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Who is to blame? Citizens, elites and democracy

The talk of European politics being in a crisis and citizens losing faith in democracy has been prevalent but it is mistaken

Anyone following European politics is inundated by talk of crisis: the decline of the mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties which stabilised European party systems for decades; the rise of anti-establishment, xenophobic, populist parties; the fragmentation and stagnation of western-European governments; 'Brexit' in the United Kingdom, and the rise of autocratic leaders in Hungary and other parts of eastern Europe.

The conventional wisdom locates the cause of these trends in the attitudes and preferences of European citizens. Over past years, in this view, Europeans have become more dissatisfied with democracy, lost confidence in established political institutions, grown disillusioned with the European Union, become more xenophobic and so on.

This conventional wisdom turns out, however, to be mistaken. Larry Bartels, one of the most influential American scholars of public opinion, electoral politics and political representation, has turned his attention to Europe in a new book, *Democracy Erodes from the Top: Leaders, Citizens, and the Challenge of Populism in Europe.* Reviewing and analysing the public-opinion data, he concludes that 'insofar as the attitudes and preferences of ordinary Europeans are concerned' there is a huge gulf between 'the alarming portrait of democracy in crisis' that so dominates popular and scholarly discussion and the 'more prosaic reality of contemporary European public opinion'.

Democracy Erodes from the Top analyses opinion on a wide range of critical issues, including the welfare state (on which attitudes have remained broadly stable and broadly positive) and European integration (more or less the same, even in countries where fears about an anti-EU backlash were greatest after the eurozone crisis). But its most interesting and provocative sections focus on populism and democratic

development.

Is Democracy really in a crisis?

Bartels stresses that, despite incessant talk of a 'populist wave' threatening European democracy, the average vote share received by populist parties in the 2010s was 'only' about 12.4 per cent — an increase, but a fairly modest one, over the 10 or 11 per cent these parties received in the 1980s and 90s. But more crucial is his argument that this increase cannot be attributed to changes in the attitudes of citizens, since during this period right-wing-populist and anti-immigrant sentiment actually declined. He also notes that since younger cohorts are less likely to harbour such sentiment than older ones, generational replacement will likely make it even less prevalent in the future.

But it is not only over time that populist voting is disconnected from changes in public attitudes; the same is true cross-nationally. There is little correlation either, Bartels finds, between right-wing-populist or anti-immigrant sentiment in a country and the vote share received by the populist parties.

The coming Swedish election is a perfect illustration. Sweden consistently emerges from opinion surveys as the European country with the lowest right-wing-populist and anti-immigrant sentiment. Yet current polls show the populist Sweden Democrats to be the second largest party in the country, only 10 per cent behind the Social Democrats.

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The story is similar with regards to attitudes towards democracy, where opinion data reveal little suggestive of a 'crisis'. Bartels argues that overall satisfaction with democracy has 'been quite stable over the course of the 21st century' and any increases in frustration with democracy 'seem mostly to reflect dissatisfaction with economic conditions rather than specifically political grievances'.

Bartels also contends that the data do not support the argument that European citizens have become significantly more distrusting of political institutions. Where there have been within-country changes over recent decades, Bartels argues that here too the 'real culprit' has been a shifting economic climate rather than underlying political sentiment.

He similarly finds little evidence of crisis in other commonly offered

measures of political dissatisfaction, such as protest activity. He claims that, despite well-publicised outbreaks such as the *gilets jaunes* in France, there has been no general increase in protest during this century; nor, in any case, does he find such activity to be clearly correlated with democratic dissatisfaction. He detects among countries with low satisfaction 'enormous variation in the prevalence of protest activity', ranging from the involvement of 2 per cent of the population per year in Poland, Estonia, and Lithuania to ten times that in Spain and Greece, where protest seems 'part of these countries' way of life'.

The role of elite manipulation

Turning to places where there has been real democratic backsliding, such as Hungary and Poland, here too Bartels challenges the common view that this is largely attributable to the spread of anti-democratic sentiment, increasingly pro-authoritarian attitudes and rising xenophobia. Instead, he argues that *Fidesz* in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland ran as conservative, rather than anti-democratic, parties and those who voted for them did so because they had conservative preferences, not xenophobic or authoritarian ones.

It is a mistake, in short, to view democratic backsliding as having occurred 'because voters wanted authoritarianism'. Rather, it was the result of 'what started out as conventional conservative parties … seizing opportunities to entrench themselves in power'.

The other main argument Bartels makes in *Democracy Erodes from the Top*, rehearsed in his previous works, is that political outcomes have little to do with what citizens want. Instead, as the title indicates, he believes the behaviour of elites is determining.

According to Bartels, the result of elites pulling a fast one on citizens (running as conservatives but once in power behaving as authoritarians), so too is rising populism best understood as a consequence of elite manipulation.

The myth of democracy as 'rule by the people' means citizens' preferences are supposed to be the primary force animating democratic politics. Conversely, if democracy falters, its erosion or breakdown must somehow be traceable to faults in public opinion. Yet Bartels finds a remarkable disconnection of ordinary public opinion from the developments commonly taken as indicative of a 'crisis of democracy' in contemporary Europe and he stresses the crucial role of political leadership in preserving or dismantling democratic institutions and procedures.

So just as democratic backsliding in places such as Hungary and Poland is, according to Bartels, the result of elites pulling a fast one on citizens (running as conservatives but once in power behaving as authoritarians), so too is rising populism best understood as a consequence of elite manipulation. Opinion data make clear that there has *always* been a 'reservoir' of right-wing populist and anti-immigrant attitudes but these attitudes have not always been directly relevant to voting.

Recognising the fragility of democracy

Political scientists differentiate between *preferences* and *salience*. Preferences refer to a person's attitudes about an issue, while salience refers to the intensity or importance attached to those attitudes. Only attitudes which are salient decisively influence political behaviour.

And this is where elites come in: over past years, politicians — particularly right-wing-populist ones — have actively worked to increase the salience of anti-immigrant and other right-wing populist preferences, making it more likely that citizens who *already harboured* such preferences would vote on the basis of them. Right-wing-populist parties thus, according to Bartels, 'draw on the reservoir of right-wing populist sentiment' but their success depends 'on the skill of political entrepreneurs' in exploiting the opportunities available.

An even greater number of citizens are more concerned with their economic wellbeing than with safeguarding the democracies which, over the long term, are the only way to ensure they have a chance to live free and secure lives.

Bartels stresses that successfully responding to threats to democracy requires knowing what those threats are. *Democracy Erodes from the Top* reminds us of the threat posed by illiberal, anti-democratic elites. But while it is certainly true that democracy's fans should be wary of politicians exploiting public opinion to undermine democracy, this does not mean that the citizens 'getting exploited' by such politicians are freed of all responsibility or reproach.

As Bartels' analysis makes clear, some citizens do harbour right-wing-populist and anti-immigrant sentiments. An even greater number are more concerned with their economic wellbeing than with safeguarding the democracies which, over the long term, are the only way to ensure they have a chance to live free and secure lives. Increasing the number of citizens who recognise the preciousness and fragility of democracy is necessary to strengthen and stabilise it over the long run.

After all, elites can't exploit a reservoir that doesn't exist.

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