitimacy problems for party government; Peter Mair, for example, regards these developments as reflecting “a massive withdrawal of public support and affection”.\textsuperscript{55}

Nevertheless it still remains unclear whether either of these trends should be interpreted as a sign of psychological disengagement from regime institutions or from political authorities. The idea of institutional confidence concerns generalized orientations towards the party system, rather than attitudes such as identification with particular parties. Moreover, as noted earlier, it is always dangerous to attribute psychological motivations to particular actions; citizens may not see themselves as party loyalists over successive elections because they want to exercise greater choice over candidates or party programs at the ballot box, for example splitting their ticket in local, national and European elections, or voting for strategic reasons, without necessarily disengaging from electoral politics or expressing disaffection with the party system as a whole. Similarly party membership rolls may be dwindling for multiple reasons, such as the availability of alternative channels of mediated political communication, the professionalization of campaigning, and public sources of party funding, so that party leaders are no longer so keen to recruit members for these functions.\textsuperscript{56} Overall measures of confidence and trust in political parties are more direct indicators of how far the public sees these institutions – as well as facilitating clear comparisons with support for similar mediating political organizations linking citizens and the state, including the news media, interest groups, and new social movements.

**Social capital**

In recent years, the research community has commonly related issues of how people feel about their government to theories of social capital. Theorists from de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill to Durkheim, Simmel, and Kornhauser have long emphasized the importance of civic society and voluntary associations as vital to the lifeblood of democracy. Modern theories of social capital, originating in the seminal ideas by Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam, build upon this tradition.\textsuperscript{57}
particular, in Making Democracies Work (1993) and in Bowling Alone (2000), Putnam emphasized the importance of civic associations and voluntary organizations for political participation and effective democratic governance. The theory claims that typical face-to-face deliberative activities and horizontal collaboration within voluntary associations far removed from the political sphere, such as sports clubs, agricultural cooperatives, or philanthropic groups, promote interpersonal trust, fostering the capacity to work together in future, creating the bonds of social life that are the basis for civil society and democracy. Organized groups not only achieve certain instrumental goals, it is claimed, in the process of doing so they also create the conditions for further collaboration, or social capital.

While attracting a substantial body of literature, it is important to separate the analysis of citizens’ psychological orientations towards the nation state, its agencies and actors from the potential causes of these orientations. It may be that a deeper reservoir of interpersonal trust in the community serves to strengthen confidence in democratic government and regime institutions, but debate continues to surround both the logic of the theoretical linkages and the interpretation of the empirical evidence about this relationship. As one recent review by Zmerli and Newton summarized the evidence: “The claim that the socially trusting individuals are also politically trusting has poor empirical support. A good deal of individual-level survey research suggests that social and political trust are rather weakly correlated, if at all.” In this study, therefore, theories of social capital are treated as furnishing potential explanations which could help to account for the phenomenon of critical citizens, but psychological orientations towards the political system are treated as distinct from indicators of generalized social trust and associational activism.

**The consequences of citizen orientations for political behavior**

In this framework, it is also worth emphasizing that the concept of systems support, and the core ideas of critical citizens, remains separate analytically from its consequences. Many popular commentators mix together a wide rag-bag of attitudinal and behavioral indicators, such as weakening partisan identification and political activism, which are regarded as signs of public disenchantment or discontent with democracy. Lack of confidence in democratic government may be expressed through eroding voter turnout, falling party membership, or declining engagement in voluntary associations, but it is equally plausible that attitudes and behavior are wholly separate phenomenon. For example, a wealth of evidence indicates that voter participation may rise and fall for many reasons -- such as the frequency of elections, the popularity of the governing party, and the closeness of the race -- all of which are unrelated to trust and confidence in government. Moreover the relationship between cultural attitudes and behaviors is complex; voter anger at incumbents, for example, may spur greater participation at the ballot box, not less. By contrast, public satisfaction with the status quo can encourage people to stay home on polling day. It is foolhardy to assume prior psychological motivations directly from actions unless the linkage is corroborated by independent evidence. Equally, at individual-level, multivariate models commonly report that trust or cynicism in government is a poor predictor of political participation, although some significant bivariate relationships have been detected. The exact relationship between systems support and its behavioral and systemic consequences can only be determined by careful analysis of the empirical evidence, as considered in the final section of this book. It is conceptually confusing if all the factors which scholars regard as different indicators of a decline in civic engagement and political participation are bundled together willy-nilly, and such an approach restricts out capacity to separate attitudes towards the regime from the behavioral impact of these orientations.

As discussed in the final section of the book, public support for the nation state, its agencies and actors is regarded as important for governance in all countries, including the willingness of citizens to obey the law voluntarily, to pay taxes which contribute towards public revenues, and to participate in
civic affairs. Lack of system support, on the other hand, is widely assumed to strengthen reform movements, to encourage protest politics through peaceful or radical means, and, ultimately, to foster regime instability. Regime legitimacy is widely seen as most vital in multicultural communities, especially in countries where secessionist movements and break-away nationalist minorities seeking independence are challenging the fundamental foundations and authority of the state. In extreme cases, such as Somalia, Colombia, and Sudan, states suffer from a severe legitimacy deficit, where the authorities lack the capacity to deal effectively with longstanding regional rebellions or enduring problems of ethnic conflict. One of the most complex challenges facing the international community engaged in peace-building initiatives is to strengthen state legitimacy and good governance, arguably as important a priority as restoring security, and expanding the delivery of public goods and services. But the impact of citizen’s psychological orientations on all these aspects of behavior needs to be carefully examined with close attention to the evidence, rather than bundling them all together. For these reasons, the idea of democratic deficits which is developed here provides a clear and comprehensive way of understanding public opinion towards democracy, while not throwing in so many components that the core idea becomes muddled and confused. The task of the next chapter is to build upon this framework by operationalizing these concepts and describing the sources of evidence and survey data.
Figure 2.1: Indicators of systems support

NATIONAL IDENTITIES
E.g. Feelings of patriotism & national pride

APPROVAL OF CORE REGIME
PRINCIPLES AND VALUES
E.g., Support for democratic ideals, and rejection of autocratic principles

EVALUATIONS OF REGIME
PERFORMANCE
E.g. Satisfaction with the democratic performance of governments, positive evaluations of decision-making processes and policies

CONFIDENCE IN REGIME
INSTITUTIONS
E.g. The legislature, executive and judiciary, the security forces, and central, state and local governments

APPROVAL OF INCUMBENT
OFFICE-HOLDERS
E.g. Positive evaluations of the honesty, probity and responsiveness of politicians, approval of particular presidents and prime ministers, party leaders, elected representatives, and civil servants.
5 For details, see http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/hist_turnout_eu_en.html


19 For a more detailed discussion of these ideas, see Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart. 2009. *Cosmopolitan Communications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


The NORC GSS questions remain somewhat ambiguous to interpret. The items ask about ‘the people running’ these agencies, but this does not refer to any individual incumbents by name or office (such as ‘your Congressional representative’, ‘the Chief Justice’, or ‘your bank manager’ or ‘your doctor’). Even the item concerning the executive branch is framed collectively, to include the White House, all departments, secretaries of state in cabinet, and federal bureaucrats, and it does not refer by name to individual presidents. As such, although the wording is imprecise, it seems most likely that people will usually respond with their general impressions of each institution, although these judgments may inevitably be colored by evaluations of specific incumbent office-holders.


For the comparison of these items used in other established democracies, see Russell J. Dalton. 2004. Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies. New York: Oxford University Press. Table 2.2.

The four standard ANES questions are: RIGHT: “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right -- just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?”; WASTE: “Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don’t waste very much of it?”; INTERESTS: “Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?”; CROOKED: “Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are 1958-1972: a little) crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked (1958-1972: at all)?” It should be noted that it is unclear who is the object of these questions as ‘the government’, when American decision-making is divided horizontally among the executive, legislative and judicial branches, as well as vertically among districts, states and the federal levels.


Almond and Verba p14.


