

**It's Complicated.**  
**People and**  
**Their Democracy**  
**in Germany,**  
**France, Britain,**  
**Poland, and**  
**the United States.**



**More in  
Common**



**Robert Bosch  
Stiftung**



## **Imprint**

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# Foreword

For a number of years, the status and future of Western democracies, their internal challenges and internal threats, have been widely debated.

Indeed, in many countries the quality of democracy is waning. According to the non-governmental organization Freedom House, civil liberties are in decline globally for the fifteenth year in a row. At the same time, many Western democracies, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, face dwindling confidence in the political class and its ability to address major global challenges, such as the resilience of democracy, climate change, inequality, and migration.

Social polarization is increasing, fueled in part by the degradation of debate culture and a retreat into filter bubbles, while disinformation, hate speech, and conspiracy myths spread effortlessly in the digital age. The pandemic poses additional challenges. Many countries have been forced to implement measures to protect public health, with significant implications for democracy. Accordingly, in 2020 global scores on the state of democracy – catalogued by The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index – fell to their lowest level since the surveys were first conducted in 2006.

With its work on democracy, the Robert Bosch Stiftung aims to strengthen democracy in Germany and Europe, promote the skills as needed for people to participate, and identify formats for citizens to engage credibly in political processes, as well to contribute their interests and perspectives. In order to implement its strategies effectively, the foundation relies on studies, as well as lessons learned, from both practice and academia.

Democracy only works if we manage to reach out to the people who are less visible, those who do not feel listened to in our political systems. It is vital that we answer questions such as: What motivates those who do not engage? What is the role of democracy in their day-to-day lives? How do citizens who are less involved in political processes view democracy?

It is ambitious to address in-depth questions on how democracy is understood transnationally in an international context with a focus on those who are ambivalent about democracy. The organization More in Common took on this task on behalf of the foundation, surveying more than 10,000 citizens across five countries: Germany, France, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Poland.

This study provides insight into the attitudes, needs, and ambitions of people in these countries on the subject of democracy. The results do not allow a continued business-as-usual approach. It is vital that we take seriously the ambivalence and indifference of many citizens in Western democracies, coupled with disappointment over unfulfilled expectations, and address them in a credible manner.

Many of those surveyed believe that their viewpoints are irrelevant to politics and that their political participation would have no impact. They feel their concerns are not heard and that their voices make no difference. They have little trust in politics or the media. This should give us pause for thought – especially in a major election year, such as 2021 in Germany.

The study gives actors from politics, civil society, media, and education an opportunity to reflect on whether they are reaching the right people to preserve democracy, or whether new approaches must be identified to strengthen trust and engagement.

We kindly invite you to join us in discussing the study's results.

Sandra Breka

CEO

Robert Bosch Stiftung



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# Introduction

Concerns about the future of democracy are growing in many Western countries. Alongside the well-known phenomenon of political disenchantment, fundamental questions regarding trust in institutions and democratic processes have arisen in recent years. These are frequently coupled with the challenge seen in Germany, Europe, and other Western democracies of burgeoning political movements that reject the political system in its entirety and propagate illiberal ideas<sup>1</sup> of democracy. In some places, the term “democracy” itself has come under fire and confusion has emerged about who is “defending” whose democracy.

The continual research into the roots of this societal challenge is well underway, but far from complete. Yet for quite some time now, on-the-ground actors in the non-profit sector, in civil society, in institutions and other groups whose efforts are aimed at strengthening democracy have been addressing the practical question of how to act. What can we do? Where should projects and formats focus their efforts to effectively strengthen democracy? Where might there be gaps? Where can we improve? And last, but not least: **When speaking of democracy, who do we need to do a better job of reaching?**

With these questions in mind, the Robert Bosch Stiftung and More in Common have joined forces for this applied research project.

The **Robert Bosch Stiftung** is one of the major foundations in Europe associated with a private company. Following a strategic review and an intensive analysis of the societal situation in Germany and other countries, the foundation decided in 2020 to intensify its emphasis on democracy in both its own work and its future funding strategy. The question was and remains where the foundation should – in line with its theory of change – focus its efforts to promote the strengthening of democracy.

**More in Common** is an initiative that helps build inclusive and resilient societies and communities, with teams in Germany, France, United Kingdom, and the United States. Since 2017, we have surveyed thousands of people regarding their experiences of society, listened to them in focus groups, and learned a great deal through practical projects and studies about what drives polarization and social fracturing. In all those efforts, the issue of democracy has been omnipresent: We have seen how crucial a functioning democracy is for social cohesion (and vice versa), but also that people have divergent views of what democracy is.

Together, we set out to understand on whom civil society work should focus (more intently or for the first time) to strengthen liberal democracy<sup>2</sup> and what concrete challenges need to be addressed in the process. With this in mind, we share a number of common premises that More in Common has carved out in its previous studies<sup>3</sup>:

Since 2017, we have conducted numerous studies to investigate people’s core values, views of themselves and society, their world views and thought patterns across all More in Common countries. We are particularly known for challenging conventional fault lines on the basis of opinion research that also applies insights from social psychology. We now apply this approach, which focuses on people in all their diversity, to the subject of democracy.

**1** In the political science debate, illiberal democracy is sometimes seen as an oxymoron due to the entanglement of liberalism and democracy, see e.g. Lührmann, A. and Hellmeier, S. (2020): *Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus: Herausforderung für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft*. Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

**2** Here, the term refers to the combination of free elections, institutional separation and limitation of powers, the rule of law, human rights, and civil and political liberties that characterize modern constitutions in Europe and North America, among other places. On the relationship between liberal and democratic principles, see also *ibid*.

**3** See More in Common (2018/2019/2020): *The Hidden Tribes of America* (2018); *Fault Lines: Germany’s Invisible Divides* (2019); *Finding France: A People in Search of Their Country* (2019); *Britain’s Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain* (2020); as well as the cross-country study *The New Normal* (2020).



Because the future of democracy cannot be sufficiently secured if it is only supported by a (possibly small) share of dedicated and active liberal democrats, **those who may not currently be active or vocal supporters, but likewise not opponents of democracy, must also be engaged**. Especially in Western societies with longer democratic traditions, there are people who are not involved in democracy or have been disappointed by it, people who do not vote, and who are not well integrated into the political process. They do not experience democracy as part of their own lives and spheres of activity. As a result, political stakeholders and actors from civil society, the economy, or education are less familiar with them – simply because they currently have not done a good job at engaging these people. The result is a vicious circle: Precisely because democratic and political actors do not come into contact with these parts of society enough, they in turn do not know enough about how to engage them better and have a harder time developing formats or communication suited to fostering better democratic involvement.

This study aims to take the first steps toward breaking this cycle of non-understanding and non-engagement. Over a time span of six months, we spoke to more than 10,000 people to better understand what democracy is all about and what it means to people.

Our goal in this is twofold. The **first** goal is to explore the broader societal dynamic around the issue of democracy in order to identify any lingering conflicts. The **second** is to identify and better understand those members of society who currently have no strong link to democracy. We want to know what expectations they have of democracy and where precisely efforts can start at attempting to strengthen the relationship between them and political and societal actors.

### Research in Five Countries

Given that the issue of democracy has been a concern across almost the entire Western world in recent years, this research project is intentionally not limited to a single country. To consider a variety of frameworks, More in Common conducted parallel inquiries into attitudes toward democracy in five countries in Europe and North America. A total of more than 2,000 people per country were interviewed through quantitative and qualitative research in the first quarter of 2021 on their understanding and views of democracy as well as their political-societal experiences. For this study we cooperated with the renowned public opinion research institutes KANTAR (in Germany, France, and Poland) and YouGov (in Britain and the United States).

This study includes **Germany, France, Britain, Poland, and the US**. The choice of countries includes different political systems (majority versus proportional electoral systems, parliamentary versus presidential democracies), different relationships to the European Union (founding member, new member, former member) and different observable levels of social fracturing. Besides Germany, this study covers countries that have faced and are facing a variety of societal challenges, namely Brexit (Britain), the yellow vest movement and the disruption of the party system (France), the polarization of the Trump era (US) and the undermining of the rule of law (Poland).

For the on-the-ground work of strengthening democracy, it is not of primary importance to know across countries where people trust their governments or local politicians to a greater or lesser degree. Therefore, we consciously decided against taking a directly comparative approach for this study. **Instead, we wanted to assess each of the surveyed societies as an in-depth**

**case study in the hopes of understanding the specific challenges facing that democracy and identifying the fault lines around it.** In doing so, the focus consistently remained on population groups that are potentially unengaged or unaddressed by the current debate over democracy.

More in Common and the Robert Bosch Stiftung hope that the resulting insights will help understand similarities in the dynamics around and attitudes toward democracy across different countries, as well as help draw conclusions to country-specific contexts and challenges. Ideally, the study ultimately provides clues to phenomena worth investigating more closely, also in other countries not covered here. It should be read as an exploration of people and their respective democracies in five very different countries.

### Relationship to Other Democracy Studies

Previous academic research on attitudes toward democracy is, unsurprisingly, well advanced and multifaceted. Political scientists, for instance, have significant experience when it comes to measuring people's support for the principle of democracy along with their attitudes regarding its concrete constitutional implementation and practical, day-to-day functioning. Questions about people's satisfaction with democracy are also well-established and frequent elements of larger, international surveys.<sup>4</sup> Researchers have also looked beyond this focus on fundamental attitudes toward examining people's more particular definitions of what they understand by democracy.<sup>5</sup> This study primarily builds on the latter research path. **We pay particular attention to which "concepts" of democracy are currently prevalent for people:** What does democracy actually mean for them? What do those concepts include, and what do they not include?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> European Social Survey: Deutschland in Europa. Deutsche Teilstudie im Projekt European Social Survey, Welle 9, 2018/2019, Questionnaire.

<sup>5</sup> Neu, V. (2019): Niemand möchte die Demokratie abschaffen – Einstellungen zu Demokratie, Sozialstaat und Institutionen. Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Studie. In: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung: Analysen und Argumente, Nr. 351, June 2019. Please refer to country chapters for further examples.

<sup>6</sup> An important note on classifications: By looking at attitudes toward democracy at the population level, our approach differs significantly from that of democratization indices. These serve the purpose of measuring the objective state or quality of democracy in different countries at the system level, among other things. For example, Alizada, N. et al. (2021): Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

**Methods:**

**Examining Social  
Dynamics Around  
Democracy**



# Methods:

## Examining Social Dynamics Around Democracy

For this study, we conducted a comprehensive online-panel survey of around 2,000 participants in each of the focus countries. Respondents were chosen according to socio-demographic criteria to reflect the adult population of each country as accurately as possible. Using a segmentation analysis, **we then identified population groups in each country whose relationships to their national democracy are particularly ambivalent**. We then held qualitative focus groups in all countries to deepen and contextualize the results.

A noteworthy element of this study is that, **within our multi-country research framework**, we developed specific research instruments for each country, which not only delve deeply into people's acceptance of democracy as such, but also into their nuanced understanding of democracy, allowing us to shed light on the country-specific context.

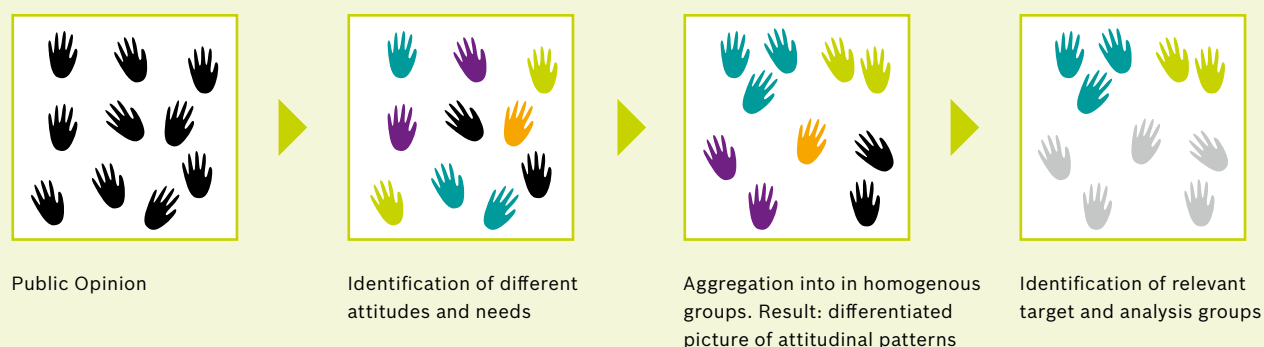
**Our goal was to find out what, exactly, people understand the term democracy to mean – what yardsticks they use when considering the real-life political systems in which they live and, on that basis, what their relationship is to political reality.**

At the heart of the survey, then, are **values** people hold and their **attitudes** toward democracy, with a particular focus on participants' detailed understanding of democracy and politics. We also look at participants' views of their own roles within the democratic system, including the extent and form of their personal involvement in politics and society. Along with democratic norms and democratic participation, we also wanted to know how people see their political system as it currently exists.

The identification of population segments which may have an ambivalent approach to democracy was undertaken in this study using an agglomerative-hierarchical cluster analysis. This statistical approach makes it possible to group people with similar attitudinal patterns and to contextualize them in comparison to the overall population. This allows a more precise image of the dynamics surrounding democracy in certain parts of society than would be the case, for example, with a pure analysis of data pertaining to sex, age, party preference or other socio-demographic criteria.

Figure 1:

### Purpose of a segmentation analysis



Source: More in Common (2021)

## Choice of Variables for France, Germany, Poland, and Britain

The variables used in the segmentation analysis for the European countries fall into two categories: (1) normative foundations and (2) political participation. The first category focuses on respondents' fundamental views of democracy, including how they believe democracy should function in its ideal form. The second measures the extent and forms of political involvement – from a simple interest in politics to an enjoyment of political discussion to active engagement.

Together, these two categories are well suited to determining a person's relationship to democracy and their own role within democracy – and thus to identifying population groups whose affinity for democracy can be strengthened.

### Normative foundations

#### **1. Acceptance of democracy as a principle, e.g.:**

- Democracy as the best form of government
- Personal importance of living in a democracy
- Acceptance of alternatives to democracy

#### **2. Attachment to liberal democratic principles, e.g.:**

- Attitudes toward the principle of representation, separation of powers, rule of law, constitutional reservations, discourse, deliberation, etc.
- Acceptance of minority rights and protective mechanisms

#### **3. Prevalence of competing concepts and understandings of democracy, e.g.:**

- Monolithic popular will vs. political pluralism
- Imperative vs. free mandate
- Direct vs. indirect popular rule
- Strong leadership vs. deliberative process
- Intrinsic vs. performance legitimacy of democracy
- Expectations of what democracy should guarantee
- Expectations of good governance

#### **4. Agency and self-efficacy**

- Individuals' political self-efficacy – internal and external
- Collective agency (citizens' ability to change society)

#### **5. Willingness to compromise and tolerance of ambiguity**

### Political participation

- Political interest
- Political participation (from passive participation to active engagement)
- Participation in and behavior in political debate

## Choice of Variables for the United States: America's Democracy in 2021

Work on this project began ahead of the events at the US Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and before accusations of alleged election fraud surrounding the US presidential election once again made clear the acute challenges currently facing American democracy. These events confirmed the importance of our research and its focus on better understanding divergent perspectives of democracy, but also made it far more difficult to investigate attitudes toward democracy among US citizens without influence from day-to-day political events.

Because of the situation in the US, we chose a slightly different research framework, less focused on abstract, normative categories and more precisely conceived to better understanding the fractures dividing Americans in their approach to democracy in the wake of the Trump presidency.

### **1. Political interest/engagement**

- Political interest
- Political participation

### **2. Effect of fraud in determining the 2020 winner**

- Perceived legitimacy of Biden's win

### **3. Perception of democratic freedoms**

- Freedom of expression
- Freedom of the press
- Freedom to organize and protest
- Protection from hate speech

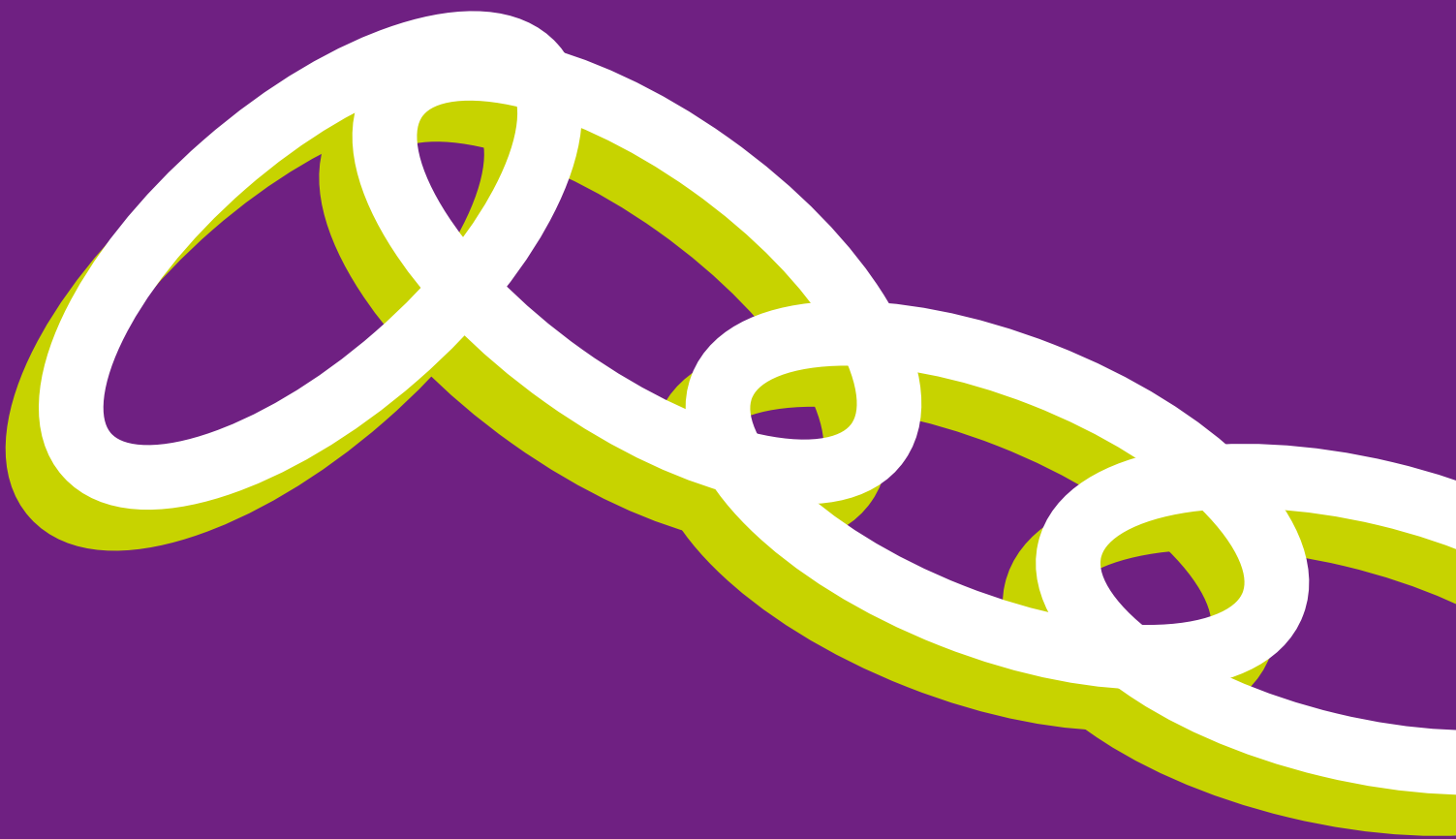
### **4. Support for violence**

- Justified actions when defending democracy

### **5. Support for government suppression**

- Ideas and actions that should or should not be suppressed

**Firmly Anchored?  
Attitudes Toward  
Democracy in  
Germany**



# Firmly Anchored?

## Attitudes Toward Democracy in Germany

### Concern About Democracy – A German Feeling?

On August 29, 2020, participants at a “Querdenker”<sup>7</sup> protest broke through the police barriers in front of the Reichstag, the landmark building that is home to Germany’s federal parliament, the Bundestag. Some of them were waving the Imperial Flag (officially used between 1871–1918/19 under the rule of German emperors and today associated with the extreme right in Germany), and several sought to gain access to the parliament. Even if the images would later take on an uncomfortable international dimension due to the January raid on the United States Capitol, they carried an unmistakably German symbolism: aggressive shades of black, white, and red in a place that represents the ups and downs of the country’s history like no other.<sup>8</sup> For many observers, it triggered the “alarm” for German democracy.

Considering the country’s difficult history, considerations of the state of democracy here have always been unique. At their heart is the Federal Republic’s *raison d’être*, which, when it comes to democracy, combines two primary elements: On the one hand, a lasting vigilance against authoritarian dangers in the spirit of “never again” (the belief that the Nazis’ crimes should never be repeated) – and, on the other hand, the increased self-confidence of a united country in a peaceful Europe that has learned its lessons from the past. The Germany of today possesses an active civil society, stable institutions, and a compromise-based party system. Nevertheless, images like those from the Reichstag have the potential to quickly shake what are often viewed as established certainties. Once again, the question has arisen: How are the Germans faring with democracy?

Doubts about democratic realities in Germany are not a new phenomenon. Past decades have seen debates on subjects ranging from “disenchantment with politics” and shrinking voter turnout to cross-party efforts to increase voter participation.<sup>9</sup> There have also been multiple extremist attacks and far-right electoral successes over the decades. In view of the rise of right-wing populism and the establishment of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) political party, as well as the development of a more tense climate<sup>10</sup> in society at large, public concern about democracy is greater today at all political levels and among the public than it was, for example, at the start of this century.

At the same time, discourse about democracy is shifting, and leading to conflict over terms and symbols. Self-proclaimed “Querdenker” invoke the German Grundgesetz (its *de facto* constitution), which they believe they are defending, while populists, in particular, systematically make use of democratic symbols to claim – unlike elected officials – to be the “true” representatives of the people. These competing narratives can be confusing.

It is time, then, to take a closer look at the true state of democracy in Germany and, more importantly, to examine the kind of relationship people have to it. It is important to understand more than just the extent to which people in Germany are committed to democracy *per se*. Just as important is the question as to the understandings of democracy that exist in Germany. What does democracy mean to the people of the country – and how do they see their own role in it?<sup>11</sup>

**7** “Critical / Unorthodox Thinkers”: A protest movement against the anti-COVID measures taken by the German government since 2020.

**8** This is also where the German Republic was proclaimed by Philipp Scheidemann on November 9, 1918; it is where the Reichstag fire in February 1933 gave the Nazis a pretext to advance their dictatorship; and it is also where the first all-German Bundestag opened in 1990.

**9** cf., e.g. Roßmann, R. (2015, 13 June): „Ganz große Koalition gegen Stimmverweigerer“. Süddeutsche.de.

**10** In 2019, the More in Common study “Germany’s Invisible Divides”, found that 75 percent of people in Germany perceived the public debate as “increasingly hateful”.

**11** In February 2021, together with KANTAR Germany, we surveyed 2,015 people in Germany aged 18 and over about their attitudes toward democracy and politics, as well as their own political and civic participation. We then conducted qualitative focus groups in March 2021 to provide nuance to the findings.



## Democratic Values and Principles in Germany

### **Even a Clear Commitment Has Many Facets**

To be clear from the start: Our survey shows that the **principle of democracy as such is not controversial in Germany**. The country is by no means divided into self-declared democrats and anti-democrats. Asked whether they are personally more for or more against the idea of democracy, 93 percent say they are in favor. The camp of avowed opponents to democracy exists, but at 7 percent, it is small. Some 94 percent of those surveyed also say they consider it important to personally live in a democratic country. This shows that **political forces who openly promote the abolition of democracy would find little support**.

What does fluctuate, however, is just how absolute that commitment is. In Germany's western states, 50 percent of respondents say that they "very explicitly" embrace democracy, while that figure in the states formerly belonging to East Germany is 38 percent. The same applies to age distribution, with younger people in particular lagging behind. Whereas 69 percent of the over-70 demographic indicated maximum approval, that figure is 40 percent for 18- to 29-year-olds and only 35 percent for 30- to 39-year-olds. In other words: Younger people in Germany do support democracy, but not with the same vigor as their older counterparts.

Moreover, we also observe that even a commitment to democracy does not guarantee complete immunization against authoritarian temptations: Some 20 percent of respondents agree with the statement that "in the national interest ... a dictatorship may be the better form of government".

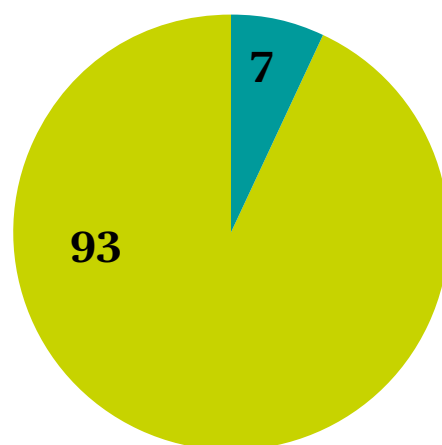
**Figure 2:**

### **Support for democracy as a principle**

The idea of democracy is widely accepted in Germany

#### Democracy as a principle

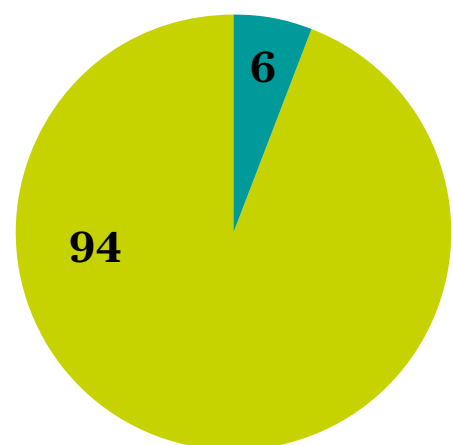
In favor %



More in favor of the idea of democracy

More against the idea of democracy

#### Importance of living in a democracy



Rather important

Rather unimportant

Question: What would you say: Are you personally more in favor of the idea of democracy, or are you more against the idea of democracy? How important is it for you personally to live in a country that is governed democratically? Source: More in Common (2021)

**Notions of Democracy: Much Consensus, but also Potential for Misunderstanding**

Even if people embrace democracy, this does not reveal what democracy actually means to them. We therefore asked the respondents to judge for themselves what qualities must be given in a country to call it a democracy. A multifaceted picture emerges. At the top of the list are the fundamental issues that are also centrally anchored in Germany's constitution. On a scale of 1 to 6, people primarily demand freedom of expression (average score: 5.5), free elections (5.4), and equality before the law (5.4) – 66 percent in each area not only agree but think these things must be an “absolute given”. There is indeed broad consensus here.

But many people's definition of democracy is not limited to “classical” legal and procedural principles – they think of it much more broadly as also including, for example, basic services and supplies for citizens (5.1). In other words, democracy has a “material” component in the minds of many.

The question as to what the decision-making process should look like is a bit less clear. Whereas 25 percent “absolutely” demand the active participation of as many citizens as possible in the political process (average value: 4.4), 21 percent also consider the existence of “strong leadership” to be an essential element of democracy (4.2). The image of what constitutes a democracy, it becomes apparent, is rather complex.

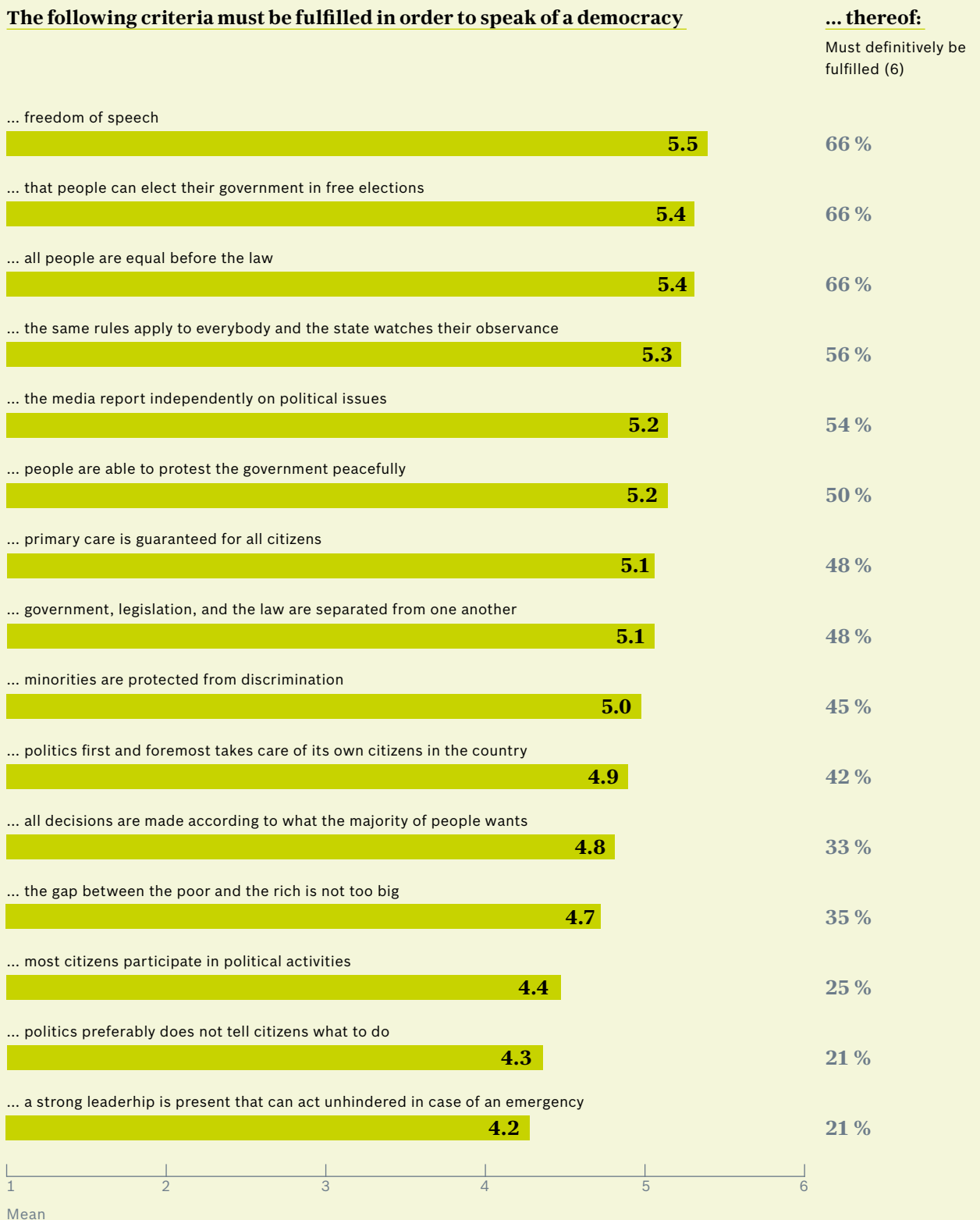
In addition to the aforementioned criteria, we are interested in the details of the democratic “reflexes” of the people whom we spoke with. **We found that most people in Germany have intact defense mechanisms against anti-democratic threats.** A full 78 percent agree with the statement that even parties with strong support from the electorate can be undemocratic if they violate important principles – a highly relevant finding in light of German history. And 64 percent hold the view – in accordance with rule-of-law principles – that politics should always follow all prescribed procedures. Likewise, there is a **mature and nuanced understanding of discourse:** Some 69 percent welcome partisan debate – and 63 percent welcome a constructive search for compromise. Our qualitative focus groups illustrate this dual finding on discourse. For many people, debate for debate's sake is not an end in itself; it must lead to results.

**At the same time, however, there are at least three key areas where different understandings of democracy clash within the German population.** These conflicts are not fundamentally new, but they do show how easily the concept of democracy can become contested in substance. Our focus groups also show that these conflicts can often occur within one and the same person.

Figure 3:

## Criteria of democracy

Many facets of democracy have majority support, yet with varying degrees of emphasis



Question: For each of the following things, please tell me to what extent you think it must be fulfilled or not fulfilled in order to speak of a democracy. Use a scale from 1 to 6 where 1 stands for “must not be fulfilled at all” and 6 stands for “must definitely be fulfilled”. Source: More in Common (2021)

**Figure 4:**

## Expectations toward democracy

### Broad consensus

Agreement with each statement in %

Even a party elected by many people can be undemocratic, if its positions violate important principles	<b>78</b>	<b>22</b>	As long as a party is elected by many people, it is also democratic
We can learn little from countries like China in political terms because, after all, they have a dictatorship there	<b>74</b>	<b>26</b>	We can learn a lot from countries like China in political terms, because decisions can be made much faster there than here
A democracy works best when the government takes extensive care of the citizens	<b>71</b>	<b>29</b>	A democracy works best when politics stays out of people's lives
It is important that politicians argue once in a while when they have different views	<b>69</b>	<b>31</b>	It is important that politicians avoid disputes and pull together
I expect people who share my political beliefs to be willing to reach out to others and to compromise	<b>67</b>	<b>33</b>	I expect people who share my convictions politically to stand by them and fight for them

### Majority consensus

Politics should always follow all prescribed procedures and laws, even if decisions then sometimes take longer	<b>64</b>	<b>36</b>	Policymakers should act as quickly and decisively as possible, even if this does not always involve compliance with all prescribed procedures and laws
It is important for parties to deviate from their positions once in a while in order to reach compromises with others	<b>63</b>	<b>37</b>	It is fundamentally not okay for parties to deviate from the positions they are elected for
As a citizen, you should try to participate in the political process	<b>62</b>	<b>38</b>	It is okay for citizens to leave the political work to politicians
In a democracy, action should be taken against statements that incite hatred or deliberately disparage others	<b>61</b>	<b>39</b>	In a democracy, one should always be allowed to express one's opinion without exception, regardless of content

### Dissent

Politics is about balancing different opinions and interests	<b>56</b>	<b>44</b>	Politics is about implementing the will of the people
In order to ensure the security of citizens, the government should have the right to restrict citizens' freedoms	<b>53</b>	<b>47</b>	The government should not have the right to restrict citizens' freedoms, even if this leads to less security
Democracy is only a good thing if it produces good results for the people in the country	<b>53</b>	<b>47</b>	Democracy is always a good thing, even if it sometimes does not produce good results for the people in the country
Important issues are best voted on by the citizens themselves	<b>52</b>	<b>48</b>	Important issues are best decided by the elected representatives of the people

Question: Which of the following statements regarding democracy and politics do you agree with more?

Source: More in Common (2021)

The first disagreement or divide **concerns the question of where democracy draws its legitimacy from: Does democracy first have to prove itself to gain support?** Forty-seven percent of the population lean toward “no” and believe that this form of government is automatically legitimate, since “democracy” is always a good thing, even if it sometimes does not produce good results. For these people, democracy itself has intrinsic value. However, they are opposed by the 53 percent of people who consider democracy to be a good thing only “if it also produces good results for the people in the country”. From this “output” perspective, the system must “deliver” to find support. This does not necessarily mean that people would be ready to give up democracy, but that they are potentially more critical of it. This finding is particularly relevant because 71 percent of respondents want a brand of politics that “takes care” of people and actually improves their lives. **Many people therefore tie their support for concrete democracy to firm criteria – the simple normative reference to the democratic “spirit” does not go far enough for them.**

**12** cf. Schubert, K., Klein, M. (2018): Das Politiklexikon. 7., aktual. u. erw. Aufl. Bonn: Dietz 2018. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.

**The second disagreement or dissonance concerns the concept of the “will of the people”**, which, although it is a common theme of democratic mental imagery, is controversial in its essence<sup>12</sup> and, moreover, can be interpreted more or less literally. A fundamental question, for example, is whether this uniform “will” exists at all and whether politics (in the liberal-pluralist understanding) is more about the negotiation of complex interests. We can see in the data **that 44 percent do in fact see democracy more as the implementation of the popular will, with 56 percent seeing it as a process of deliberation within a pluralist society.** This distinction may seem theoretical or abstract at first glance, but it can very quickly take on practical significance – when, for example, it comes to dealing with debates involving several stakeholders, differences of opinion, or minority positions. It is no coincidence that populist movements, in particular, refer to a “popular will” that is disregarded by an “elite”. There is potential for tension here, because the concepts compete and diverge in people’s minds – coupled with the fact that, as a rule, all sides see themselves as democrats at the citizen level.

**The third underlying conceptual conflict concerns the question of whether German democracy should be more representative or more of a direct democracy.** Overall, 52 percent of respondents say they are more likely to believe that important issues are “best left to the citizens themselves to vote on”, whereas 48 percent would prefer to entrust them to the “elected representatives of the people”. In a country where there is no legal framework at the federal level for direct democratic procedures like referendums, this is an astonishing split. Our focus groups also clearly show that many people who tend to have a more representative mindset could also imagine adding elements of direct democracy. **Calls for participatory supplements to the representative principle set forth in the German constitution can be sure of considerable support.** However, there is no guarantee that this belief in the right to participation is always accompanied by a personal willingness to participate. In fact, our data shows that the call for direct democracy is higher among those who say they are primarily concerned with their personal lives – and not among those who are actively involved in political life.

None of the three dissonances described above would necessarily be cause for concern, since different understandings of democracy are arguably as old as democracy itself. They can, however, lead to problems when the concept of democracy itself is politicized and stakeholders representing different “claims to representation” wrestle over them in the public arena.

## Democratic Reality: Calls for Improvement, Strained Confidence

Democratic values and principles are one thing, but people's ability to orient themselves within Germany's political reality is another. Democracy, after all, is not experienced in a vacuum, but rather in the middle of the ongoing political process.

In the 2019 study "Fault Lines: Germany's Invisible Divides", we found that people had a two-fold dissatisfaction with the political system: Many felt that politicians were not sufficiently, or at all, interested in the opinions of people like them – that politics did not listen enough. At the same time, most had the impression that politicians were not addressing the country's problems. We spoke at the time of a "country on hold".

Our new data shows that both findings still apply in 2021. Some 70 percent of respondents continue to believe that politicians are not interested enough in their opinions. And only 40 percent are confident that politicians will decisively address the important problems in Germany. Moreover, only a slim majority of 55 percent are willing to agree with the statement "Our current political system usually yields good results". **As such, many see room for improvement in the democratic reality.** That was also evident in the focus groups. If these needs are not addressed in the long term, trust will suffer.

### **Representation and Participation**

A democracy thrives on a feeling among the citizenry that they are a part of the political process and that they are able to influence it. Therefore, we wanted to know the extent to which people feel they are included in the German democracy. Overall, the responses reveal a rather mixed picture and indicate deficits in the relationship between citizens and politics. **Currently, 53 percent of Germans believe they can become involved in the political process if they want to, while conversely, 47 percent do not.** Moreover, only around 51 percent of respondents currently feel that their views are well represented in the representative system, meaning that a (felt) gap in representation is opening. Despite this dissatisfaction and the increasingly sharp tone, including toward political representatives, people do not necessarily have a fundamental contempt for politicians. Some 76 percent of respondents believe that "whoever is committed to democracy as a politician definitely deserves our recognition".

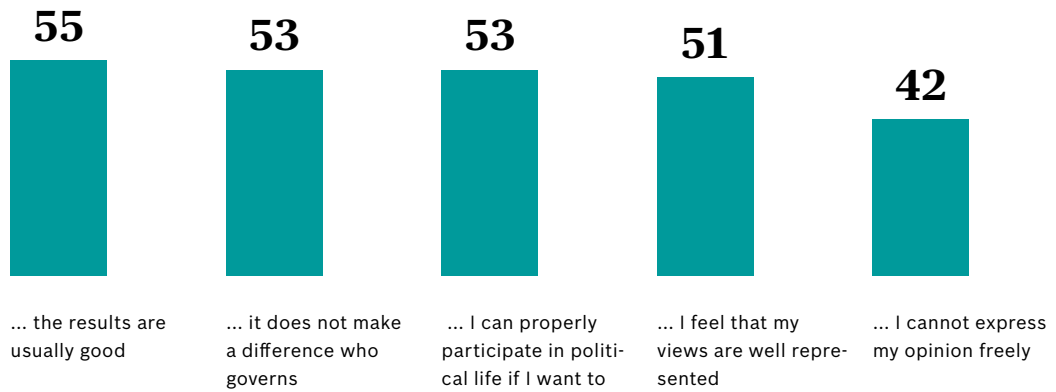
A sizeable minority (42 percent), however, go even further in their criticism, believing that freedom of expression itself is threatened in Germany ("cannot express opinions freely in the current political system") – a right which, as we noted earlier, ranks right at the top of the list of democratic principles. Considering the rampant belief in conspiracy myths, these numbers are troubling. Those types of allegations seem to be finding fertile ground.

Figure 5:

## Statements on political reality

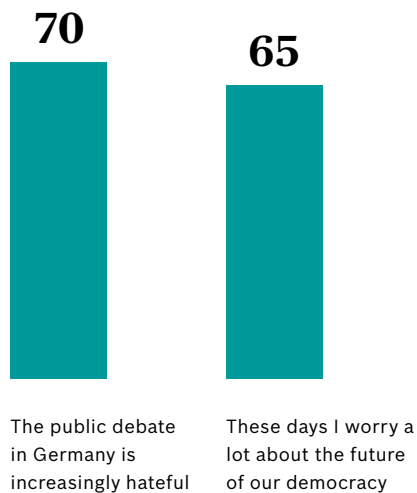
### In our current political system ...

Agree in %

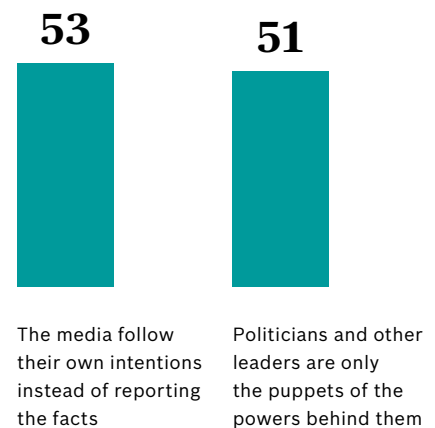


### Are these statements correct?

Agree in %



### Skepticism toward elites



Questions: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? In your opinion, to what extent are these statements correct? Source: More in Common (2021)

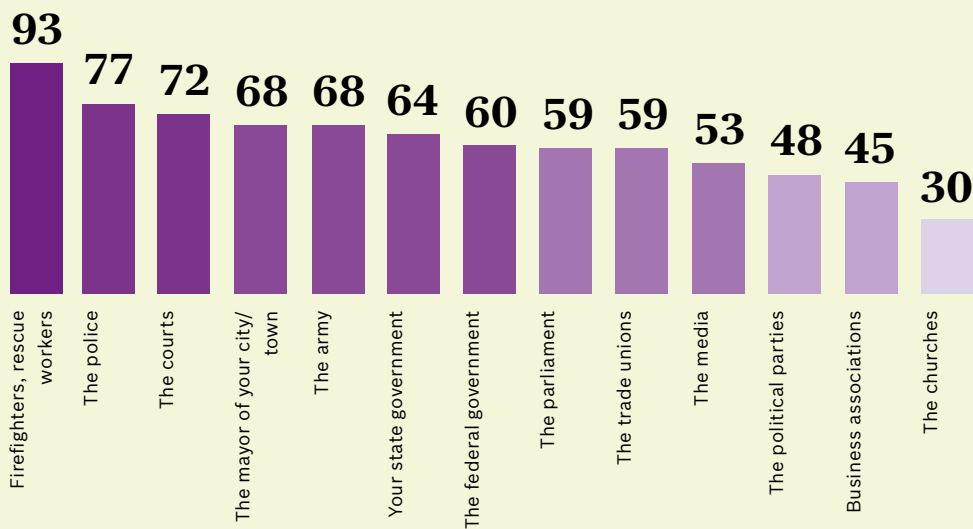
## Trust in Elections, Media and Institutions

The images from the United States on Jan. 6, 2021, provide a striking reminder that trust is the core currency of politics in a democracy. Where it is lost or destroyed, the political process suffers along with its legitimacy. This is particularly true for fundamental processes like elections. A look at the reality in Germany can therefore be reassuring: **A full 84 percent of the country's population believes that elections are generally fair** – a robust figure in times of targeted disinformation.

Figure 6:

### Trust in institutions and organizations

Trust in %



Question: How strong is the trust you place in each of the following organizations and institutions?  
Source: More in Common (2021)

However, we also see that distrust of political and media actors in Germany is an important factor. **On the one hand, a foundation of trust in institutions remains (see chart). At the same time, though, we recognize a willingness among many to support criticism of elites and even conspiracy myths.** Fifty-one percent of respondents view politicians as “puppets of the powers behind them”. To that end, 44 percent often specifically “research issues that politicians seek to conceal”.

Beyond their mistrust of politics, people are also especially mistrustful of the media. Many believe that the media is not reporting in a balanced enough manner. Fifty-three percent of respondents believe the media are pursuing their own agenda. At the same time, it is notable that a large share of people still rely on information from the “classical media” in their daily lives: A full 71 percent say they consider Germany’s two major public television channels to be credible. By comparison, only 22 percent say the same about an “alternative”, such as the German version of the Russian state-controlled television network “Russia Today”. As such, the findings on trust in the media are rather ambivalent.



### Concern About the Tone of Discourse

People in Germany generally attach great importance to a civil tone in democracy. Respondents also demand the same of themselves: Two-thirds of respondents expect themselves and their peers to be willing to compromise. As such, it is concerning that many are currently lamenting that the tone of political debate has grown too caustic. **A full 70 percent of respondents deem the public debate to be increasingly hateful.** And 65 percent go so far as to say that they frequently worry about the future of democracy.

Given that social media is often blamed for the deterioration of discourse, it is interesting to note that **42 percent of respondents believe that the online exchange of views on social media promotes democracy**, while only 19 percent consider it harmful.

Figure 7:

## What is conducive, what is detrimental to democracy in Germany?

Numbers in %

The prohibition of parties that are classified as hostile toward the constitution



The existence of public broadcasting



Political discussions among citizens on social media



A larger proportion of politicians with migration history



The abolition of potentially discriminating terms or spellings



Electoral success of parties like the AfD



■ Conductive ■ Neither ■ Detrimental

Question: Please indicate whether you think the following things are more conducive or more detrimental to the good functioning of democracy in Germany. Source: More in Common (2021). Please note: Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

### **Political Participation: There Is a Culture of Civic Engagement – at Least in People’s Minds**

A clear majority of 62 percent of people in Germany view civic life as being active and as involving popular participation in political events – meaning that just sitting by passively does not correspond to most people’s ideal. This is also reflected in the picture respondents paint of their own involvement, although mostly on a small scale.

For example, 76 percent state that they regularly follow political news, and 68 percent describe themselves as being interested in politics. Furthermore, 66 percent report that they regularly think about political and social issues. **The majority of people in Germany are thus personally interested in politics.** When it comes to active exchange between citizens, the numbers decrease somewhat, and yet some 60 percent say they enjoy discussing political and social issues with others. The country is home to a broad-based democratic civic culture.

This involvement, however, understandably reaches its limits given the widespread preference for private over public life. There is no majority support in Germany for an “Athenian” model in which the public supersedes the personal in terms of importance. When asked whether they tended more toward looking after their “own private matters” or taking part in “political and societal events”, 55 percent opt for the former, although a 45 percent share of active citizens is considerable.

In thinking about participation, it is also important to note (as shown above) that many people are dissatisfied with their role in the political process as currently practiced. It is possible that such discontent may reduce some people’s active participation. As such, there currently appears to be a gap between people’s participatory expectations and their perceived ability to participate.

### **Preliminary Conclusion**

**Overall, we see a clear and mature commitment to democracy in Germany, but this is accompanied by a call for a better democratic reality in large parts of the population.** The key words “trust” and “confidence” between the citizenry and politics are central when it comes to strengthening democracy. Many would like to have a greater say, a more proactive brand of politics, and more constructive discourse. Criticisms of the current democratic reality acquire additional salience considering the differing understandings of democracy. Despite criticizing day-to-day politics, those who strongly see democracy as having inherent value or who have faith in representative democracy will be significantly less judgmental on a fundamental level than those who measure democracy primarily in terms of its results or who inherently demand a greater direct-democratic role for citizens. **As such, there is a risk of misunderstandings between people who all share a belief in basic democratic norms** but who have different understandings of democracy.

It is not enough for us, though, to look at the overall population to best understand the complex dynamics surrounding attitudes toward democracy, because doing so can obscure important nuances *within* the population. Nor does such an approach allow us to determine the point of view from which certain people approach an issue, where differences exist between groups, and where certain views “cluster”. It thus keeps us from ascertaining who currently has particular potential for strengthening democracy and improving its resilience.

It is precisely this examination of different perspectives among the populace that forms the foundations of this study. We are particularly interested in people whose views are not particularly radical or resolute in any one direction, but who run the risk of drifting into a certain “distance” or indifference to democracy. **We now want to deliberately take a closer look at the perspectives of those who currently have an ambivalent or weak relationship with liberal democracy.** In short, we are interested in all those who are necessary for the process of strengthening democracy but are often lost when the public focus turns to the “defenders and opponents” of democracy.

**Figure 8:**

## Forms of engagement

Numbers in %

Discussed politics in my personal environment



Supported a petition or collection of signatures



Followed people on social media who talk about political or societal topics



Shared or spread online news with political or societal content



Took a political stance on the internet



Visited events on political or societal topics



Contacted a politician or party



Participated in a protest



■ Sometimes ■ Often

Question: How often have you done the following activities in the last twelve months? The response categories “Rarely”, “Never”, and “Not specified” are not displayed. Source: More in Common (2021)

As such, our focus is neither on the extreme political “fringes” nor on those who have a positive and strong relation to democracy in practice. These groups are consciously excluded from the analysis below.

### **Two Potential Groups: Ambivalent toward German Democracy for Various Reasons**

In our research, we used a segmentation process to group people with similar ideas about democracy, norms, levels of engagement, and assessments of their own role in democracy. Based on this method, we have identified **two segments of the population, each of which, in their own way, shows great ambivalence toward democracy in Germany, but are reachable with democratic values**. They do not currently have a sufficiently positive or fulfilling relationship with the system, its principles, modes of participation, and representatives.

These groups, which are of particular interest for the process of broadly strengthening democracy, comprise a total of 24 percent of the population. They differ in the values they hold, in what drives them and in their attitudes:

- The **Passive Indifferent (16 percent)**. Characteristic for this segment is a normative vagueness toward democratic values and principles as well as a deficient relationship to and interest in the polity, which goes hand in hand with civic passivity.
- The **Disappointed Output-Oriented (8 percent)**. Members of this segment are characterized by a disappointed need for a strong and caring polity and a resulting feeling of alienation from the political system as well as a strong feeling of powerlessness.

#### **The Passive Indifferent (16 Percent)**

**“I don’t see it [democracy] in danger, no. I honestly don’t care that much either. I’m not that interested in politics. You can’t change anything anyway unless you’re in a huge club or have a lot of money or are really well networked.”**

– Quote from focus group

Their central characteristic is a weak connection to the polity. In thought and action, the Passive Indifferent remain distanced from the political-societal sphere. They are neither radical nor moderate – they’re largely just disengaged. As such, there is also a certain ambivalence when it comes to identifying with democracy – the urgency is lacking. Overall, they maintain a functional relationship to “major” politics and to issues of shaping society.

**Recurring Themes:** Politics as quick decision-making; exhausted by debates; little urge to get involved.

**Demographic Characteristics:**

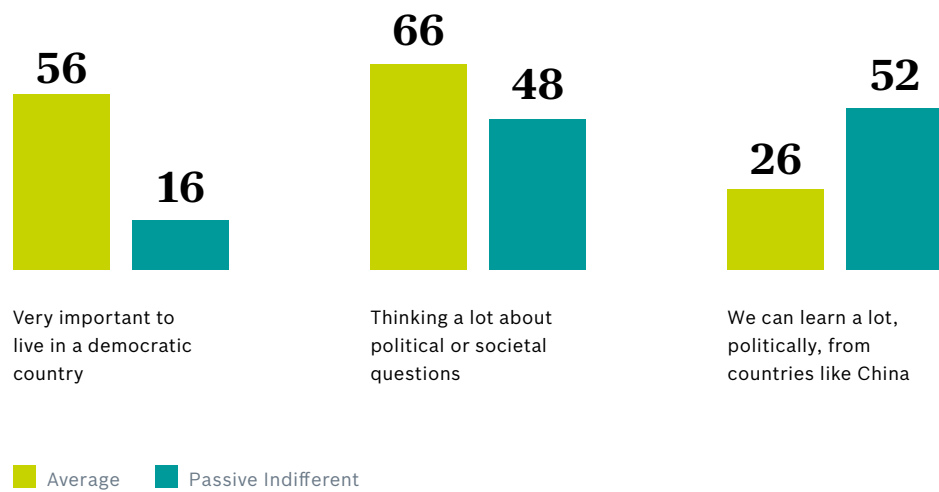
- Far younger than the overall population, on average: 55 percent are 40 years of age or under
- Share of people with immigration backgrounds significantly increased
- Tend to have lower levels of education
- High proportion employed; incomes tend to be in the lower mid-range
- Large proportion of parents with minor children

**Figure 9:**

**Profile of the Passive Indifferent**

Weak relationship to democracy and politics,  
more vulnerable to authoritarian alternatives

Agree in %



Questions: How important is it for you personally to live in a country that is governed democratically?  
Which of the following statements regarding democracy and politics do you agree with more?  
To what extent do the following statements apply to you personally? Source: More in Common (2021)

### **Norms and Principles**

Already when it comes to the general commitment to democracy, the Passive Indifferent are noticeably more remiss than the population average: Only 75 percent support the idea in principle (-18 points) and only 12 percent position themselves as being “explicitly” in favor (-37).

This hesitation is to be interpreted less as rejection than as indeterminacy: They welcome democracy in principle but are less unequivocal than others. For example, the Passive Indifferent are also more reserved in their definition of what absolutely must be part of democracy: They are much less insistent about almost all possible criteria than others and seem to have no clear vision of it. The “concept” of democracy remains fuzzy and non-binding for them.

Conversely, this also means that they are less immune to authoritarian alternatives: They lack the decisive democratic “antigen”. For example, 53 percent of the Passive Indifferent believe that Germany could certainly learn from China given that many things happen faster there (+26). And the fact that an elected party could also be undemocratic seems much less plausible to them than to others (-29). Fittingly, they are more willing than others to accept curtailments of democracy, or even a dictatorship (+22). Such attitudes make it clear that unconscious indifference and the ambivalence that arises from it can be just as dangerous as conscious anti-democratic will. And that is the crux of this segment.

**“I am in no way in favor of dictatorship. But at some point, there comes a time when you think to yourself, there has to be someone who takes the reins and says: ‘Look, we’ll do it like this and like that.’ Without someone jumping in and saying: ‘But, but, but.’”**

– Quote from focus group

### **Democratic and Political Participation**

Although the Passive Indifferent may not automatically shy away from authoritarian models because of their lack of political convictions, **they also show no signs of being a militant segment actively working against liberal democracy**. Instead, they tend to demonstrate indifference. At 52 percent, they are less interested in politics than average (-15), they follow the news less often (-15), they think about politics and society less often (-18), discuss things less often (-12), and vote less often (-11).

To differentiate: This passive profile distinguishes the segment significantly from subversive segments of the population, who in our survey show a closed authoritarian worldview along with militancy and make up around 5 percent of the population.

### **Evaluation of Democratic Reality, Trust, Relations, Voting Behavior**

The Passive Indifferent have trouble making independent assessments of the political establishment. There is no particular sense of satisfaction or hostility.

In terms of trust references, though, the Passive Indifferent are clearly distant from the institutions of the polity. For example, they trust the federal government less than others (-12), and their trust in the media tends to be lower. Because of this distance, they are also somewhat more inclined to believe in narratives of distrust. They are also less certain than others that elections in Germany are always conducted fairly (-12), and they assume more often that the media pursue their own agenda (+8). There is a lack in strong trust. The Passive Indifferent are also more often undecided than others in terms of who they should vote for; a clear party preference is indiscernible. This also fits with their overall vague political profile.

### **Living Environment**

When looking at the subjective reality of life of these often young people, patterns of insecurity and lack of anchoring are striking. Their average life satisfaction is lower (-13) and they feel less valued (-12). Likewise, they are less likely to know where they feel at home and where they “belong” (-12) and, by the same token, are more likely than others to feel foreign in their own country (+13). A feeling of control over their own lives (-10) is also diminished compared to the general population. The living environment of the Passive Indifferent tends to be fraught with problems and marked by instability.

### **The Disappointed Output-Oriented (8 percent)**

**“Democracy is only good if it is for the people. When it is made for the people and not for lobbyists ...”**

– Quote from focus group

The Disappointed Output-Oriented expect a caring and welfare-oriented state that shapes people’s lives and achieves good outcomes for its citizens. This is how they measure their own satisfaction with the democratic system. In their eyes, though, this expectation is not currently being met: They feel like they are not being listened to and are distancing themselves from the political system even though they have an interest in a functioning polity. Their participation is paralyzed by strong feelings of powerlessness. Among the Disappointed Output-Oriented, disenchantment threatens to morph into alienation from the democratic system.

**Recurring Themes:** Democracy as the people’s welfare; inadequate policy outcomes; lost trust.

### **Demographic Characteristics:**

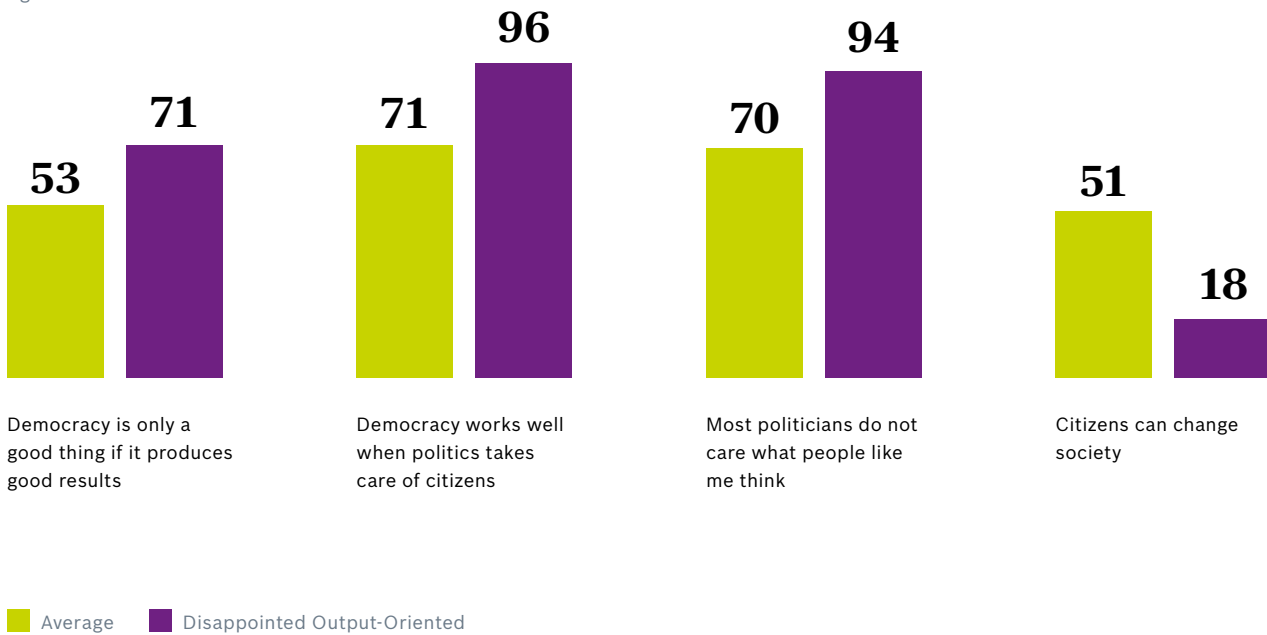
- Often tend to be older: 64 percent over 50 years old
- Often tend to have low or medium levels of education
- Often have lower social status, often perceive themselves as in the lower half of society; many are in the low-income bracket, although not consistently so
- Predominantly women

Figure 10:

## Profile of the Disappointed Output-Oriented

Care-oriented conception of politics, strong feelings of powerlessness

Agree in %



Questions: Which of the following statements regarding democracy and politics do you agree with more? Which of the following statements do you agree with more? Source: More in Common (2021)

### Norms and Principles

The Disappointed Output-Oriented uncompromisingly self-identify as proponents of democracy:

**Consistent with the population average, 93 percent support the idea of democracy.**

When it comes to specifics, they demonstrate an understanding of democracy that prioritizes community and security, built on a foundation of a strong state.

The Disappointed Output-Oriented believe that an essential element of democracy is a guarantee of basic social welfare for everyone (average: 5.7, +0.6). Their view of the nation state as community also gives rise to a desire for politics to primarily look after its own citizens (5.4, +0.5). They would like to see strong political leadership to ensure smooth processes (4.8, +0.6), and would even accept restrictions on popular freedoms should it become necessary to achieve that goal (+21).

The Disappointed Output-Oriented evaluate the democratic system based on the concrete achievements it produces. Seventy-one percent agree that democracy is only a good thing if it delivers good results (+18). References to the inherent value of democracy are insufficient for this segment unless they are directly linked to their ideal of a provident polity. A full 96 percent feel that a democratic political system must “take care” of its people (+25).

The fact that the Disappointed Output-Oriented tie their democratic consent to material conditions does not automatically make them susceptible to authoritarian alternatives. For example, they are no more comfortable with the idea of a dictatorship than others. But the data does indicate that certain democratic restrictions would be accepted in exchange for a reduction in



social inequality or for greater security. The Disappointed Output-Oriented primarily view democracy as the implementation of the will of the people (+10). A liberal-pluralistic understanding is mostly absent, leading to a belief that citizens must be allowed to decide for themselves if need be (+22). Overall, the normative structure of the Disappointed Output-Oriented provides a material concept of democracy anchored in the social reality of people's lives. **Democracy here is less an abstract intrinsic value than an obligation that politics ought to be there for the people.**

#### ***Democratic and Political Participation***

The Disappointed Output-Oriented are committed to the necessity of keeping abreast of political developments. Some 89 percent regularly follow the news (+13), and people in this segment often think about societal issues (+17). Their engagement, however, does not extend beyond this small-scale involvement. **When it comes to their understanding of their own larger role in society, the Disappointed Output-Oriented tend to pull back:** Only 32 percent said they enjoy participating in political and societal events (-13). This passivity is not, however, an arbitrary decision stemming from indolence – it arises from a deep insecurity regarding their own agency. They do not believe that people can change society through their actions anyway (+33). Feelings of impotence stand in the way of active participation.

#### ***Evaluation of Democratic Reality, Trust, Relations, Voting Behavior***

The perceived helplessness of the Disappointed Output-Oriented does not exist in a vacuum – it coincides with massive critique of the system. There is universal dissatisfaction within this segment with democratic reality – with both the process and its outcomes.

Only 38 percent of the Disappointed Output-Oriented (-17) believe the German political system ultimately yields good results. They believe the output is insufficient and that politics does not address the most important problems (+9). A full 94 percent of the Disappointed Output-Oriented feel that their voices are unheard by most politicians (+24), and only 28 percent feel that their views are well represented (-23).

**“We don’t get asked very often. We have freedom of expression, but when it comes to politics, we don’t have much of an influence.”**

– Quote from focus group

The Disappointed Output-Oriented should always be assessed against the backdrop of this enormous displeasure, which also affects their trust in the institutions. Their trust in those in power is thus structurally diminished. It makes no difference for them who governs anyway (+12) – resigned aversion sets in. There is also a palpable affinity for narratives critical of the elite and the feeling that democracy could be threatened “from above”. Some 77 percent of them frequently worry about democracy (+12), with two-thirds viewing politicians as “puppets of the powers behind them” (+16) and accusing the media of pursuing a secret agenda (+13).

When it comes to voting preferences, the Disappointed Output-Oriented tend to be undecided due to their political disappointment. They also vote for the Left the party (Die Linke) more frequently than the average.

### ***Living Environment***

In the subjective evaluation of their life circumstances, the Disappointed Output-Oriented also complain about insecurity and being left behind. They are less likely to feel secure (-13) and less likely to feel they have decent opportunities in life (-9). There is also a more general feeling of injustice lurking in the background: Only 35 percent believe things are more or less fair in Germany (-17). The feeling of being a second-class citizen is also widespread (+13). Consequently, this segment’s perception of their own lives has an alienating and destabilizing effect.

### **Segments in Comparison: Similarities and Differences**

The profiles of the two segments show the degree to which their “paths” to indifference differ. Even their basic relationship to democracy is completely different. Whereas the Passive Indifferent must be viewed as having a fundamental distance from the polity (an “intrinsic” indifference, so to speak), the Disappointed Output-Oriented are more likely to turn away from a system that does not meet their own demands. The first segment’s relative distance from democracy is therefore much more immediate than the second segment’s “acquired” skepticism through subjective experience. To put it succinctly: **The Passive Indifferent have a weak overall relationship with democracy and the Disappointed Output-Oriented have a poor relationship with *this* democracy.**

And this brings us to the characteristics shared by the two groups. **Both segments have diminished trust and connection to the institutions of the polity. Accordingly, both respond more favorably than others to narratives of mistrust and to vilification of the system.**

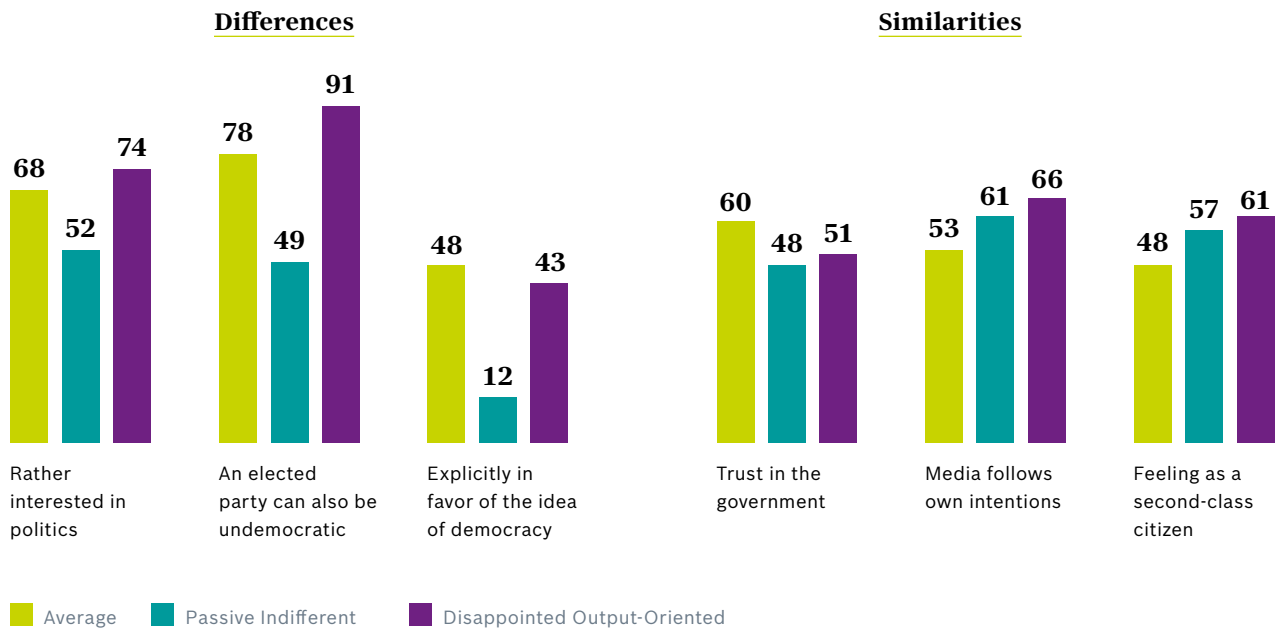
To reiterate: There is no authoritarian or even subversive militancy behind either segment, but their distance from the political system and lack of trust in stakeholders is palpable. Likewise, both segments suffer from feelings of insecurity in their living environments. Neither segment has “arrived” or is a self-confident portion of the population – feelings of being left behind, uprooted and disoriented are pervasive. This constellation could potentially make it easier for actors who want to tap that negative sentiment for their own destructive ends to gain a foothold.

**Figure 11:**

## Differences and similarities between the two segments

Different relationship with democracy, similar negative feelings

Agree in %



Questions: Are you personally more in favor of the idea of democracy, or are you more against the idea of democracy? Which of the following statements regarding democracy and politics do you agree with more? How strong is your interest in politics? How strong is the trust you place in each of the following organizations and institutions? To what extent do you agree with the following statements? In your opinion, to what extent are these statements correct? Source: More in Common (2021)

### Side Note: Additional Risk - Threat of Alienation and Escalation Within the Population

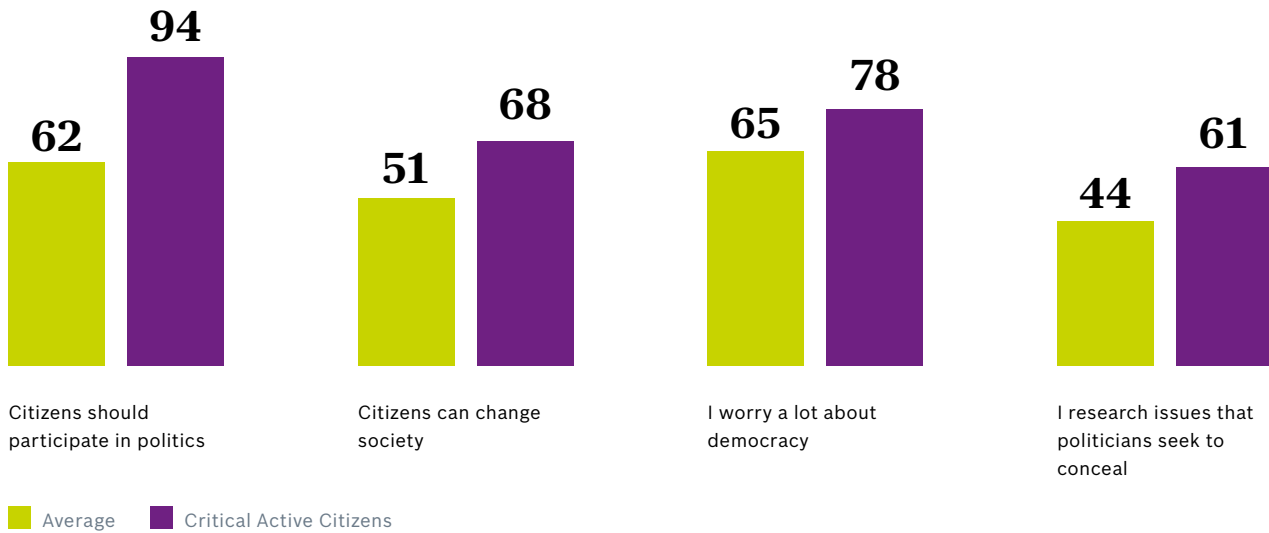
In addition to the two segments of the population who have an ambivalent relationship to democracy, our research has revealed a group within the German population that is developing a problematic relationship with the political system. This said group is by no means characterized by an excess of ambivalence or passivity (on the contrary), but rather by the susceptibility of a particularly democracy-supporting segment to militancy and conspiracy myths. This is why they are not classified as a potential group here but should nonetheless be covered by an analysis of current dynamics around democracy. This group (around 10 percent), which can be described as **Critical Active Citizens**, has a need to have a say and has a fundamentally critical approach. While this stance is perfectly legitimate, their overall profile could lead them down unsteady paths, particular during the coronavirus pandemic.

Figure 12:

## Profile of the Critical Active Citizens

Civic self-confidence, system-critical attitude

Agree in %



Questions: In your opinion, to what extent are these statements correct? Which of the following statements regarding democracy and politics do you agree with more (pair of opposites)? Source: More in Common (2021)

### An Active Civic Image Meets ...

For these people's understanding of democracy, the right to co-determination is key – i.e., they believe that as many citizens as possible should actually participate (+32). This includes, in particular, the right to peaceful protest against those in power (average score 5.7; +0.5). They believe it would be best if citizens could decide things for themselves right from the beginning (+28) – the system of representation appears to be just an obstacle. This group generally views the citizenry as a justifiably uncomfortable sovereign over whom politics can exert little control (5.1; +0.8) and whose freedoms politics must not restrict under any circumstances (+32).

Their need to emancipate themselves from institutional politics is palpable. At the same time, they are extremely self-confident in their role as citizens: They fundamentally believe that people can change society (+17). Therefore, Critical Active Citizens also rely, to a conspicuously large extent, on online exchanges in social media by the citizenry to strengthen democracy (+12). They also show increased militancy in their demand to shape politics: They believe that like-minded people should fight vehemently for their positions (+13). A differentiation should be made here: This emphasis has little to do with a contentedly moderate, civic self-image of the kind we find among other interviewees.

## **“Co-determination. That someone would place a little fire under some gentlemen’s butts.”**

– Quote from focus group

Accordingly, their level of concrete engagement is usually elevated – they get involved and are very interested. However, this engagement has a distinctly suspicious and scrutinizing air about it; they see themselves in an investigative role. Some 61 percent of this group say they often re-search things they believe politicians are keeping quiet about (+17). It quickly becomes clear that this segment keeps its distance from political institutions.

### **... Political Mistrust**

Critical Active Citizens are hard on politicians, saying they do not listen enough (+14) and they ignore the real issues (+16). This group feels insufficiently represented by this system and its representatives (-17).

As such, trust in institutions is low: Critical Active Citizens have much lower trust in the federal government than others. They tend strongly toward imputations: The media supposedly pursue their own agenda (+10); politicians are merely puppets (+16). Consequently, they are very concerned about the future of democracy (+13).

## **“I just get information through Telegram, through the alternative media, which happens to be more multifaceted. To me, the news is simply state broadcasting.”**

– Quote from focus group

Given this mix of activism, desire for freedom, and distrust, it seems logical to deduce that Critical Active Citizens have been shaken to their core by the current coronavirus pandemic and all the state-imposed restrictions that have gone along with it.

Although the segment tends to view itself as being centrist or even slightly left of center, it exhibits a significantly higher tendency to vote for the anti-system party AfD. This shows a potential willingness to rebel – even with deliberate action and militancy – against the current order, which it considers inadequate. It should be noted once again, however, that this segment does not have an authoritarian-anti-democratic profile. Also, when it comes to the perception of “opinions being censored” and to subversive tendencies, Critical Activist Citizens should not be confused with the radical, anti-system fringe. Most importantly, however, their vehement protest element is striking – and the central question is therefore the possible extent to which it could be exploited by other actors.

### **Diagnosis: Militancy and Risk of Alienation**

Overall, it becomes clear that the picture of the Critical Activist Citizens is a rather ambivalent one. On the one hand, with their willingness to engage and assert themselves, they are a potential pillar of civic democracy; but on the other, their distrust also holds great potential for militancy if they and the political system become even more alienated from each other.

A look at the potential militancy of the population overall also shows that, in the worst case, criticism of the system can take on a life of its own: Currently, 29 percent believe that citizens sometimes need to “take matters into their own hands, even if that may lead to violence”.

### **Summary and Recommendations**

Our analysis shows that, as a rule, the pros and cons of democracy are not the subject of fundamental debate within the German population. The idea of democracy – with the significant exception of a small part of society – is not fundamentally disputed. Many important principles of Germany’s constitution are also met with popular approval.

Nevertheless, it is clear why conflicts about democracy exist and why the term is also somewhat “politicized”: There are different ideas in the German populace about what democracy actually means and thus people sometimes talk past each other even if they think they are saying the same thing. This in itself is nothing new, but it gains a new potential for volatility when it – as is currently the case – is compounded by a simmering crisis of trust between the citizenry and the political establishment: Because many people feel inadequately listened to and even “ill-served” in terms of political outcomes, their confidence in the political system suffers. Populist actors can skillfully exploit that and initiate a debate over who the “best” or “real” democrats are – i.e., who is most likely to live up to people’s expectations of democracy.

In addition, our research has shown how strongly the coronavirus pandemic is currently “politicizing” many people in Germany. In our focus groups, many participants said that this is the first time they have followed politics closely and engaged with its actors. Therein lies an opportunity, since it makes it clear that democracy and politics directly influence people’s own lives. But it also poses danger, since this new attention often goes hand in hand with critical statements about political decision-making processes and ability to act.

The following recommendations could offer guidance to politicians and civil society actors working to strengthen liberal democracy:

- All efforts to strengthen liberal democracy should take into account the fact that purely “appeals-based” approaches at the values level run the risk of failing to reach precisely those who have an ambivalent relationship with the current political and social situation. Civil society work should not, therefore, approach democracy solely as a self-explanatory intrinsic value, but it should engage in a conversation about it. It would help this conversation if an emphasis were placed on the common core view of democratic rights shared by almost everyone in Germany. Room should, however, also be made for problems raised by those who want to discuss democracy based on experienced practice and material issues.
- The different conceptions of democracy also show why pluralism – a cornerstone of democratic culture in Germany – is struggling. Many do not want the discursive negotiation of different interests within a society (“politics” is supposed to “do” and not talk) and many regard political discussions as burdensome, especially in their personal surroundings. Strengthening and positively engaging with this important aspect of liberal democracy, namely the enjoyment and acceptance of discourse, will be one of the important fields of action.
- What is needed overall is not so much “values work” as a new “relationship work” between politics, the citizenry, and civil society – to (re)strengthen the overall solid foundation of German democracy and, more importantly, to make it stronger and, above all, broader. It is less about “convincing” people of democracy than about rebuilding trust between the citizenry and politics, between the media and the people, and striving to reflect different interests and perspectives in our political system.
- New approaches can also be found for specific target groups. With the often younger Passive Indifferent, whose relationship to democracy is comparatively weak, it is a matter of starting in the practical world of their lives and making it clear to them that they, too, have agency and opportunities to shape things, if they are willing to take advantage of them. Low-threshold “pull offers” in political participation could be especially interesting here – i.e., formats that are not framed in a general manner, but involve someone specifically and personally for them.
- For the Disappointed Output-Oriented, whose expectation of a generous welfare state and politics geared toward the common good is not being met in their eyes and who react by withdrawing, it is instead a matter of reestablishing a relationship of trust with the institutions of the polity. Issues of credible representation, recognition, and advocacy are paramount. Political and social actors should more emphatically understand and address real-life problems, such as precariousness and inequality, as key elements of strengthening democracy. Only in this way can it become clear that democratic politics can and should improve the lives of these people.
- In conversations among citizens, and between citizens and political leaders, the common good, respect, and appreciation should be high on the agenda as topics – as research has repeatedly shown. In a time that is often perceived as cold, interest-driven, and isolationist, many currently desire a society that does a better job of meeting these basic human needs.



**France:**  
**Torn Between**  
**Democratic**  
**Idealism and**  
**Disillusionment**



# France: Torn Between Democratic Idealism and Disillusionment

**13** In collaboration with the opinion research institute KANTAR, More in Common surveyed a total of 2,000 adults in France about their attitudes around democracy and politics, as well as their own roles in community and society. Quantitative fieldwork in January 2021 was followed by qualitative focus groups in March 2021.

It will come as no surprise that not all is well when it comes to democracy in France. Fully 39 percent of French people believe that “in some cases, a non-democratic government would be preferable to a democratic government”, while 37 percent think that “for people like me, living under a democratic or a non-democratic regime would not make any difference”.<sup>13</sup>

To better understand the disillusionment that afflicts contemporary France, and before we focus on specific groups of democratically disengaged French populations, a short historical detour is helpful to grasp **how perceptions of democracy and power reflect founding myths** that are so deeply anchored in the French collective imagination.

More than 230 years after 1789, the legacy of the French Revolution still looms large. It shapes people’s perceptions of power and their behavior toward it. But what has marked France since 1789 is mainly its significant and often underappreciated constitutional instability. Since the storming of the Bastille, **14 constitutions have come into use, and five regimes or Republics have come and gone**. In the 20th century alone, France has been governed under the Third Republic, the Vichy Regime, the Fourth Republic, and finally the current Fifth Republic. The Fifth Republic of 1958, amended 24 times, has offered only moderate institutional stability. Two main changes have been made since 1958: the election of the president by direct universal suffrage in 1962 and the reduction of the presidential term from seven to five years in 2000.

These frequent regime changes most often took place after moments of crisis, including violent ones. The Fifth Republic, for example, was born out of the Algerian war and an appeal to General Charles de Gaulle to return to power and restore order. French institutional life in the postwar era is therefore relatively unstable, particularly when compared to France’s neighbors like the United Kingdom or Germany. **Political power struggles thus play a more prominent role than the search for consensus.**

The current centralized system originates from the Revolution of 1789 and the pursuit of universalism and equality among all French citizens for which the state – so central to political life in France – is the guardian. Since the 1960s, the question of the allocation of competencies between the centralized state and local authorities has been a permanent feature of French political debate. Local authorities (regions and municipalities) are increasingly seen as political and institutional counterweights to the power of the central state. French democracy should therefore be seen partly through the lens of a shifting formal institutional framework.

Perceptions of democracy in France are also impacted by permanent tension between the search for, and the rejection of, the leader as strongman – *l'homme providentiel*. This very French form of Caesarism is partly based on the memory of Napoleon (whose legacy remains strong 200 years after his passing) and has found more recent incarnations in Marshall Pétain or, of course, in General De Gaulle, who continues to be an inspiration to most modern presidents. The idea that the French people can find their full incarnation under a tutelary figure, capable of restoring lost pride and glory, remains predominant in today's France, and recent attempts at returning to "normal" authority figures have failed, as President François Hollande demonstrated.

The current organization of power in France gives considerable informal weight and formal power to the president – and this has only increased in recent years. As head of the executive branch, the president is also the *de facto* head of a legislative branch elected immediately after him and which owes him (and always him, as unfortunately France has not yet had a female president) its political and electoral legitimacy. The resulting imbalance of power strains political relations, since the parliamentary opposition struggles to make its voice heard. This situation has been exacerbated by the near permanent state of emergency brought on first by the wave

of terror attacks that started in 2015 and then by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led many constitutional specialists to believe that the Fifth Republic needs a reboot. Far from a purely institutional debate, this is also reflected, as we will see below, in how the French people perceive democracy as a whole.

### **Attitudes of the French Toward Their Democracy**

#### **Democratic Fatigue**

As our study shows, roughly a third of the French population harbors a marked distrust of democracy as a political system. The symptoms of democratic disillusionment are numerous: deep distrust of elites, political parties, and elected officials – which in recent years has taken violent forms, during the yellow vest movement, for example – growing abstention, the enduring appeal of populist and authoritarian parties, and alienation from public debate.

To grasp the reality of democratic disillusionment, and the deep causes of the growing rift between a large part of the French people and their political system, one must begin by examining precisely the understanding and expectations French people have of democracy.

## The Conditions for Democracy

Beyond its legal and formal definition, let us consider first the main necessary conditions for a functioning democracy as expressed by the respondents to our survey. The people in France rate the following as “particularly important”:

- The **honesty of elected officials** is seen as the most important condition for democracy (63 percent). This reflects both the fact that equality (in this case understood as equality before the law) is the cardinal value in France, but also the scars left by a series of high-profile corruption cases and trials, such as the recent conviction of former President Nicolas Sarkozy.
- The ability of the **education system to provide the same opportunities to all children** (61 percent), reflecting once again France’s special relationship to equality as a value
- A guarantee of **security** for everyone, everywhere in the country and its territories (60 percent)
- **Free elections** (60 percent)
- **A secular state** (referring to the French concept of *laïcité*) (59 percent)
- Respect for **individual freedoms** – of expression, of movement, of religious belief (56 percent)
- **Separation of powers** between the three branches of government (52 percent)
- A **free and independent media** (51 percent)

When asked about their personal attachment to the attributes of democracy, French people placed free and fair elections and freedom of expression first (each 67 percent). They placed equal rights for all citizens and an independent judiciary (each 61 percent) second. Freedom to protest (46 percent) and the existence of opposition parties (45 percent) ranked far lower.

What are the signs, in the view of our respondents, that a democracy is not functioning? Forty-two percent say that they view excessive poverty or a lack of separation of powers as most worrisome, followed by the existence of a regime where the separation of religion and the state is not observed (41 percent). Those were all far ahead of a weak parliament (31 percent).

Although French opinion cannot be examined as one bloc, as we will see later in this chapter, the overall picture that emerges is that French people view **democracy more in terms of a set of clear rules and outcomes and less as an attachment to representative democracy per se, or indeed to a set of democratic values.**

## The French Paradox: Is France an Authoritarian Country?

The French – or at least large parts of the French population – differ from many of their neighbors in their tendency to favor vertical power to an almost authoritarian degree. This has long been a feature of the democratic landscape in France and has been exacerbated by the wave of terror attacks that started in 2015 and by the COVID-19 pandemic.

France is characterized by relatively low levels of interpersonal trust: According to data collected by More in Common in previous studies<sup>14</sup>, but also by the annual barometer conducted by the political research institute CEVIPOF<sup>15</sup>, 35 percent of people in France believe that most people can be trusted, compared to 42 percent in Germany and 45 percent in the UK. This level of distrust puts France closer to the level of Italy (29 percent). High “horizontal” or interpersonal distrust can help explain a pronounced demand for vertical authority in France.

<sup>14</sup> See More in Common (2020): *The New Normal?*

<sup>15</sup> CEVIPOF: *Le Baromètre de la confiance politique.*

Yet as the French look up to a strongman, they also have a deep-seated mistrust of all authority figures, especially political ones. **Therein lies a French democratic paradox.**

- A full 77 percent of the French believe “we need a real leader in France to restore order”, with 29 percent saying they “completely agree”.
- Yet 61 percent believe the most effective actors for changing society are citizens themselves, far ahead of any other category, including the government (28 percent).

This tension between the horizontal and the vertical is on display throughout our study. While over half (57 percent) of French people say that “what they expect from a government is above all that it obtains results”, just under half (43 percent) consider it paramount that a government “takes into account the greatest possible number of citizens”.

The tension is also evident when it comes to decision-making:

- 78 percent believe that the best decisions are taken by the representatives of the people after debate and consultation.
- 50 percent believe that the best public decisions are those taken directly by the people via referendum.
- 48 percent believe that experts and scientists make the best public decisions.
- 24 percent believe the president himself makes the best decisions.

**This tension between deliberation and efficiency is a constant feature of the French landscape** and harkens back to the instability of past regimes. It has been particularly apparent during the COVID pandemic, which has seen President Emmanuel Macron impose a strong centralization of decision-making even when it comes to very serious decisions like placing the country on lockdown. This was met with bewilderment by the legislative branch but also with broad popular approval.

This helps to explain why:

- 76 percent of French people think it is “acceptable for the government to limit citizens’ rights in the event of a threat to public order” (27 percent say they “completely agree” with this assertion).
- 77 percent think that it is “acceptable for the government to limit citizens’ rights in the event of a major health risk” (29 percent say they “completely agree”).

This authoritarian tendency is also noticeable in the perceived relationship between democracy and efficiency. For many, as we will see below, more concentrated decision-making means faster and more efficient outcomes. Dialogue, deliberation, and compromise are seen as little more than a waste of time.

**The demand for authority is not, however, unanimous, and does not entirely block out a demand for participation and co-construction.** These two contradictory demands coexist and fluctuate depending on the moment and who you ask. This explains why President Macron has enjoyed broad popular support during phases when he has exercised power that is especially “vertical” (during his first year in power or during much of the COVID-19 crisis) and why these have been interspersed with more “horizontal” and popular rejections of the very notion of political representation, as seen during the yellow vest movement with its totemic call for rule by referendum.

### **Can Democratic Politics Still Make a Positive Difference in People's Lives?**

Powerless, ignored and left behind: About a third of French citizens are experiencing a democratic system that seems to function without them and increasingly against them. **Just under half of all French citizens say they feel recognized and taken into account as citizens.** This is rooted in a daily experience of being downgraded or of stagnation, as well as a lack of social and professional recognition.

- Only 18 percent of French citizens believe decisions made by politicians have a positive impact on people like them.
- 48 percent believe they have a negative impact.
- 34 percent believe they have no impact.

Much of this has to do with perceived economic stagnation. According to CEVIPOF (cited above), more than half of French people perceive their current standard of living to be worse or similar to that of their parents when they were the same age. Moreover, 37 percent believe that their overall standard of living has deteriorated in recent years – a higher level than the ones measured in Germany (23 percent) and Italy (30 percent), for example. Perceptions of progress or stagnation are quite central to individual and collective representations. They impact the way different groups consider their political system and the way they view democracy. **Our data shows that French people who are doing better economically have a much more positive perception of democracy as a system:**

- 73 percent of those in the wealthier categories in our survey (with a monthly income above 3,750 euros) believe that the democratic system is irreplaceable and is the best possible system.
- Only 54 percent of the poorest respondents (with a monthly income of less than 800 euros) agree.
- Among the more affluent, only a quarter (27 percent) agree with the statement “for people like me, living under a democratic regime or not would not make any difference”. More than half (52 percent) of the poorest respondents agree with this statement.
- Differences in education also have a major impact: 41 percent of those with no higher education believe that it makes no difference whether or not they live in a democracy, compared to 25 percent of those with some higher education.

Democratic disillusionment also translates into the feeling that people are not heard or considered, and that politicians do not trust ordinary citizens. This feeling is prevalent among 77 percent of French citizens, who believe that “politicians do not care at all about what people like me think”. Only 37 percent believe that members of the government trust people like them, and 40 percent believe that the French president trusts them, while a clear majority believe that mayors, teachers, or police officers trust people like them.

### **For Many French People, It Is What Democracy Does That Matters**

French democracy is not judged in relative terms compared to other forms of government – but rather more in the absolute, through its perceived ability to achieve a certain number of tangible results. **The reality of democracy as experienced by people in their everyday lives is thus compared to the ideal of a democracy whose function is to fulfill what the French call the “Republican promise” of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*.** Democracy is perceived as fairly effective (for example in guaranteeing individual freedoms and the rights of minorities) by the respondents, but nearly one in five do not consider it to be “the best possible system” for reducing inequalities, fighting against private interests, or protecting the environment. And a quarter of the population does not consider democracy to be the best possible system for guaranteeing order.

Figure 13:

## Democracy as the best form of government to ...

Numbers in %

... ensure that individual liberties are respected



... ensure that the rights of minorities are respected



... promote the economic development of a country



... address the concerns of all citizens



... ensure justice



... reduce social inequalities between citizens



... promote the general interest rather than the private interest



... protect the environment and biodiversity



... ensure order



■ Yes, strongly agree    ■ Yes, mostly agree    ■ No, mostly disagree    ■ No, strongly disagree

Question: In your opinion, is democracy the best possible regime to ... ? Source: More in Common (2021)

So, what alternatives are available for ensuring better results? Faced with perceived ineffectiveness on certain issues and public policy objectives, a clear majority (67 percent) believe that “today, it is easier to change society through work and entrepreneurship than through political commitment”. But democratic disengagement and withdrawal into the private sphere is not the only consequence of dissatisfaction with the outcomes of democracy: Nearly one-third of people (29 percent) say they are “ready to support violent actions to change the system” with almost one in ten saying they “totally agree” with this statement.

Figure 14:

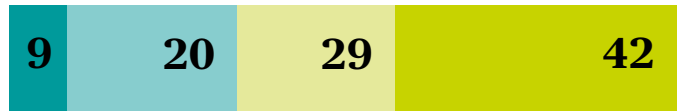
## Useful actions for change

Numbers in %

Today it is easier to change society through work and entrepreneurship than through political or associative commitment



I am ready to support violent actions to change the system



■ Totally agree   ■ Somewhat agree   ■ Somewhat disagree   ■ Totally disagree

Question: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Source: More in Common (2021)

Whether it is the demonstrations against Macron’s pension reform or the yellow vest movement in 2018/19, no modern protest movement seems to escape widespread violence – and often an equally violent response by the police. Boosted by 24-hour news channels and social media bubbles, the prospect of political violence has become a central feature of French political life. This violence exacerbates polarization and turns normal disagreements into increasingly intractable culture wars. This is a particularly worrying development and poses a genuine threat to French democracy.

### Sporadic Participation

The disconnection of the elites from the rest of society, a lack of consideration for ordinary citizens, and the absence of tangible improvements in their daily lives are leading a substantial segment, roughly one-third, of the population to maintain a relationship with democracy marked by disillusionment and resignation. It is a passive mindset that translates mainly into abstention at election times and does nothing to prevent more or less violent social convulsions at regular intervals.

### A form of intermittent voting has taken hold among a substantial portion of the electorate:

Only 58 percent of French people say they vote systematically in all elections, while 23 percent vote “in most elections but not all”, 11 percent vote “in some elections only” and 8 percent say they never vote. For large parts of the population, this intermittent relationship to democracy is characterized by phases of apathy or resignation, followed by phases of increased engagement. The latter increasingly takes place through modes of action that bypass traditional frameworks of political action and institutions (like unions or non-profit groups). In this milieu, voting, membership in a party, union, or representative organization, dialogue with elected representatives, and even peaceful demonstrations have all come to be seen as *passé*.

**Yet disillusionment has not so much led to an aspiration for another form of political regime, as it has for democracy itself to be adjusted**, either by implementing a more participatory and modern form – through citizen assemblies, for example – or in a more authoritarian, vertical sense, because this is a perceived condition for greater efficiency and better results. This latter trend is fueled by two relatively widespread notions:

- One is the idea that increased physical protection requires a trade-off between individual rights and freedoms and security. This feeling has become mainstream since the terrorist attacks of 2015, born out of numerous debates about the ability of the “rule of law” to fully protect the French. When asked directly, 60 percent of the French tend to believe “it is essential to ensure the security of citizens”, while only 40 percent say, “it is essential to respect individual rights and freedoms”.
- The other is the idea that deliberation is not necessarily the most efficient way to reach a good decision, and that it is sometimes better to move faster, even at the cost of limiting consultation. Thus, when a major crisis occurs (health, security or economic), 43 percent think that it is “better to let the public authorities have a free hand to manage the emergency, even if it means not taking the time for discussion”, while 57 percent think it is better “to take the time to consult citizens and discuss before making decisions and acting”.

### **Ambivalent Segments in France:** **Between Resignation and the Temptation to Revolt**

Behind the tensions and paradoxes noted above lies a heterogeneous public opinion landscape. This is why we have explored one step further, identifying two specific groups that can be considered democratically ambivalent: the **Skeptics** and the **Critics**.

They perfectly illustrate the underlying tensions between different attitudes toward democracy in France – between a vertical and a horizontal understanding of power, between a focus on deliberation and conversation or delivery of results, not least order and security, and between the perceived lack of representation and a desire to go beyond representation.

- Overall, **Skeptics** make up 25 percent of the total sample and are the larger group identified. They consist of people who have little faith in democracy, distrust referenda, and sometimes feel it is necessary to circumvent the rules. This group is on average younger, poorer, less educated, and is more likely to vote for Marine Le Pen’s far-right *Rassemblement National* party or abstain than others.
- **Critics** (13 percent) are made up of citizens who could be considered “disappointed” with democracy. They believe that democracy is not necessarily the best system. At the same time, though, they are very attached to the notion of considering citizens’ opinions, to referenda and to freedom as a value. They are distrustful of representative democracy. Worryingly, they too include more Marine Le Pen voters and abstainers than the average.



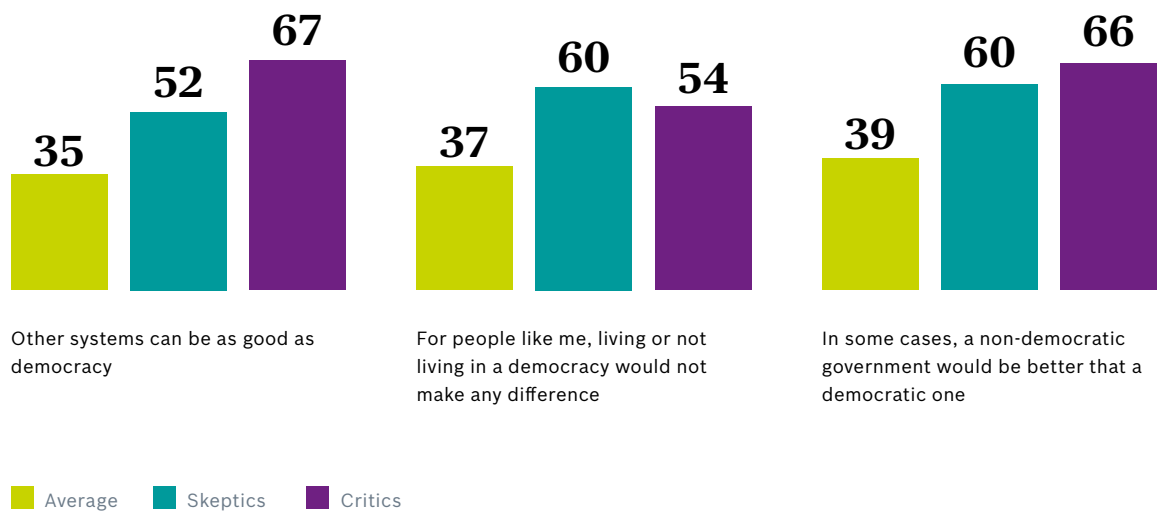
Both groups are characterized by lower overall attachment to democracy as a system: They are less likely than others to believe that “democracy is the best possible system” or to believe that democracy has a real impact on their daily lives. However, and this is a crucial point, neither seems fundamentally estranged from democratic principles and values.

A closer look at these two groups will allow us to identify possible paths to reconciliation and re-engagement. These two groups have notable differences detailed below: **While the Skeptics have clear authoritarian tendencies, the Critics want more participation and consideration of citizens.**

Figure 15:

### How Critics and Skeptics stand out from the rest

Agree in %



Questions: In general, would you say that ... ? To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
Source: More in Common (2021)

### **The Skeptics (25 percent)**

Skeptics are characterized by a tendency to judge democracy as having no impact on their lives and expect almost nothing from it because they are convinced that it cannot be effective. The crisis of political effectiveness – experienced on a personal level through stagnation or social decline – generates in them a demand for order and authority.

**“We don’t have any positive opportunities anymore. It is harder and harder to earn a living, and politicians don’t do anything to improve our lives.”**

– Quote from focus group

### ***Demographic Characteristics***

- Overall rather young
- Tend toward lower education
- Often worse off economically: 58 percent belong to lower income groups or the lower middle class (with monthly incomes of up to 2,250 euros).

### ***Personal Perspective***

Skeptics are younger on average and have more modest social backgrounds. This group is significantly more likely than others to think that “living under a democratic or non-democratic government would not make a difference” to people like them. They are much more likely to think that a non-democratic government would be preferable to a democratic one.

They also place less importance on a number of basic democratic tenets such as free and fair elections, independence of the media from political and economic interests, independence of the judiciary, and the guarantee of equal rights for all citizens regardless of their sexual orientation, gender, religion, geographic origin, or social background. They are less inclined than others to believe that democracy is the best possible regime to guarantee justice or order, to ensure the respect of individual liberties, as well as the rights of minorities, to consider the opinion of all citizens, or to reduce social inequalities between all citizens.

Their disillusionment with democracy seems to be driven by what they see as the failure of democracy to be effective, in the sense of its inability to achieve specific outcomes such as order, economic prosperity, or environmental protection. With little commitment to the democratic processes, deliberation, or pluralism, they tend to see efficiency in the concentration of power, verticality, and a form of discipline and order.

This group is thus characterized by a certain number of authoritarian temptations. For example, they are more inclined than the average to believe “the referendum is a tool that should be dis-trusted, because it subjects us to the very variable moods of opinion”, and they are less inclined to think that “the best public decisions are those taken by the representatives of the people, after debate and consultation”, whereas the office of the president of the Republic is in their eyes more legitimate and effective for this purpose (although not when it comes to the current president). Similarly, they are more likely than others to believe that “to solve the country’s problems, it is sometimes necessary to bend the rules”, even if that means disregarding the Constitution. They see the government’s consideration of political opponents as much less useful than the national average and are more favorable to a government composed of a single political party.

### **Political Positioning**

Skeptics are more likely than average to be Le Pen voters or to abstain from voting altogether. A relative majority (39 percent) report no party preference, and although too much emphasis should not be placed on the left-right axis – which is not seen as meaningful by 69 percent of respondents in our national sample – Skeptics are more likely to identify with the right (57 percent, including 12 percent who identify with the far right) than with the left (19 percent). But their interest in politics is clearly less pronounced than the rest of the identified groups. They talk less about politics with their friends and family and they also vote much less than the average.

### **Re-engaging the Skeptics**

Focus group discussions led us to the conclusion that the Skeptics will likely be the most difficult segment to re-engage, given that they are so clearly at odds with the system. They are harder to reach because they do not strongly value public and political life or participate in civic activities. Their main expectation is that democracy should allow them to live life the way they see fit, in a fairly autonomous and detached way, but with clear prospects for progress, or at the very least for stopping what they perceive as their personal downward social trajectory.

Two prominent features are paramount among the Skeptics:

- **Anger:** They feel deep resentment toward the world as it is, which feeds on experienced or feared downward social mobility and feelings of being left behind (as More in Common has documented in previous studies on France).
- **Order:** Skeptics want authority, security, and order above all. Beyond the expectation of a strong leader, they expect an orderly system, where the merits of each person are recognized and where each person has a place and a role that gives meaning to their life. That is the appeal they see, for example, in the far right.

As such, only a promise of fairly radical change in the political, economic, and social system is likely to bring them back into the public space. In addition, the expectation of order, that there are rules of the game respected by all, is coupled with an expectation of much greater effectiveness of political action. **Proving that public action can still make a difference in their daily lives seems essential.**

**“We don’t live anymore, we merely survive.  
We don’t have hobbies or free time anymore.  
Politics doesn’t change anything.”**

– Quote from focus group

In the end, Skeptics share a **feeling of incomprehension of today’s world and a need to read the world in a way that gives both meaning and perspectives for a better life.** This is partly why conspiracy myths are so prevalent in France. Skeptics are also vulnerable to us-versus-them narratives that provide simple explanations for the threats around them by pointing fingers at minorities or the elites, for example.

**To re-engage the Skeptics, one must therefore try to break the cycle of suspicion** and involve them in a narrative that speaks to them and restores their faith in their future by providing them with an understanding of the world and perspectives for personal development – but without resorting to lofty values and principles of which they have grown weary and suspicious.

### **The Critics (13 percent)**

Critics share a disillusionment about democracy with Skeptics, but they draw a different conclusion: They focus on asking for more horizontality, more deliberation, more consideration by the “elites” for the citizens. They have a similar electoral profile overall to Skeptics – with a tendency to abstain or to vote for Marine Le Pen – and make the same observation about the inability of the political “system” to change their lives.

**“I haven’t voted for more than 25 years. Sarkozy showed in 2005 that voting is useless, because in the end the elites proceed as they like.”**

– Quote from focus group

### ***Demographic Characteristics***

- Balanced age profile
- Educational profiles evenly distributed
- Balanced income distribution, all strata represented

### ***Personal Outlook***

As with the Skeptics, their interest in politics is quite low relative to the rest of the population. They are nevertheless much more likely to talk about politics with their friends and family than the Skeptics, **which indicates that their disinterest is more a form of disappointment than real detachment**. They are less inclined than the average to believe that democracy would be the best regime and tend to hold the view that for people like them, “living under a democratic regime or not would not make any difference”.

**The Critics’ disaffection with both the process of representative democracy and its outcomes** is rooted in a deep suspicion of the elites and core demands for more direct, consultative, and horizontal forms of democracy. They seem to question the efficiency of representative democracy led by the elites to deliver the “republican promise”. They do not see democracy in its current form as being the best system for promoting the economic development of the country or ensuring that the rights of minorities are respected, guaranteeing justice, individual freedoms, and public order, or protecting the environment and biodiversity.

Based on their observation that citizens are among the most effective actors in bringing about change in society, but that their voices are not heard enough, they are among the most inclined to expect the government “to take into account as many citizens as possible”. Critics believe that in a major crisis, “it is better to take time to consult and discuss with citizens before making decisions and taking action”. They are suspicious of decisions made by experts and scientists, as well as by the president alone, and are less inclined than others to believe that after an election, all voters should rally behind the winner. **Furthermore, they are the most likely to think that “the best public decisions are those made directly by the people, for example by referendum”**, and they place substantial value on being able to oppose the government and demonstrate to draw attention to their disagreement.

They are skeptical of the idea that, in a crisis, public authorities should be given a free hand to manage an emergency without wasting time on consultation and discussion. However, they are the most willing to consider that “in some cases, an undemocratic government would be preferable to a democratic one” – a response that probably primarily reflects their dissatisfaction with the current system rather than a real desire for an alternative form of government.

This apparent contradiction can be explained as follows: The democratic political system is clearly incapable – in their eyes – of taking into account the opinions of its citizens. The Critics’ demand for more deliberation and more consideration, combined with their disillusionment with the existing system, leads them to seek a different political system, one that can take everyone’s opinion into account.

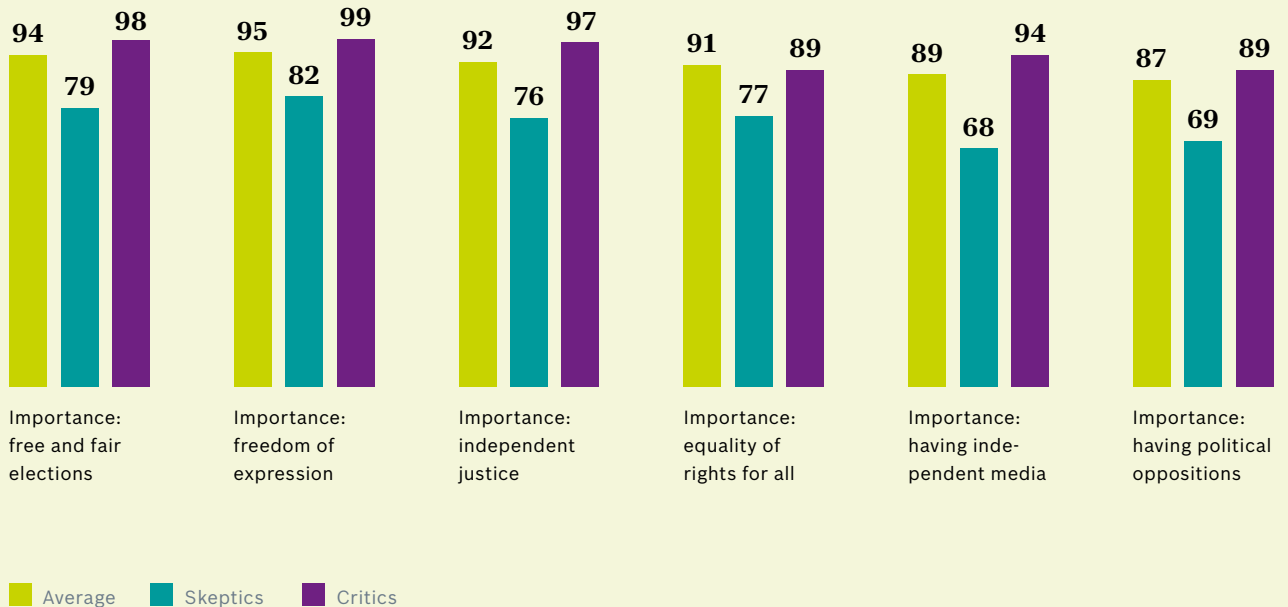
**Political Positioning**

Critics are more likely than average to be Marine Le Pen voters or abstainers. A relative majority (44 percent) report no party preference, but Critics are more likely to identify with the right (40 percent, including 16 percent who identify with the far right) than with the left (31 percent, including 6 percent who identify with the far left).

**Figure 16:**

**Differences between the Skeptics and the Critics**

Numbers in %



Question: Is each of the following an important condition for a well-functioning democracy? Source: More in Common (2021)

Figure 17:

## Confidence in democracy

Critics visibly disenchanted – more so than Skeptics

### Democracy is the best regime possible to ...

Agree in %



Question: In your opinion, is democracy the best possible regime to ... ? Source: More in Common (2021)

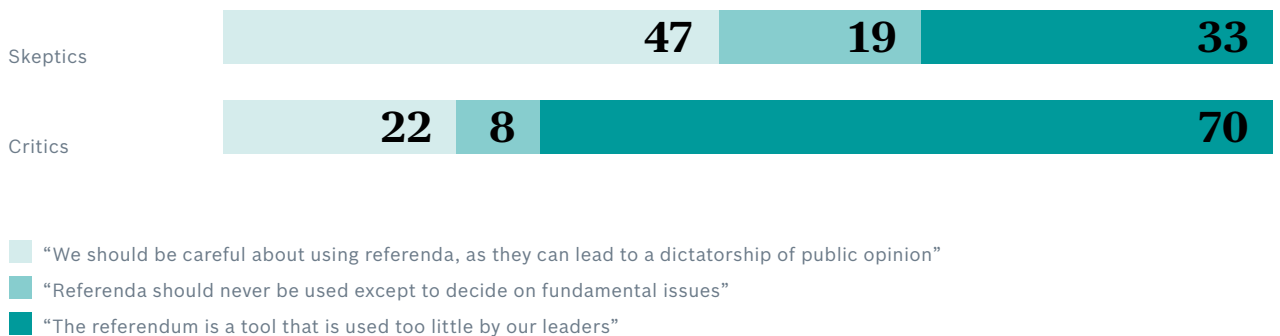
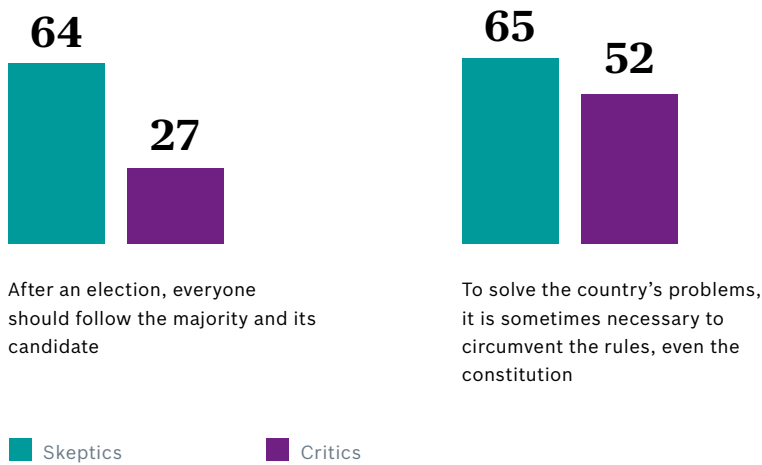
Figure 18:

## Skeptics more prone to authoritarian thinking than Critics

Agree in %

It is better to give free reign to the authorities in times of crisis, even if it means they do not take time for discussion and deliberation

It is better to take the time to consult and discuss with citizens before making decisions and taking action



- “We should be careful about using referenda, as they can lead to a dictatorship of public opinion”
- “Referenda should never be used except to decide on fundamental issues”
- “The referendum is a tool that is used too little by our leaders”

Questions: Which of the following statements do you agree with? To decide on important issues for the future of the country ...  
 Source: More in Common (2021). Please note: Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

**“They even stole our right to vote. We voted in 2005, but they did as they wanted. The right to vote doesn’t exist anymore.”**

– Quote from focus group

Critics assign great value to considering and listening to the voices of citizens – for example, through referenda or citizen assemblies. **Efficiency in decision-making is less important to this segment than the process of decision-making.**

To re-engage the Critics, emphasis should be placed on the need for a “real” democracy, a return to the basics of a democracy that is now perceived as having gone astray. This could be done by recruiting elected officials who look and sound less like detached elites and more like the Critics themselves. Better tracking of campaign commitments, decisions and their implementation – for example, by using online tools – could also go a long way toward reassuring Critics. Any step that places citizens more at the heart of decision-making, such as at the local level, would be well received by the Critics.

Finally, in response to their concerns and criticisms, freedom of expression as well as freedom of protest should be valued more highly, and the historical and current role those freedoms have played in peacefully opposing the political system and achieving progress should be celebrated.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

**“How do you expect anyone to govern a country where there are 258 types of cheese?”**

– Charles de Gaulle

France is marked by deep democratic disillusionment based above all on a perceived crisis of outcomes. Many people see the results of this system as inadequate. That has given new life to France’s old tensions between vertical and horizontal expressions of power and rekindled old authoritarian temptations. About a third of French women and men seem to have given up on democracy, but they are not yet willing to consider alternatives. Our study shows that large swathes of French people feel they are not being listened to and that they are not given much consideration by their peers and by the current system. They demand more empathy, a considerate ear to listen to their woes, and a more active role in decisions that impact their lives.



**The two groups we have studied – the Critics and Skeptics of French democracy – embody, in a way, the ambivalence that characterizes the relationship of the French people to their political system.** While these groups are different – Skeptics have an authoritarian bent – the stakes in re-engaging them are equally high. With elections looming in 2022, and given the current volatile political context in which one in ten French people see violence as a legitimate path to achieving deep change, there is some urgency to finding ways of addressing democratic disenchantment in France.

Of particular concern are voting intentions for so-called populist parties on both the far left and the far right. **In this respect, the ability of Marine Le Pen’s party to appeal both to the Critics, with their demands for direct democracy, and to the more authoritarian Skeptics is particularly worrying.** This comes alongside increasingly high levels of abstention and the emergence of new types of social movements that challenge the very principle of representative democracy and the role of traditional intermediary bodies such as unions or volunteer groups that have been the glue of social cohesion in France for so long. **Against this backdrop, it is urgent to understand and overcome the disengagement and disillusionment that affect these segments** if France is to maintain social harmony and political stability while preserving its ability to carry out important reforms and be governed peacefully, especially in times of crisis. The good news is that neither of these segments, despite their deep disillusionment, can be seen as “anti-democratic”, so there is still time to act.

As noted above, Critics will be easier to re-engage in the democratic process **if we can find ways of reassuring them that their voice matters and that they have a say in both individual and collective decisions.** Conversations with Critics in the context of the study give us confidence that the following measures would go a long way toward re-engaging them in the democratic process:

- **Lowering the legal requirements to trigger popular referenda.** Currently, the legal requirement for citizens’ initiatives – one-fifth of parliament *and* 10 percent of the total French electorate – is unattainable. Making referenda more accessible would be a good way of giving Critics a say on what issues shape the political agenda and the public conversation.
- **Recognizing blank votes** that are currently not counted when tallying the results of elections may be seen as a way of recognizing disagreement and dissent as part of the democratic process.
- **Allowing elected officials to hold both a national office *and* a local office** while limiting pay and privileges. The possibility to be, for example, a member of the national parliament and a mayor was revoked a few years ago, but this could well have been a mistake, as it may be leading to a growing disconnection between national representatives and the realities experienced locally.
- **Citizen assemblies or conventions should be used, sparingly, at all levels of government.** They are a good way of familiarizing randomly selected ordinary citizens with political decision-making, but only on the condition that the process is credible and that decisions are implemented.
- **All measures, particularly at the local level, that can restore a sense of agency in people** will go a long way toward changing their view of democracy as a whole. This is being done effectively through, for example, participatory budgeting or recycling initiatives.
- **Strengthening and highlighting the independence of the judiciary** is especially important to the Critics. In this respect, the way high-profile cases will be handled in years to come is significant.
- In a similar vein, **greater transparency for civil servants’ salaries or large public contracts** could be helpful. This information is generally in the public domain but not easily available.
- Given their attachment to the process of democracy, **reinforcing civics education and involving parents of school-age children** would appeal to Critics.

Skeptics feel that they can live “without” democracy, mainly because of the lack of impact on their everyday lives. **To ward off Skeptics’ authoritarian temptation, it will be necessary to rely more on several concrete achievements which they can clearly attribute to the democratic process.** These measures might be worth considering:

- Making the **French state more effective and accessible** is key to this segment. The task is immense, of course, but making tangible interactions with the state – like accessing welfare or family benefits – more effective and understandable would considerably lower Skeptics’ anger toward the system. It can be done, as the reform of the French postal system has shown.
- Lofty rhetoric and appeals to values – frequent features of French political life and tradition – are likely to backfire with the Skeptics. **More down-to-earth, outcome-focused communications and framing are important.**
- Highlighting stories of meritocratic success and upward social mobility, for example, in the media, would help disarm anger at the elites.
- **Engaging media companies and social media platforms** on the question of polarization and the general aggressive tone of public debate in France. The distorting mirror that this tone holds up to French citizens on key issues accentuates fears and shrinks the possibility of finding common ground, lending more credence to toxic and divisive narratives.
- Setting up an easily accessible **online tool to allow citizens to track how a law is being implemented.** A major source of frustration is that campaign speeches, and even many laws, never seem to impact people’s everyday lives. Delays, bureaucratic reticence, and political changes mean that most laws never get ratified or implemented. Changing that would go a long way toward bolstering the credibility of the democratic process and demonstrating how it has tangible impacts on people’s lives.
- **Clarifying administrative** responsibilities also appears to be necessary. Today, the centralized state, the regions, the départements, and the local authority amount to a bureaucratic *mille-feuilles* that leads to confusion, frustration, and a sense of lacking accountability. Here, too, **civics education** can make a difference.
- Finding new ways of **addressing conspiracy myths** and the very nature of online speech will be important for this group.

**Poland:  
A Stress Test  
for Democracy**



# Poland: A Stress Test for Democracy

Since the dual victory of the Law and Justice party (PiS) in 2015, when Andrzej Duda was elected president and the nationalist-conservatives won an absolute majority in both chambers of parliament, Poland has been the focus of a global debate over populism and the resilience of liberal democracy. Shortly after the election, the party, under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński, began dismantling the country's system of checks and balances to remove all limitations to executive power. The result has been a tough test for a democratic order that is relatively young when compared to the democracies of Western Europe.

The virtual disempowerment of the constitutional court, in particular, marked the incapacitation of a central control institution of the system built up after 1989. Numerous additional steps followed, **leading the European Commission in December 2017 to identify serious risks of infringement on the rule of law** and, for the first time, to initiate proceedings in accordance with Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union. "Over a period of two years," the European Commission wrote in its justification for opening the proceedings, "the Polish authorities have adopted more than 13 laws affecting the entire structure of the justice system in Poland, impacting the Constitutional Tribunal, Supreme Court, ordinary courts, National Council for the Judiciary, prosecution service and National School of Judiciary. The common pattern is that the executive and legislative branches have been systematically enabled to politically interfere in the composition, powers, administration and functioning of the judicial branch."<sup>16</sup>

This head-on infringement of rule-of-law principles and the separation of powers has also been reflected in the evaluations of Polish democracy performed by international organizations that monitor democracies around the world. Once seen as a model of democratic transformation, the country has rapidly plunged in several democracy rankings and has become an example of the advance of right-wing populism and the relapse into authoritarian and illiberal models of governance. Freedom House has identified a continual deconsolidation of democracy in Poland since 2015. In its most recent "Nations in Transit" report, which focuses on the democratic developments of post-communist nations, **Poland is categorized as a "semi-consolidated democracy"**.<sup>17</sup> The V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg has reached a similar conclusion and has demoted the country from a "liberal democracy" to an "electoral democracy". The institute's most recent report identifies Poland as the country in which liberal democracy has declined the fastest in the world in the last 10 years.<sup>18</sup>

Even though the authoritarian style of governing, the mockery of liberal-democratic norms, and the concurrent curtailment of fundamental rights have repeatedly triggered waves of protest in the country, the Law and Justice Party was able to repeat its electoral success in 2019 and again attain an absolute majority in the Sejm, the lower house of parliament. Given the reelection of President Andrzej Duda, the narrow loss of control of the Senate in that election represented only a minor correction. **Paradoxically, that has given the government, which has repeatedly been criticized for violating democratic principles, the ability to claim democratic legitimacy from the electorate.**

The validation of a government that violates rule-of-law principles does not just raise questions about the state of Polish democracy at the institutional – objective – level. More importantly, the subjective, cultural-political components of democratic reality in the country must be more closely examined. Are the most recent election results the expression of an acute lack of trust in liberal democracy? How deeply are democratic values rooted in Polish society? Is a profound renunciation of fundamental liberal-democratic principles in favor of illiberal patterns really discernible? Or are we dealing with a broadly felt indifference to democracy in general and liberal democracy in particular?

<sup>16</sup> European Commission (2017): Rule of Law: European Commission acts to defend judicial independence in Poland. Press release, December 20, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Freedom House (2020): Nations in Transit 2020 – Dropping the Democratic Façade.

<sup>18</sup> Alizada, N. et al. (2021): Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

These issues can all be combined into a single, fundamental question. **What does “democratic” really mean? This is not an abstract question, but rather one that Polish society is currently wrestling with.** Given the revolutionary zeal with which PiS has sought to modify state institutions, and the societal reactions those efforts have triggered, democracy itself has become a political focus for the first time since 1989.

### **How Democracy Is Seen in Poland: Between Consensus and Conflict**

**19** In collaboration with KANTAR, More in Common surveyed around 2,000 adults in Poland in February 2021 about their attitudes around democracy and politics, as well as their own political and lifestyle participation. We then conducted qualitative focus groups in March 2021.

Almost all Poles agree on one point: They believe that democracy is the best form of government.<sup>19</sup> That says nothing, of course, about their precise understanding of democracy, but support for democracy as such is clear: some 87 percent of Poles prefer it over other forms of government. Women, at 89 percent, are slightly more supportive of democracy than men, at 85 percent. The percentage of people who say it is important to them to live in a democratically governed country is even higher, at 91 percent.

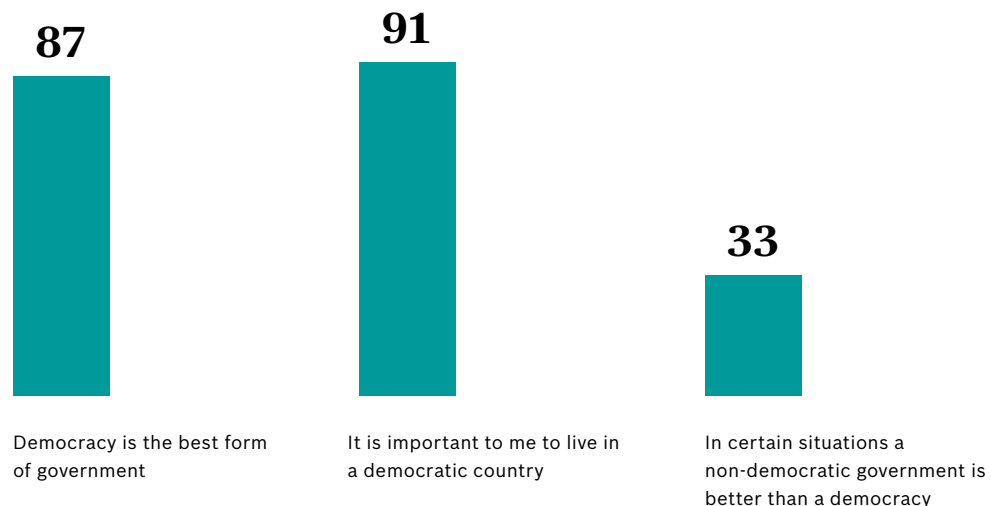
Self-declared supporters of alternative forms of government are, at 13 percent, a relatively small minority. Young people are represented disproportionately among them, with fully 21 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 29 saying they do not believe democracy is the best form of government. Among people 50 years old and older, this value is considerably below 10 percent. Younger members of society are also likelier to be more tepid in their support for democracy, with only 19 percent of people aged 29 or below reporting the maximal dedication to democracy, whereas the average for all age groups is 34 percent.

**Figure 19:**

### **Acceptance of democracy**

Most Poles are in favor of democracy

Agree in %



Questions: Do you agree with the statement that democracy is the best form of government? How important is it to you to live in a democratic country? Do you think there are situations in which another form of government is better than a democracy? Source: More in Common (2021)

Additionally, people who view their own financial situations as poor and see themselves as being toward the bottom of the social ladder tend to hold more skeptical views of democracy. Twenty-three percent of respondents who believe they have a low social standing believe other forms of government are superior. Among those who see themselves at the top, that value is just 5 percent. As we will see, the nexus between material aspects and democracy will play a role in the further course of this study.

The generally positive image given off by the declarative views of democracy is further tarnished by the – in comparison with Germany, for example – relatively high share of people (33 percent) who are convinced that there are situations in which a non-democratic form of government is better than a democratic one. Nevertheless, only 3 percent of respondents say they “absolutely agree” with this statement. That seems to indicate that even if the openly anti-democratic fringe is part of the tapestry of Polish politics, it does not have a chance of putting down deep roots in the broader population.

**Longitudinal data also shows that Polish society is not in the process of turning its back on democracy.** On the contrary: The state-run public opinion institute CBOS has been asking Poles since 1992 if they agree with the statement that democracy is preferable to all other forms of government. The data gathered since 2015 reflect the highest level of agreement with that sentiment ever recorded – and a level much higher than the average seen in preceding years.<sup>20</sup>

### **Clear Acceptance of Democratic Principles**

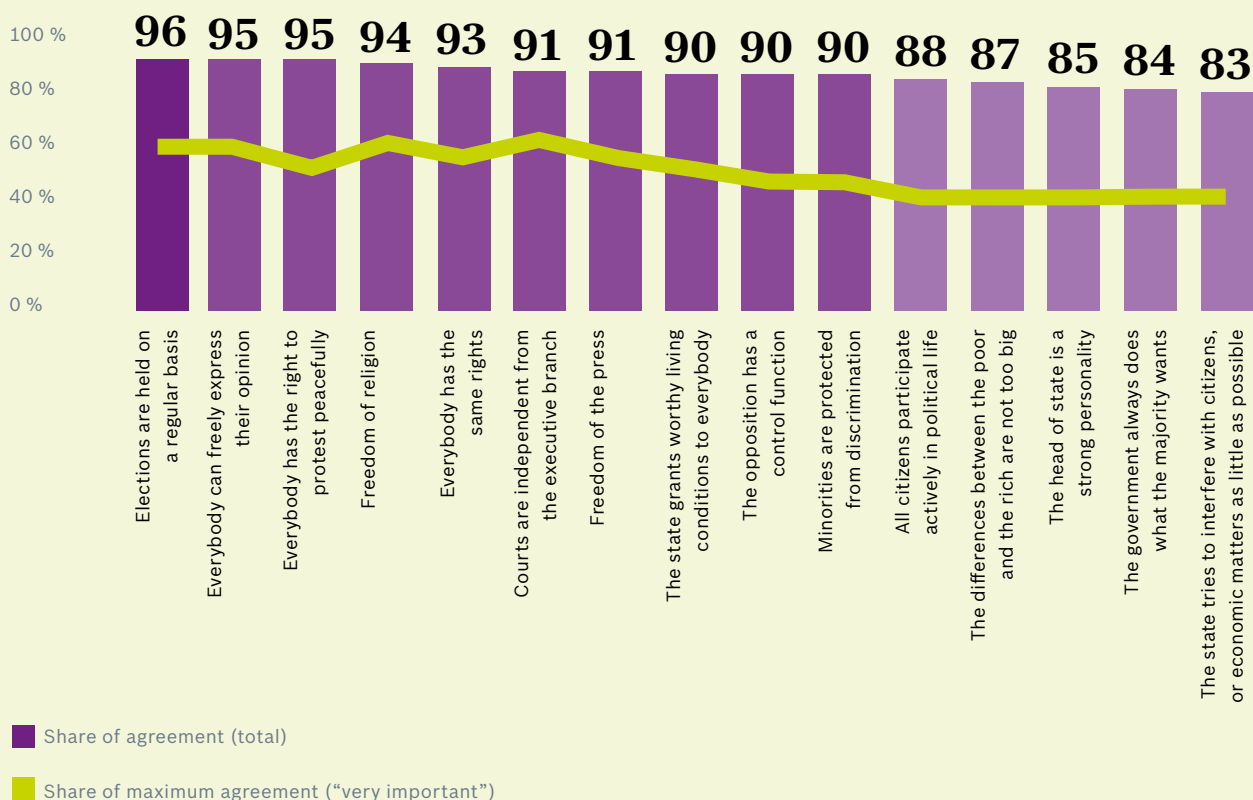
What exactly do Poles mean by “democracy”, that abstract term which enjoys such widespread support? To find an answer, we asked respondents to rate on a scale from 1 to 6 which principles they believe are necessary for a democracy to be a democracy. They were then asked, again on a scale from 1 to 6, to rate a number of antithetical statements about democracy in accordance with their personal views.

<sup>20</sup> Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej (2020): Polacy o demokracji. Komunikat z badań, Nr. 95/2020.

Figure 20:

## What is important about democracy for you personally?

Agree in %



Question: What is important about democracy for you personally? Source: More in Common (2021)

The goal was to establish a view beyond simple nominal agreement with certain principles. The results of our survey show that there is a broad consensus in Polish society on the key characteristics of democracy, but not necessarily on how these characteristics should be implemented in practice, and thus how democracy should be actually lived.

The principles Poles believe are essential to democracy include classical liberal values like freedom of expression (average value: 5.4) and the right to hold demonstrations (5.2), the right to free and fair elections (5.4), freedom of religion (5.4), separation of powers (5.3), freedom of the press (5.2), the equality of all people before the law (5.2), and the protection of minorities from discrimination (5.0). This fundamentally democratic stance is also evident in the rejection of dictatorial regimes as possible role models. Only 17 percent of respondents believe that there is anything to learn from leaders like Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko, who rule with an iron fist. Only 4 percent are maximally convinced that something can be learned from such leaders. Eighty-three percent, by contrast, believe that dictators set no example at all. This lends credence to the impression that Poles are immune to openly formulated autocratic alternatives.

A large majority of Poles also agree with the idea that “democracies need democrats”. Eighty-eight percent of those surveyed believe that all citizens of a democracy must take part in political life (4.9). An overwhelming majority of 84 percent also reject the idea that politics should be left exclusively to politicians in a democracy and that it is sufficient for “normal people” to merely cast their ballots every few years. On the contrary, citizens should be continually politically engaged, also between elections. When these values are compared with the fact that 76 percent of respondents believe that a democratically elected government can be undemocratic if it turns its back on certain democratic values, it appears that most Poles are dedicated to the imperative of political vigilance.

The role of political guardian, however, is not just reserved for the citizens themselves, but also for the parliamentary opposition. Ninety percent of respondents believe the right of the opposition to criticize the government is one of the fundamental principles of democracy (5.0). In line with this, 82 percent believe that the opposition should constantly keep an eye on the government and present its own ideas.

The gathered data also clearly show that when it comes to defining democracy, many people go beyond merely its theoretical perfection and societal involvement but are also concerned about its effectiveness in their daily lives and about systemic performance. As such, there is a broad expectation that a democratic state guarantees dignified living conditions for its citizens (5.1) and ensures that the gap between rich and poor does not grow too wide (4.9). Social components, in other words, are also seen as important. This became clearer in our focus groups, with primarily Nordic countries being identified as examples of democratic countries. The fact that people are not willing to simply issue democracy a blank check is demonstrated by **44 percent of Poles saying that democracy is only worthwhile if it produces positive results for the populace**. For many people, in other words, democracy is not an end in itself, but a means to an end.

**“Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, tolerance of other religious convictions and nationalities. Universal and free access to education and health care. I associate a lot of things with democracy.”**

– Quote from focus group

This output orientation, however, is not an anti-democratic view. Numerous democracy researchers emphasize that the legitimacy of a democracy cannot be exclusively underpinned by its superior values relative to other systems or by the sophistication of its order based on freedom and the rule of law. A democracy must constantly reproduce its legitimacy through good political results, proving to citizens its effectiveness and its superiority to other systems. This theoretical assumption is confirmed by our survey. That does not mean, however, that poor political results will automatically result in numerous Poles turning their backs on democracy. A democracy draws its legitimacy from numerous sources. Still, shifts within the democratic system are conceivable – for example, a turn away from a liberal to an illiberal form if the former is seen to have “failed”.



**21** Blaydes, L., Grimmer, J. (2019): Political Cultures: measuring values heterogeneity. Political Science Research and Methods 1–9.

### The Difficult Search for Compromise Despite Significant Commonalities

A further component of our survey focused on attitudes toward the formation of democratic consensus. This question is particularly important because, as shown by the study “Political Cultures: Measuring Values Heterogeneity”, conducted by Lisa Blaydes and Justin Grimmer of Stanford University, only Romania is home to greater values heterogeneity than Poland.<sup>21</sup> While the data we gathered on fundamental views of democracy revealed neither significant values heterogeneity nor the much-discussed radical polarization of Polish society, it is nevertheless important to explore whether competing concepts of values lead to discord when it comes to shaping differing opinions into a “popular will”.

Many Poles are familiar with the feeling of living in a fragmented society. Fully 37 percent of survey respondents believe not just that they have different political priorities than supporters of other parties, but also that they hold different fundamental values. On the other hand, 63 percent are convinced that all Poles are dedicated to the same fundamental values despite holding different political views. The people of Poland do not seem particularly bothered by this heterogeneity. Only 14 percents of respondents believe that it is important for the good of the nation that everyone hold the same opinion.

**Figure 21:**

## Expectations toward democracy

### Broad consensus

Agreement to each statement in %

	86	14	
For the sake of our country, it is important that we learn to live with each other despite our different opinions			For the sake of our country, it is important that everybody has the same opinion
In a democracy, the rights of minorities should be respected even if the majority has a different opinion	85	15	In a democracy minorities should only have as many rights as the majority thinks is right
Politics can not be left to politicians alone; citizens should always engage in politics	84	16	It is enough if politicians take care of politics and citizens vote every few years
Dictators like Vladimir Putin or Alexander Lukaschenko should never be role models	83	17	We can learn a lot from leaders who govern with a firm hand, like Vladimir Putin or Alexander Lukaschenko
The opposition should keep an eye on the government and propose their own ideas	82	18	The opposition is supposed to let the winner of the election govern the country and not interfere
The winning party should look for compromises that satisfy as many people as possible, even if that means disappointing some of its supporters	77	23	The winning party should focus on implementing its program so that it fulfills the promises it has made to its supporters, even if this means that many others are dissatisfied
Even an elected government can still be undemocratic if it violates democratic values	76	24	Every elected government is automatically democratic
The government should not restrict people's freedoms, even if that leads to less safety	74	26	In order to guarantee the safety of citizens, the government should have the right to restrict people's freedoms

## Majoritary consensus

Politicians should always follow the law, even if that means they can not keep all their electoral promises

68

32

Politicians do not have to follow the law all the time; it is more important to keep electoral promises

We differ from the voters of other parties in our political priorities, but we profess roughly the same basic values

63

37

We differ from voters of other parties not only in our political priorities, but also in our core values

## Dissent

Democracy is a good thing, even if its results are sometimes not satisfactory for citizens

56

44

Democracy is only a good thing if it brings good results for the people

In a democracy, everyone should be able to express their opinion, even if someone else might feel hurt

52

48

In a democracy, hate speech should be fought, even at the cost of restricting freedom of expression

Politics is about reconciling different opinions and interests

50

50

Politics is first and foremost about enforcing the will of the majority

Question: Which of the following statements regarding democracy and politics do you agree with more?

Source: More in Common (2021)

Yet views regarding how this plurality should be addressed in the process of political decision-making are much more varied. To be sure, 77 percent of Poles believe that the party that wins an election should search for compromises that satisfy the greatest possible number of people, even at the risk of disappointing some of its supporters. But when push comes to shove, exactly half of the Polish populace believes that the primary function of politics should be to push through the will of the majority. The other half supports a discursive approach and believes that the task of politics is to bring together divergent opinions and interests. **This shows that in critical instances, the differing conceptions regarding the necessity of compromise in the process of political decision-making could lead to tensions.** These tensions could manifest themselves in people's fundamental views of a government's actions and efficiency just as they could in their assessment of a certain style of governance or even in the respect for parliamentary rules.

All of these aspects – adherence to principles, expectations of democracy, approaches to the process of political decision-making – are reflected in the question as to whether political policymakers should always obey the law or whether they should instead prioritize the implementation of their political plans. A solid majority of 68 percent believe that politicians must act within the legal framework and accept that they may therefore not be able to fulfil all campaign promises. Thirty-nine percent agree fervently with this principle. Still, at 32 percent, the share of those who believe it is more important for politicians to fulfill their campaign promises is not insignificant.

When asked differently, fully 47 percent of respondents agree with the statement that for the good of the country, a strong leader who is willing to break existing rules is sometimes necessary. **Particularly in situations of crisis, there is a greater willingness to sacrifice rule-of-law principles and procedural rules in favor of concrete political results and decisive political leadership.** Even absent exceptional circumstances, however, the desire for charismatic political leadership is widespread in the Polish populace. A clear majority of 85 percent would like to see a strong personality at the helm of the democratic state (4.8). Even in “normal times”, they believe democracy should have a recognizable face.

In summary, despite important disagreements on the conceptual level, Poles hold a relatively unified view of what constitutes a democracy. Most Poles are dedicated to the principles of liberal democracy and link them with democracy itself. Two aspects in particular stand out, however, which point to an increased potential for tension. On the one hand, there is the question to which degree frustration or satisfaction with tangible political outcomes influence views of democracy. On the other is the degree of willingness to compromise and the ability to accept competing views in the process of political decision-making.

### **Democracy in Practice: Mobilization and Polarization**

The internalization of democratic values is merely one side of the coin. Actual attitudes toward a democracy are not merely comprised of abstract ideas and concepts. Rather, they are formed by the constant interaction with political realities within which these ideas are confronted with the existing, real-life democracy. In the case of Poland, it is particularly important to look closely at the views of political and democratic realities, because in recent years, this has been the focus of significant conflict.

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that interest in politics among the Polish populace is high. Sixty-nine percent of those surveyed report being interested in politics. A similar share of 70 percent regularly follow political news. This high interest has also been reflected in sharply rising electoral turnout in recent years.

**Figure 22:**

## **Voter turnout in Poland**

Numbers in %	<u>Voter turnout</u>	<u>Change compared to last election</u>
Regional election 2018	<b>54.9</b>	<b>+7.5</b>
EU election 2019	<b>45.7</b>	<b>+21.9</b>
Parliamentary election 2019	<b>61.7</b>	<b>+10.8</b>
Presidential election 2020 (1st round)	<b>64.1</b>	<b>+15.1</b>
Presidential election 2020 (2nd round)	<b>68.2</b>	<b>+12.9</b>

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (State Election Commission)

The fact that 17 percent of survey respondents say they participated in a street protest within the last year also indicates a high degree of sociopolitical mobilization. That would mean that over 5 million Polish adults took part in a demonstration. Given the fact that in late October, at the peak of the so-called Women's Strike triggered by the tightening of Poland's already restrictive abortion laws, only around 430,000 people took part in over 400 protests across the country, this number should be approached with caution and seen more as an indicator of social unrest.<sup>22</sup>

And what about day-to-day engagement with political issues beyond specific events? For just over half of Poles, merely staying abreast of the political news is not enough; they also seek out political exchange with others. Fifty-three percent of survey respondents say they enjoy discussing politics and do so frequently. Nevertheless, it would be an overstatement to claim the existence of a pronounced culture of open discussion in the country. Understandably, political discussions tend to take place mostly in more familiar surroundings and not in public. A clear majority of 76 percent of respondents report having discussed political issues with family or friends at least once in the last year. Beyond private contexts, social media platforms are the most popular venues for political exchange. Twenty-eight percent of respondents say they have commented on political issues on such channels within the last year.

At the same time, almost a third of respondents (31 percent) say that their closest circle does not include anyone with "completely different political views". Fifty-one percent of Poles, meanwhile, say they have limited their contact with some friends or family members, or refrain from discussing politics with them, in order to avoid conflict. Yet it is precisely these types of interactions that provide Poles the opportunity to speak with people holding differing political views. Thirty-seven percent of those surveyed say they have family members who hold completely different political views, whereas that is more rarely the case among acquaintances (30 percent), friends (15 percent), and partners (8 percent). It becomes clear, then, that politics both mobilizes and divides Poles.

**22** A survey also conducted by KANTAR in November 2020 came to similar conclusions. At that time, 13 percent of respondents said they had taken part in the Women's Strike.

**"I am a bit reserved at family gatherings or in other groups when I know that someone is present who holds views different from my own and I try to avoid mentioning such issues so as to avoid uncomfortable situations."**

– Quote from focus group

### **Willingness to Live in a Pluralistic Society: Missing**

Yet, to ensure social cohesion in a pluralistic society, it is essential that members of that society tolerate differences of opinion. This is a view shared by 86 percent of Poles, who are convinced that it is important for the good of the country to be able to live together despite holding competing views. As we have seen, however, there are contradicting notions in Polish society of how those differences should be approached. As such, we wanted to find out whether and how these notions are expressed in political reality. The collected data suggests a deeply divided society that has a hard time accepting compromise and has limited tolerance for those who hold different views.

**Fully 40 percent of Poles believe that people who hold different views than their own are acting in ways disadvantageous to Poland.** Similarly, majorities among individual party electorates mutually do not feel respect for each other. Asked whether supporters of different parties – based solely on their political views – deserve respect, only supporters of Polska 2050, the movement recently founded by Szymon Hołownia, a political newcomer and a candidate for president in the 2020 election, produced more positive than negative answers.

The previously discussed negative view of politicians intensifies these attitudes and puts an even greater strain on the mistrustful relationship between politics and citizens. Two-thirds of those surveyed reject the idea that despite differences of opinion, most politicians could be described as patriots who have the good of Poland at heart. Similarly, a clear majority of 60 percent also believe that the Sejm includes politicians who pursue foreign interests rather than those of Poland.

**Poland, it becomes apparent, is home to deep distrust and strong mutual antipathy between those holding competing political views.** As such, our survey has confirmed the findings of a recently published survey by Paulina Górka of the University of Warsaw, which found that in extreme cases, the mutual animosity turns into dehumanization of the other.<sup>23</sup> **As such, it is even more regrettable that – as we found – half of Poles seek to avoid personal debates with those holding contradictory political views.** In doing so, many Poles may unknowingly be exacerbating the problem. After all, contact with those who think differently is essential for dismantling preconceived notions.

<sup>23</sup> Górka, P. (2019): Polaryzacja polityczna w Polsce. Jak bardzo jesteśmy podzieleni?

It is nevertheless important to emphasize that the deep divisions are not seen on the level of fundamental views of democracy, but on the level of political party allegiance.

### **A Non-Representative Democracy**

We have already seen that Poles are interested in politics, even if in some cases they do not live up to their own ideas of what it means to be an active citizen. But what does it look like in reverse? Do Poles have the feeling that politicians are interested in their views and look after their interests?

The results of our survey paint a dark picture. Only 24 percent of Poles believe that politicians care what the people think. Just under half of those surveyed (47 percent) agree strongly with the statement that most politicians are concerned first and foremost with their own private interests and not with the common welfare. In addition to broadly held negative views of politicians and the feeling of alienation from the political elite, our data also hints at an additional representational deficit in the relationship between citizens and the political parties. An absolute majority of 55 percent of those surveyed do not believe their views are well represented by any of the existing political parties. That means that on election day, many Poles do not vote out of conviction, but instead cast their ballot for the lesser evil.

Figure 23:

## Statements on politics in Poland

Agree in %

Most politicians primarily take care of their private interests

79

Most politicians do not care what people like me think

76

The Polish state only serves certain groups of influence

65

There are politicians in the Sejm who do not represent Polish but rather foreign interests

60

Among the existing parties there is a party that represents my interests

45

As a citizen, I can influence what happens in this country

34

I have never experienced contempt for people like me by politicians

26

Questions: Please mark on a scale from 1 to 6 which of the following statements is closer to you (pairs of opposites in each case). Please mark which statement applies to you (pairs of opposites in each case). Do you agree with the following statements? Source: More in Common (2021)

From the perspective of the political classes, that is a depressing verdict showing long-term loss of trust in the entire system. Even though political power in a democracy is to be held by the people, a large share of the Polish population feels rather disempowered. **Only a third feel that they have an influence over what happens in the country. Less than a tenth strongly believe so.** Many people in Poland feel that existing democracy does not offer the civic possibilities it is meant to.

Party preferences play a central role in the question as to whether respondents feel they have a say. **Only among supporters of the governing Law and Justice party does a majority believe that their voice is actually heard by political leaders** (51 percent versus 21 percent, who believe the opposite). Among supporters of opposition parties, depending on the party, a plurality or an absolute majority feels like they have no political influence. At the same time, regular voters – those who have participated in at least three of the last four elections – strongly value the opportunity to influence political occurrences by casting their ballots. On a scale of 1 to 6, fully 65 percent of this cohort choose the highest value.

**Actually casting their ballots, it seems, is what counts – and can pull citizens out of resignation.** The previously mentioned high levels of voter turnout confirm this impression. The focus on elections and the ensuing frustrations and sense of impotence on the losing side also shows, however, that neither the Polish society nor the political elites have developed effective “reconciliation mechanisms” to overcome comparatively minor rifts. The Polish political system very strongly adheres to the principle of “winner takes all”, or at least is perceived as such. It provides supporters of opposition parties insufficient opportunities to feel as though they are part of political life in between elections.

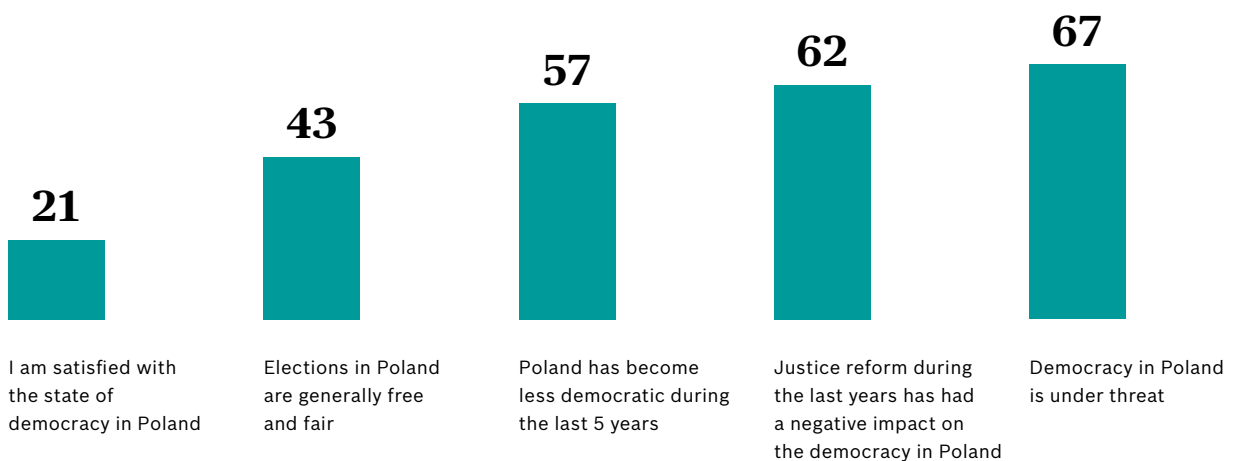
### **Concern for Democracy – Depends on the Party**

Given this in part scathing report card that Poles give to their democracy, it is not surprising that 59 percent of those surveyed are dissatisfied with the state of democracy in Poland. Only 21 percent hold the opposite view. Particularly against the background of rising populism and the erosion of liberal-democratic procedural rules, concern for democracy is also high. Sixty-seven percent of those surveyed believe it is currently in danger.

**Figure 24:**

## **Assessment of democratic reality**

Agree in %



Questions: Are you satisfied with the state of democracy in Poland? In your opinion, are the elections in Poland generally free and fair? Has Poland become more or less democratic in the last 5 years? Please indicate how much the reform of justice, including the constitutional tribunal and supreme court, has influenced or influences democracy in Poland. Is democracy in Poland under threat?  
Source: More in Common (2021)

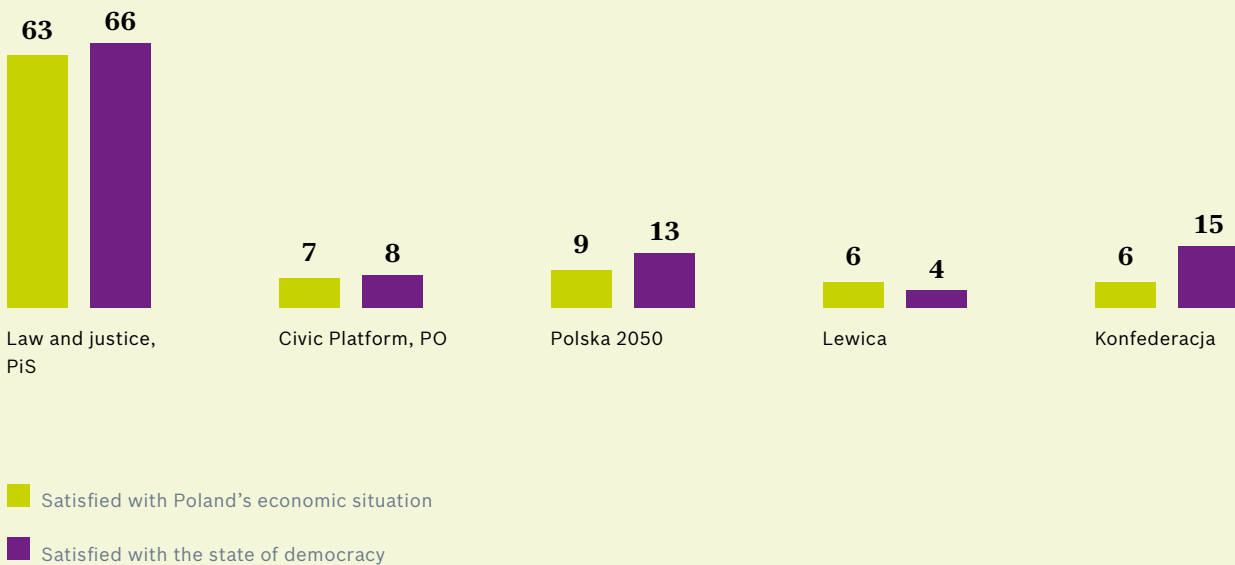
The similarity of attitudes toward the concept of democracy might lead one to expect that positive and negative evaluations of democracy as it currently exists in Poland would be evenly distributed throughout the population, irrespective of party preferences. **But here, too, political party allegiance plays a decisive role in evaluations of the political reality.** Whereas 96 percent of voters for the conservative-liberal Civic Platform, 91 percent of voters for the left-wing alliance Lewica, 86 percent of voters for Szymon Hołownia’s center-right party Polska 2050, and 60 percent of voters for the libertarian-nationalist Konfederacja believe that democracy in Poland is in danger, only 19 percent of those who support the governing PiS party agree. Similar values can be seen in responses to the question as to whether the right to protest is endangered.

**Figure 25:**

### Satisfaction by party preference

PiS supporters are by far the most satisfied with the political-economic situation

Agree in %



Questions: Are you satisfied with the general economic situation in Poland? Are you satisfied with the state of democracy in Poland?  
 Source: More in Common (2021)



**As such, views of the political reality in Poland are largely dependent on party preference.**

It is less the result of a critical evaluation of one's own views regarding the functioning of democracy than it is an avowal of support for one or the other political camp. This political polarization can also be seen in other aspects of life. Sixty-three percent of PiS voters are satisfied with the state of Poland's economy. Supporters of opposition parties, by contrast, are far more critical of the economic situation and an average of just under 80 percent of them are dissatisfied. And what about the elections themselves, the apex of the democratic process? Do Poles, despite existing polarization, believe that the influence of the sovereign – the people – finds its legitimate expression at the polls? Forty-three percent of those surveyed say they believe elections in Poland are free and fair. A further 21 percent have no opinion. The remaining 36 percent have concerns, some of them serious. Whereas 26 percent of respondents believe elections are “not really” free and fair, 10 percent believe they are “definitely not”. **Again, party preference is decisive when it comes to views regarding the fairness of elections.** While 82 percent of PiS voters believe that elections in Poland are generally free and fair, that value is only between 34 and 40 percent among supporters of the four largest opposition parties.

The data seems to support the thesis that many supporters of opposition parties believe that by taking over the entire state apparatus, including public broadcasters, the governing PiS party has gained an unfair advantage. It has made an opposition election victory less likely, though not impossible. Results in regional elections, where some opposition candidates have won convincingly, show that such an opposition victory is possible. Essentially, it is the belief in the legitimacy of election results, despite a lack of fairness in the campaign, that holds the political community together.

**Potential Groups: Where Liberal Democratic Regeneration Can Start**

As we have seen, an overwhelming majority of the Polish population defines democracy through liberal-democratic principles and has internalized the latter, at least on the abstract and normative level. Liberal democracy may have ceased to exist in Poland at the institutional level, but as an ideal,

it has not vanished from the minds of Poles. Nevertheless, Poles differ, sometimes radically, in their evaluation of political realities and the dangers to democracy that go along with them. It appears that party preference is the primary factor in these differences. That clearly demonstrates the power of political narrative. Such narratives lend structure to political perceptions and offer guidelines and reference points that help people combine separate elements of political reality into a coherent image. They also provide the framework within which the term democracy is construed.

We would like to have a deeper look at Polish society to find out which groups or segments have enabled the almost revolutionary, institutional upheavals that have taken place since 2015. In doing so, we are not interested in self-professed opponents of liberal democracy, who exhibit clear illiberal or even authoritarian, characteristics. Instead of these radical, yet relatively small fringe groups, we are interested in the people who can be found between the extremes, or on the political sidelines, but who, at decisive moments, cast their ballots in favor of illiberal parties.

We would thus next like to take a closer look at those who have an ambivalent or indifferent approach to liberal democracy. What characteristics and attitudes have contributed to their apathetic acceptance of the dismantling of constitutional institutions? Do they not care for liberal democracy, as long as elections are held? Or have they been disappointed by liberal democracy and are now ready to sacrifice some liberal principles for certain – from their perspective, relevant – tradeoffs? In the case of Poland, such a group would no longer be one to be protected from the attractions of illiberalism, but – from the perspective of liberal democracy – one to be recaptured. To ensure success in that endeavor, it is necessary to better understand their motives and priorities.

## The Quiet and Output-Oriented (26 percent)

**“A democratic state cannot ignore the hardships faced by its citizens. It must take responsibility for us, because ultimately, we are the ones who elect those who govern the country.”**

– Quote from focus group

The Quiet and Output-Oriented have an electoral and transactional understanding of democracy. They expect concrete results and a caring state, the performance of which they can appraise every four years at the ballot box. In between elections, they tend to be rather passive. They are uninterested in debates about the rule of law and feel comfortable in today's illiberal Poland.

### ***Demographic and Political Attributes:***

- Higher than average rural representation, below average urban representation
- Elevated share of PiS voters (+9 percentage points)
- Above-average feeling of being appreciated
- Moderately conservative worldview

The segment of the Quiet and Output-Oriented is not initially unfavorably conspicuous. Their personal appraisal of democracy, and their commitment to liberal-democratic values do not deviate from the mean. Yet despite these positive normative foundations, this group has an ambivalent relationship to liberal democracy as its members are characterized by a pronounced willingness to exchange certain democratic principles for concrete results, and they have a limited need for political participation.

As the description indicates, **those belonging to the Quiet and Output-Oriented segment place a less than average emphasis on participation in political life.** They tend to be passive citizens who provide little political input between elections. Twenty-eight percent of them believe that in a democracy, it is enough to participate in elections and to leave the rest to the politicians (+12). This view is reflected in their behavior. They are less interested in politics than average (-8), are less dedicated to keeping up on the political news (-10) and are less likely than average to engage in political discussions (-7). The same pattern can be seen when it comes to participation in political activities like demonstrations (-7) or gathering signatures for a petition (-7).

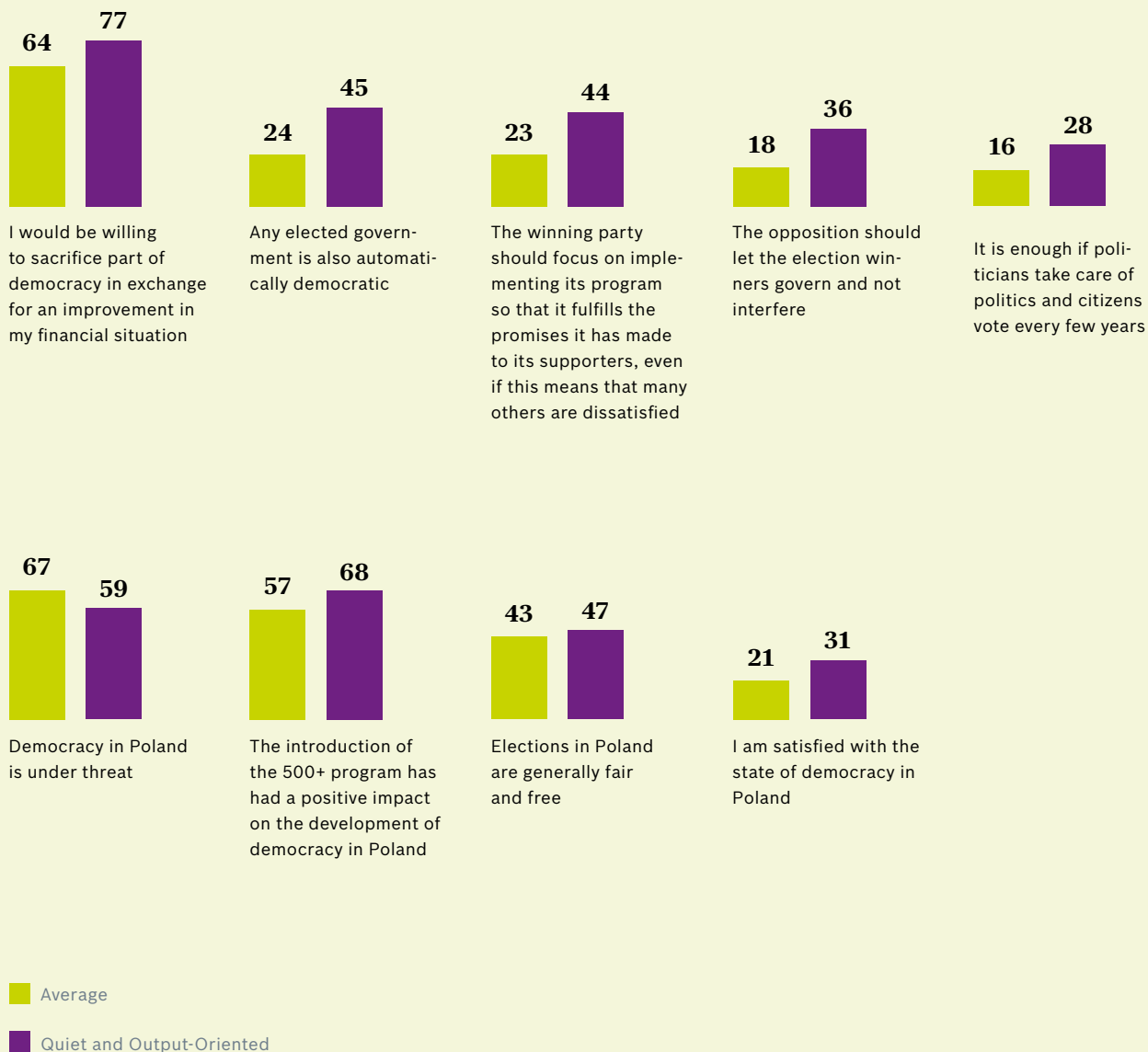
**“We are passive players and become active players when the election comes.”**

– Quote from focus group

Figure 26:

## Profile of the Quiet and Output-Oriented

Agree in %



Questions: Would you be willing to sacrifice part of democracy in exchange for a significant improvement in your material situation? Please mark on a scale from 1 to 6 which of the following statements is closer to you (pairs of opposites in each case). In your opinion, is democracy threatened in Poland? Please indicate how the introduction of the 500+ program has affected or is affecting the development of democracy in Poland. In your opinion, are elections in Poland generally free and fair? Are you satisfied with the state of democracy in Poland? Source: More in Common (2021)

**When it comes to the political system, members of this segment have more of an electoral understanding of democracy.** There is not much need for talk or debate between the elections, as they prefer action instead. Their expectation that the governing party (or parties) seek compromise is, at just 56 percent, well below the rest of the population (-21). They also believe the opposition should largely stay out of the government's way as it moves toward implementing its campaign platforms. This opinion is held by 36 percent of Quiet and Output-Oriented citizens (+18). This reserve means that their anti-authoritarian defense systems are not as robust as in the "democratic" portion of the population. Only 55 percent of this group believe that a democratically elected government can act undemocratically (-21). The Quiet and Output-Oriented see elections as the primary control mechanism, as our focus groups confirmed.

**“We have to participate in elections, we have to vote and change governments if they do something different than they promised.”**

– Quote from focus group

A further indication of an above-average indifference for the concept of liberal democracy is the "transactional" approach of Quiet and Output-Oriented citizens. Thirty-nine percent are prepared to accept limitations to civic freedoms in exchange for greater security (+13). Seventy-seven percent (+13) would sacrifice an element of democracy if it meant improvements to their financial situation, and 71 percent (+13) would accept such sacrifices to better protect traditional values. **For the Quiet and Output-Oriented, it is not the normative perfection of a democracy that matters most, but its performance.** They expect, for example, that the state guarantees all its citizens dignified living conditions (94 percent, +4) and ensures that the gap between the rich and the poor does not grow too large (93 percent, +7). When it comes to the judiciary reforms that have taken place in recent years – reforms that have triggered major concerns in parts of Polish society about the future of the rule of law – members of this group have been rather unmoved by comparison. "Only" 49 percent (-13) believe that the reforms have had a negative impact on the development of democracy in Poland.

To achieve the desired results, an above average share of Quiet and Output-Oriented citizens is prepared to accept a strong personality who sometimes breaks the rules (57 percent, +10) or to learn from dictators (25 percent, +8).

**“Poles have to be tamed a bit. We have a democracy that suits our country.”**

– Quote from focus group

In general, if the democracy does not deliver, it risks the withdrawal of support. That does not necessarily mean that the Quiet and Output-Oriented will completely turn their backs on democracy and place their fates in the hands of dictatorial rule, because 95 percent of them value living in a democracy. But they could certainly turn to a political actor who is prepared to break existing rules to deliver the desired results. If he does deliver, he will – as would democracy – be rewarded. As such, it is no wonder that 68 percent (+11) of Quiet and Output-Oriented citizens see the

introduction of 500+, the PiS party's child-benefit program, as advancing democracy. Against this backdrop, it is also understandable that this segment of the population is less critical than their compatriots of the democratic realities in Poland: 31 percent are satisfied with the condition of the Polish democracy (+10).

**“My daughter is divorced, her marriage failed, her child needs medical care, and she was left in the lurch by the state. In such circumstances, the 500 zloty are a huge help.”**

– Quote from focus group

An additional interesting finding: **Whereas Output-Oriented citizens in many other societies are deeply frustrated with the system, the opposite is true in Poland.** Their satisfaction with the caring state is reflected in their evaluation of their quality of life. They feel more respected than average and valued for what they have achieved in life (53 percent, +7). Nevertheless, as tends to be the case in society at large, they are skeptical and critical of politicians. That shows that they have a pragmatic, transactional approach to policymakers. The usefulness of the relationship is evaluated every four years at the ballot box.

The Quiet and Output-Oriented tend to have a conservative, more traditional lifestyle and make up a larger share of the population in rural areas than in cities. Beyond that, however, they do not exhibit any special attributes.

#### **A Further Conflict: Democrats versus the Indifferent**

Now that we have taken a closer look at a segment of the population that show a more pronounced indifference toward democracy, it makes sense to take a brief detour into the world of liberal democrats. They are outfitted with a robust democratic immune system and are the source from which active defenders of the rule of law in Poland are recruited. Nevertheless, they exhibit characteristics that have a negative effect on social cohesion and the quality of democracy and could thus pave the way to illiberal tendencies. This stance is particularly apparent in attitudes toward the child benefit program, 500+.

In recent years, the Quiet and Output-Oriented have been the target of fierce imputations from the (liberal-)democratic camp. They stand accused of having allowed themselves to be bribed by the national-conservative government and of selling out Poland's democracy for 500 zloty. As such, we have become witnesses to the collision of two competing visions of democracy – one which prioritizes the preservation of rule-of-law conventions and one which guarantees economic security.

Interestingly, it is not immediately possible to reproduce this conflict on the normative level. In their self-assessments, self-proclaimed and dedicated democrats are also extremely supportive of the idea of a welfare state – to an even greater degree than the indifferent. Empirical data shows, however, that in all the “democratic” segments we identified, a majority see the 500+ program as being harmful to democracy.

This stance once again shows that **the evaluation of political realities largely takes place through the lens of party affiliation and that this lens overshadows a person's own fundamental views.** It also becomes clear that the inability to put oneself in another's shoes

and try to understand their motives is not just difficult for those segments characterized by illiberal or even authoritarian characteristics. It is a shortcoming also widespread among self-proclaimed democrats. This phenomenon is frequently accompanied and intensified by arrogance and contempt for those holding competing views. Our data even shows **that opinions of PiS voters held by opposition-party supporters are even more negative than vice versa**. Fifty-eight percent of Civic Platform voters, 51 percent of those who support Polska 2050, and 43 percent of Lewica voters believe that PiS supporters, when judged solely based on their political views, deserve no respect. Supporters of PiS are less severe with their political opponents, with “only” 33 percent saying that Civic Platform voters deserve no respect. For Polska 2050 and Lewica, that value is 24 and 26 percent, respectively. As such, it looks as though (liberal) democrats themselves tend to alienate the indifferent from liberal democracy.

### Summary and Recommendations

- The idea of democracy is not controversial in Polish society. Aside from minor exceptions, Poles support democracy, and a majority of them are committed to liberal-democratic principles and maxims. For many Poles, democracy is not just an abstract, normative framework; they believe it should also include social components and a caring state. Against this backdrop, there is a discernable readiness in parts of society to engage in “tradeoffs” involving the sacrifice of rule-of-law principles in exchange for desired results. That does not, however, extend to giving those in power a blank check. The principle of limited trust, with elections as the ultimate control mechanism, remains valid.
- Whereas the theoretical concept of democracy is not controversial, there are a number of competing conceptions in Polish society for how democracy should be lived in practice. This especially applies to the political decision-making process. Because there is a lack in Polish society of a willingness to compromise and a shortage of effective mechanisms for overcoming comparatively minor rifts, political reality is interpreted through the lens of party politics. Because opposing sides of such conflicts – to put it pointedly – do not recognize each other’s right to represent the will of the people, democracy, in the eyes of each camp, can only function properly when that camp holds power. And that opens up democracy to severe polarization.

- As a rule, in severely polarized society, loud fringe groups tend to command attention. Nevertheless, the more reserved, quiet citizens can be decisive in setting the course of a democracy. In the case of Poland, the segment of the Quiet and Output-Oriented wields this power. The challenge is convincing this group that they will be better provided for by a liberal democracy than by an illiberal democracy. For that to be successful, liberal-democratic actors must develop new bonds of trust with this group by placing greater emphasis on common interests and by paying increased attention to the modern welfare state.
- Thanks to the concept of democratic indifference, it is possible to identify what has gone wrong with Polish democracy since 1989. It has left too many people behind, to the point that they began looking around for alternatives, making it possible for the Law and Justice party to pursue the illiberal restructuring of the Polish state from 2015 onward. Conversely, they could emerge as the key for the comeback of liberal democratic forces. Nevertheless, our findings show that the greatest challenge to the Polish democracy in the long term is not indifference to democracy, but the limited ability across society to deal with opposing opinions in a pluralistic society.
- Over the long term, the top priority must therefore be to reduce distrust between different societal groups. “Bridging social capital” must be established. In many instances, work here must start at ground zero, because polarization reaches deep into society. Indeed, not only the approach to history is politicized, for example, but also some charitable initiatives. Meeting places are necessary, not just to combat the polarization of society, but also its atomization. A successful democracy lives from competing opinions and heated debate – but arguing must also be learned.

**Great Britain:  
Resilience and  
Repair of  
British Democracy**



# Great Britain: Resilience and Repair of British Democracy

## Introduction

The past decade has put democracy in Britain to the test. There have been four general elections, three referenda, a long-lasting deadlock over Brexit, the rise of populism, and increased anger and vitriol in the political debate, which has spilled over in some instances into acts of violence, with tragic consequences.<sup>24</sup> Our study on attitudes toward democracy<sup>25</sup> shows: three in five Britons today believe that British democracy faces serious threats. Trust in the institutions of democracy – as with established institutions generally – has declined. Large numbers feel that public discourse has coarsened in the age of the digital “town square”. A sense of exhaustion with the country’s divisions has set in.

Yet in significant ways, Britain’s democratic institutions have also proved resilient in a time of deepening divisions. A large majority of people across the United Kingdom still believe that democracy is the best form of government and feel proud to live in a country with such a history of democracy. **Britons remain committed to the idea of democracy and the principles that underpin it. Even for many who feel dissatisfied, their frustration is more about the outcomes produced by the democratic system than its underlying principles.** They feel let down by politicians not living up to their promises, and by a system that falls short of its ideals. Unlike in the United States, the threats to democracy in Britain do not come from a binary polarization between two entrenched, opposing groups, as the *Britain’s Choice* study concluded in 2020.<sup>26</sup> The spirit in which people think about their democracy is typical of the nuance found on many issues in the British population: **alongside deep frustrations with the system’s failings, there is also deep commitment to the practice of democracy, and many people feel both sentiments simultaneously.**

The historic Palace of Westminster, the seat of parliamentary democracy in the United Kingdom, will soon begin to undergo a long-term process of repair, one expected to take decades. Years of neglect have left it vulnerable to fire and unfit for the needs of the 21st century. As these physical repairs are undertaken to the seat of democracy, an even more challenging repair job is needed for democracy itself. **Low trust and deep frustration have bred disengagement, indifference, and resentment, making democracy more vulnerable to the forces of division, despair, and extremism.** This chapter sets the context for this work of democratic repair, through the lens of what Britons think about their democratic system. It does this through a focus not on institutions, regions, or demographic groups, but on those most indifferent to democracy itself.

**24** For example, just days before the 2016 Brexit referendum, Labour MP Jo Cox was murdered by a far-right extremist after a constituency clinic.

**25** In collaboration with YouGov, More in Common surveyed a total of 2,000 adults in the UK (England, Wales, Scotland) about their attitudes around democracy and politics and their own role in the community. The quantitative survey took place in January and February 2021, followed by qualitative focus groups in March 2021.

**26** Juan-Torres, M., Dixon, T., Kimaram, A. (2020): *Britain’s Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain*. More in Common.



## **Dynamics and Trends in Attitudes Toward Democracy**

Britons are strongly committed to the concept of a democratic society and culture. When presented with less democratic alternatives, nine in ten choose democracy as the best way to govern their country. Asked on a scale of 1 to 10 how important it is to them to live in a country that is governed democratically, 54 percent rank its importance as 10 out of 10. Eighty-seven percent also believe that democracies generally lead to fairer societies, and seven in ten believe democracies lead to more orderly and peaceful societies.

### **Britons Are Committed to the Principles and Values that Underpin Democratic Culture**

Electoral democracy is something that Britons value and share, something they are not willing to sacrifice. Only one in ten feel that holding elections less frequently would make the country more united. Britons value the democratic processes that allow them to choose their leaders, with only 1 percent of Britons “strongly agree(ing)” with the proposition of doing away with elections if it ensured that their preferred party could stay in power.

The public commitment to democracy goes beyond a preference for choosing governments through elections. There is also strong support for many of the principles and values that underpin democratic culture, such as respect for processes, rules, and the rule of law:

- Seven in ten Britons expect the government to abide by the law and follow procedures, even if that constrains their ability to act or makes decision-making processes take longer.
- Four in five agree that “those who disagree with me politically deserve the same rights as I do” (82 percent). Support for this belief holds up strongly across different political ideologies, competing views on Brexit, and different social status.
- When asked what three aspects are most important in British democracy, Britons rank free and fair elections, the rule of law, and equal rights for everyone as being the most important.

### **Some Would, However, Trade Democratic Principles for Other Benefits**

While few Britons express an outright rejection of democratic principles, a minority of Britons are willing to contemplate giving up some democratic rights or freedoms.

- Twenty-eight percent are willing to sacrifice rights and freedoms if doing so would secure a better future for their families. A further 36 percent neither agree nor disagree with that scenario.
- Only 8 percent would be willing to do away with elections if it would ensure their preferred party remained in power. But an additional 23 percent neither agree nor disagree with the premise. Younger voters are the most ambivalent (with 36 percent of Gen Z neither agreeing nor disagreeing, compared to just 15 percent of Baby Boomers).
- There is a weaker consensus for protection of the concerns of minorities against the majority, with almost two in five saying that the concerns of people out of political power and of racial and ethnic minorities should take a “backseat” if they conflict with the majority’s view (38 and 36 percent, respectively).

**27** Foa, R.S. et al. (2020): *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report*. Centre for the Future of Democracy, University of Cambridge.

**28** Fieldhouse, E. et al. (2020): *British Election Study Internet Panel Waves 1–20*.

### **Only Half of the Population is Satisfied with the Way Democracy Works in the UK**

Public satisfaction with democracy varies over time, with large numbers of people feeling less satisfied when the party they support is out of power or when they perceive the government or parliament is performing poorly. The protracted impasse in negotiations over Britain’s exit from the European Union, for example, resulted in dissatisfaction with democracy in the United Kingdom rising above 50 percent in 2019 – the first time this had occurred in four decades, according to an aggregation by the Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report.<sup>27</sup> However, following the resolution of that impasse and following the 2019 general election, there was a recovery in satisfaction, especially among Leave voters.<sup>28</sup>

### **There Is Widespread Concern about Extremism**

Three in five people believe that British democracy faces serious threats. **These concerns are shared across political ideologies, views on Brexit, region, and social backgrounds.** The growth of extremism is regarded as the greatest challenge facing British democracy. In recent years, Britain has experienced political violence, including the tragic murder of Jo Cox MP in 2016, the continuing risk of violence in Northern Ireland, and the high volume of online threats and abuse, particularly targeting women and minorities.<sup>29</sup> There is strong public support for countering online abuse and extremism.

- Eighty-four percent of Britons feel that democracies “must protect citizens from those who incite hate and violence”, with 42 percent considering current protections from hate speech to be “too little”.
- Three in four believe that social media companies should have the right to limit speech on their platforms if rules are violated.

### **There Are Deep-seated Concerns Relating to Accountability and the Power of Elites**

Many of the threats seen to be facing British democracy come from the failings of the system itself, and from the fact that so many people feel that leaders and institutions are distant from their own values, thoughts, and experiences.

- More than three in five Britons believe that the system is rigged to serve the rich and powerful.
- When asked to identify threats to the British democracy, alongside the growth of extremism, Britons are most likely to highlight politicians not being “accountable for keeping their promises”, “bad political leadership”, and “a system run by elites who just look after themselves”.
- Eighty-four percent of Britons believe that politicians do not care what people like them think, and only 22 percent agree that elected officials are better equipped than ordinary people to make decisions that affect the public, while six in ten believe experts are better qualified than ordinary people.
- This frustration with institutional democratic actors stems from a widely shared feeling that Britons are “looked down on” by actors in British democracy. Three in four (76 percent) of respondents feel either looked down on “a lot” or “a little” by the UK government. Large majorities feel looked down on by political parties (Conservative Party: 74 percent, Labour Party: 63 percent). More than 60 percent of those surveyed report similar levels of resentment toward local authorities, judges, civil servants, academics, and the media. **Feelings of being overlooked, ignored, or judged play a significant role in the erosion of trust in democratic institutions.**

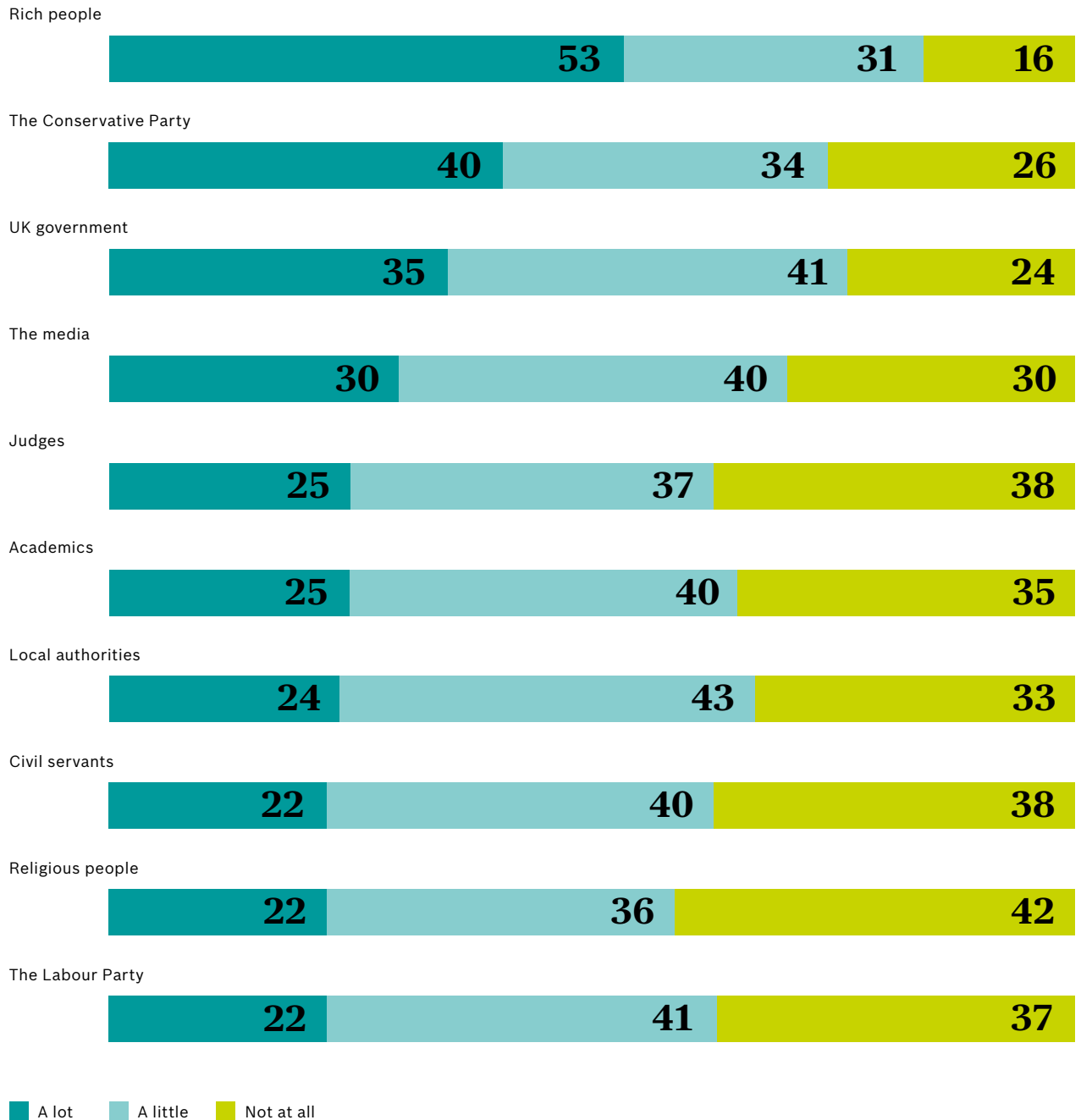
<sup>29</sup> Research by Glitch UK and the End Violence against Women Coalition has found that almost half of all women in the UK experienced online abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic, with one-third of women reporting that online abuse became worse during the pandemic. Glitch UK, End Violence Against Women (2020): The Ripple Effect: COVID-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse. p.7.

Figure 27:

## Perceptions of being looked down upon by elites

Britons share the feeling of being 'looked down on' by almost every actor in British democracy

Numbers in %



Question: In general, to what extent do you feel that people from the following groups look down on people like you?

Source: More in Common (2021)

### Trust in the Sources of Information within the UK Democracy Is Weak

- There is widespread distrust toward the media, with **only 21 percent of people feeling that the mainstream media accurately reflects the views of people like them.**
- While critical of the British media generally, there are much higher levels of trust in the sources of news on which people choose to rely as individuals. Some 68 percent of Britons trust their favorite news organization (with BBC One and BBC Two the most popular TV channels, and the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian* the most popular newspapers). Documentaries also enjoy high levels of trust at 76 percent.
- Sixty-one percent are likely to trust what they read in broadsheet newspapers or their associated websites, as opposed to 20 percent trusting what they read in tabloid newspapers and their websites.

### Political Parties Are Seen As a Major Part of the Problem

An underlying driver of distrust in politics is the feeling that individual politicians are forced to toe the party line regardless of what they believe. This dissatisfaction with political parties resonates with findings from *Britain's Choice* that less than one-third of Britons consider their political party identity to be important to their own personal identity:<sup>30</sup>

- Seventy-seven percent of Britons believe that MPs ought to have the freedom to vote according to what they believe is right, regardless of the party line on any given issue.
- Nevertheless, 61 percent of Britons expect politicians to follow public opinion over their own personal conscience.

### Britons Are Interested in Democracy but Only Half Feel a Sense of Agency

Britons are interested in what is going on in their democracy. Eight in ten people say they follow current affairs and the government most or some of the time, and three in four discuss politics with their friends frequently or occasionally. **Nevertheless, there is a difference between following the news and feeling engaged.** The Hansard Society's most recent Audit of Engagement found that core indicators of political engagement (certainty to vote and knowledge/interest in politics) have been stable in recent years, but "feelings of powerlessness and disengagement are intensifying".<sup>31</sup>

Strong democracy in Britain does not have to mean full participation and engagement by everyone; indeed, many feel it is not their job to get involved in changing things. However, disengagement and disillusionment with democracy, local and national, is likely to grow if those who want a say in society do not feel they can make a difference. **A majority of Britons want more of a say in decisions that are made at both a local community level (63 percent) and a national level (65 percent).** However, they are evenly divided (51 versus 49 percent) on whether they believe that citizens can change society through their actions and decisions.

### While Power Is Too Centralized, This Does Not Translate into Consensus for Devolution

Many of the democratic reforms undertaken in the UK, and those under debate for the future, involve shifting power away from central government towards the devolved nations and local communities (such as through the direct election of mayors). The "Take Back Control" slogan popularized by the successful campaign to leave the European Union can be adopted at more localized levels.

<sup>30</sup> Juan-Torres, M. et al. (2020): *Britain's Choice*. p.106.

<sup>31</sup> Blackwell, J. et al. (2019): *Audit of Political Engagement* 16. The Hansard Society. p.3

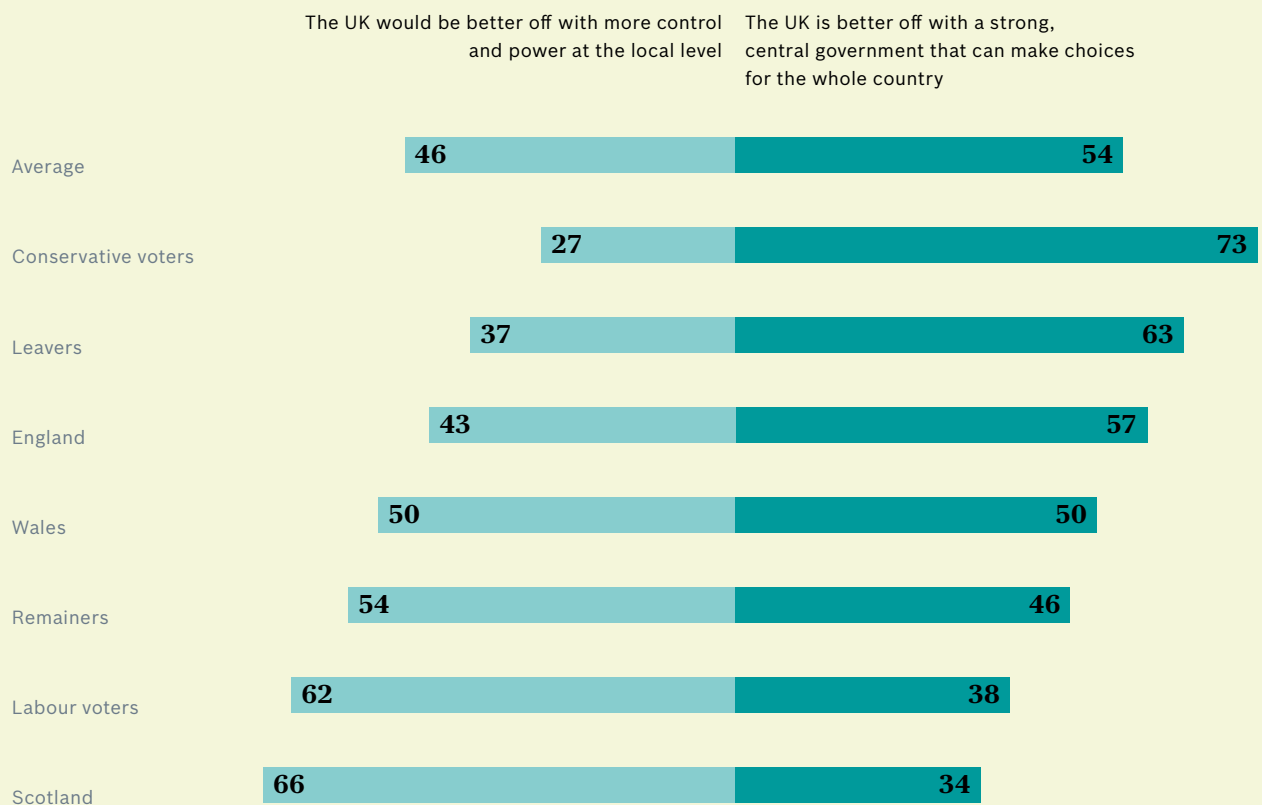
Nevertheless, public attitudes are more nuanced than simply universally supporting the devolution of power away from Westminster, reflecting differing views about the future of the Union. When public attitudes are tested using the most positive framing in favor of centralized decision-making – “a strong central government that can make decisions for the whole country” versus “more control and power at the local level” – public opinion favours stronger central government by a margin of 54 to 46 percent, with stronger support for central government among those in England (57 percent), Conservative voters (73 percent), and Leavers (63 percent). In contrast, shifting power to the local level is more strongly supported by those in Scotland (66 percent), as well as Labour voters (62 percent) and Remainers (54 percent). Those in Wales are evenly divided.

**Figure 28:**

## Government for the whole country versus devolution

Other than in Scotland, there is no clear consensus for devolution

Agree in %



Question: If you have to choose, which statement do you agree with more? Source: More in Common (2021)

## Key Segments for Strengthening Democracy

**The conversations and surveys undertaken for this study highlight the way in which views and experiences of democracy differ.** In their day-to-day lives, most citizens rarely think in abstract terms about democracy. They nevertheless agree that democracy is the best model; hardly any Britons look for alternatives to it. Yet their assessment of how well it is working and their engagement with the civic and political practices that underpin a liberal democratic system differ widely. For some, British democracy works fine. For others, Britain is a democracy in name only: they believe the system is rigged to serve the rich and influential and think politicians do not seem to care about how people like them feel.

**Figure 29:**

### Civic participation

Britons vary on their level of engagement with society

Numbers in %	<u>Average</u>	<u>Detached Pragmatists</u>	<u>Frustrated Realists</u>	<u>Disillusioned Dissenters</u>
Donated to charity	<b>52</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>42</b>
Signed a petition	<b>43</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>48</b>
Shared content on personal social media pages in support of an issue	<b>22</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>15</b>
Contacted a Member of Parliament or other elected official about an issue	<b>16</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>
Voted in a local election	<b>16</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>
Purchased products/services or boycotted products/services related to an issue	<b>13</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>
Volunteered in my local community	<b>12</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>
Donated money to my place of worship	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
Donated blood	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
Donated money to a campaign group or political organization	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Participated in a protest	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
None of the above	<b>25</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>30</b>

Question: Which of the following have you taken part in in the past year? Source: More in Common (2021)

Similarly, some Britons participate in an array of civic and political activities. They share political content on social media, attend protests, donate to charities, and more. Others engage in some of these activities, but not others. A significant portion of the British population participates in little or no activities at all. The reasons for this lack of participation differ between groups.

Efforts to strengthen confidence in democracy and build resilience against threats will be more effective if they are rooted in insights exploring people's different dispositions regarding democracy, its norms, values, and practices. **This section focuses on those segments of the population that display lower levels of engagement or higher levels of indifference to democratic norms.** The analysis presented in this chapter excludes the most active members of society (both pro-democracy and the very small proportion who are actively anti-democracy). It also excludes those who are more satisfied.

Instead, the analysis below focuses on **three segments that make up more than half of the British population and are less likely to participate in civic and political life.** They have different perspectives on how the British system works, how they are perceived within this system, what norms and values are relevant, and their desire to play a more central role.

This chapter presents three segments that together comprise 51 percent of the population:

- the Detached Pragmatists (16 percent)
- the Frustrated Realists (26 percent), and
- the Disillusioned Dissenters (9 percent).

These groups were identified through a segmentation process that grouped together individuals with similar attitudes to democratic norms, competing concepts and understandings of democracy, and similar levels of civic and political engagement.

**They participate less in civic and political life and have lower levels of trust. Nevertheless, there is potential in working with people in each of these groups to strengthen liberal democracy.** In many respects, each of these groups shows distinct propensities and ways of thinking and engaging with our democratic system.

- The **Detached Pragmatists** are less interested in current affairs and political issues but are relatively satisfied with how the system works. Practical, real-world issues resonate with them much more than issues that feel distant or more abstract. They want people to have a voice, but they tend to be much less interested in participating than others.
- The **Frustrated Realists** feel the whole system is broken. They are frustrated and distrustful and feel that others look down on them. In particular, they feel that politicians do not care about people like them. They have a weaker commitment to many of the principles that underpin liberal democracies, such as protecting the rights of minorities.

- The **Disillusioned Dissenters** differ from the Detached Pragmatists and Frustrated Realists in that they are strongly committed to universal rights and freedoms for all. They are not willing to compromise on democratic norms and values. They are interested in current affairs and want more of a say, but they have only weak faith in the system and feel that citizens can do little to achieve real change. This results in feelings of disappointment, frustration, and disenchantment – and, potentially, lasting disengagement.

**Figure 30:**

## Interest in current affairs

Most Britons follow the news some or most of the time

### I follow what's going on in government and current affairs ...

Numbers in %

Average



Detached Pragmatists



Frustrated Realists



Disillusioned Dissenters



■ Most of the time   
 ■ Some of the time   
 ■ Not much   
 ■ Not at all

Question: Would you say you follow what's going on in government and current affairs? Source: More in Common (2021). Please note: Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.



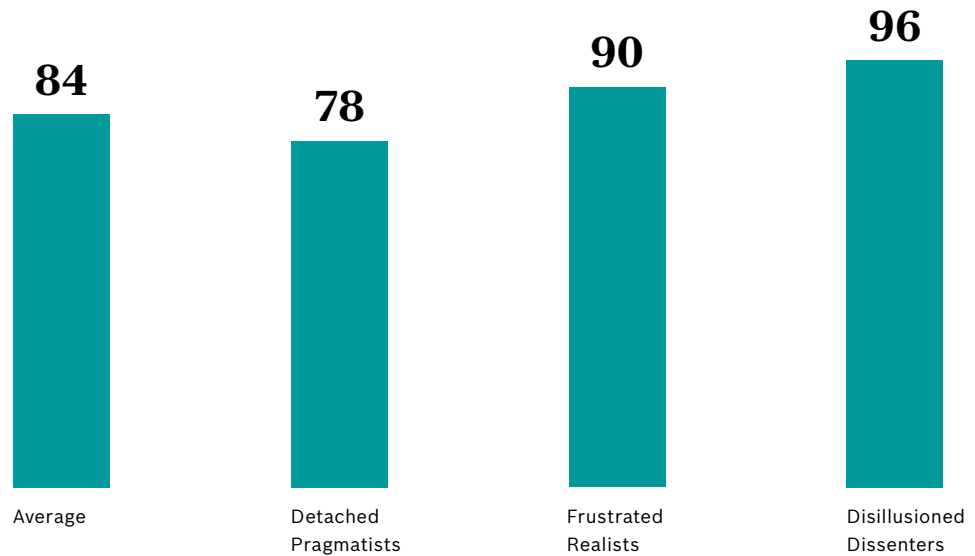
**Figure 31:**

## **Perceptions of political leaders**

There is little faith among the population that politicians care

### **Most politicians do not care what people like me think**

Agree in %



Question: Which do you agree with more? (Pair of opposites)

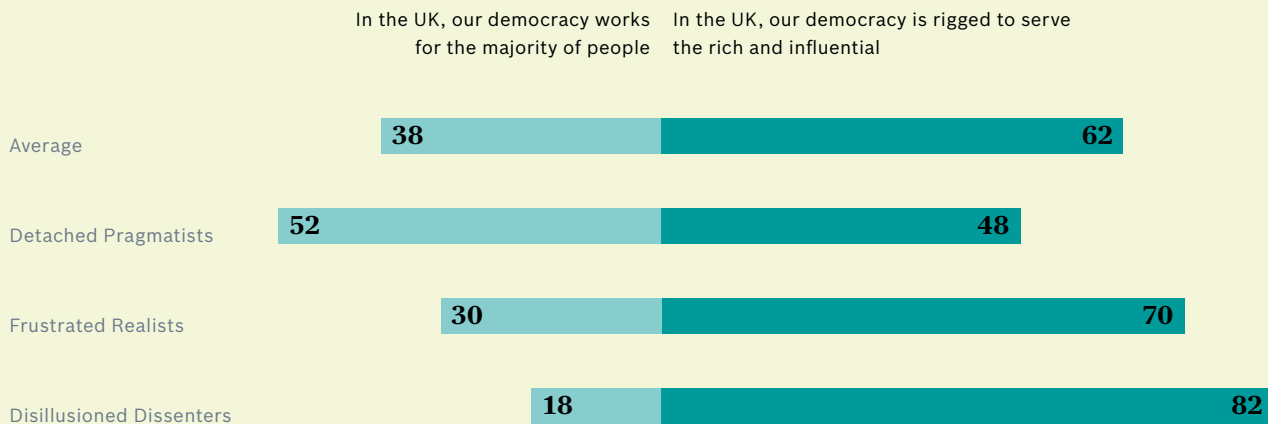
Source: More in Common (2021)

Figure 32:

## Who does our democracy serve?

Detached Pragmatists stand out in their attitudes toward democracy being rigged

Agree in %



Question: Which do you agree with more? Source: More in Common (2021)

### Detached Pragmatists (16 percent)

**“There are things I’m not happy with but I’m not unhappy enough to give up time.”**

– Quote from focus group

**Key words:** Content, pragmatic, indifferent, preoccupied, not opinionated

**In their own words: what is democracy?** being represented, choosing government, freedom

### **Demographic and Political Profile**

Evenly spread across age cohorts, with slightly fewer Baby Boomers (29 percent versus an average of 34 percent)

- Slightly more likely not to have voted, and more likely to vote Conservative (72 percent versus an average of 45 percent)
- Vote in EU referendum: 47 percent voted Leave, 25 percent Remain, and 25 percent did not vote
- More likely to be from the North West, less likely to be from London or Scotland
- More women than men (58 percent versus 42 percent)
- Lower levels of education (42 percent low education against an average of 29 percent)

### **Involvement in Civic and Political Life**

Detached Pragmatists are less interested in politics and participate less in civic and political life (with the exception of donating to charity). Only 4 percent frequently discuss political matters with friends and as many as 42 percent say they never do so.

One in three Detached Pragmatists say that they either do not follow politics and current affairs much or at all (24 and 12 percent respectively). Those who do not follow current affairs explain their reasons as “politics is boring”, “find it difficult to keep up with politics”, and “I have more important things to do in life”. Only 9 percent have shared content on personal social media pages in support of an issue (compared to an average of 22 percent).

Their lower levels of interest generally do not reflect greater frustration or anger toward the system, as many of them feel satisfied with British democracy. Detached Pragmatists are, in fact, more likely than average to believe that in the UK, democracy works for the majority of people. Some 72 percent of them believe that Britain is a genuine democracy (compared to an average of 65 percent). In general, they do not feel looked down on by elites. In focus group

conversations, Detached Pragmatists demonstrated their pragmatism: *“I think no party would have everything you like in it. At least we have got one or two options, but I think every party is just a conglomeration of viewpoints, so it will never tally exactly with yours.”*

### **Democratic Norms and the British Model**

Detached Pragmatists are most likely to have no clear point of view on particular issues. They do not oppose democracy, nor are they in favor of “authoritarian” alternatives. But they also do not stand strongly in favor of democratic principles. As they themselves expressed in focus group conversations, many simply have not thought much about these issues.

Figure 33:

## Commitment to democracy versus retaining power

Detached Pragmatists are more open to trading their democratic freedoms

**“If it meant my preferred political party could stay in charge, I would be willing to do away with elections.”**

Numbers in %

Average



Detached Pragmatists



Frustrated Realists



Disillusioned Dissenters



■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Source: More in Common (2021). Please note: Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Detached Pragmatists differ in what they think is most important in a democracy. They are less likely than average to rank free and fair elections first (19 percent compared to an average of 26 percent) and are more likely to prioritize free speech and a free media. When considering the most important challenges facing democracy, Detached Pragmatists are most concerned about the growth of extremism, followed by “it’s impossible to know what is true and what is lies” and “the media is biased”.

Detached Pragmatists value personal freedoms over collective interests. They are the group most likely to accept limitations on rights and freedoms if it would mean their family would be better off (38 percent compared to an average of 28 percent). Fully 43 percent of them do not express a view about the idea of doing away with elections if it meant their preferred political party would stay in charge, and 20 percent even agree with that proposition. Compared to the Frustrated Realists and Disillusioned Dissenters, Detached Pragmatists are also the group least likely to say that democracy must protect citizens from those who incite hate and to think that it is the government’s job to provide for everyone.

**Detached Pragmatists do not have a strong attachment to democratic principles, reflective of their lower level of interest and engagement, but neither are they particularly critical of democracy.** Our focus group revealed that their ideas of what it means to be a good citizen are quite passive. They expect a good citizen to abide by the law, be kind, respect people and have an open mind. They have ideas about how society and government should work, but are not interested in making that change happen themselves. Some do feel they can enact change locally, but most feel they do not have the time. As one Detached Pragmatist from Yorkshire said: *“Where is the spare time to go out and do the stuff even if you’d like to? Time is a big factor.”* Detached Pragmatists are more likely to feel that politicians care what people like them think, and focus group conversations revealed – alongside criticism – sympathy for the challenges facing political leaders.

Detached Pragmatists’ weaker commitment to democratic processes is reflected in 41 percent believing that politicians should act quickly and decisively, even if it means not following established rules and procedures (compared to an average of 29 percent). Detached Pragmatists are also more likely to accept the proposition that to fix the country, we need a leader willing to break the rules (with one in two agreeing), and one in four agree with the proposition that we should consider alternative forms of governments in which leaders are given more power (26 percent, compared to 10 percent overall). Fully 75 percent state that once a government has been voted in, they should have much more power to make decisions with fewer constraints (compared to 30 percent overall). When it comes to individual MPs following their party or their conscience, Detached Pragmatists are more likely to believe that MPs should vote according to their party line so that their party has consistent positions (36 percent, compared to a 23 percent average).

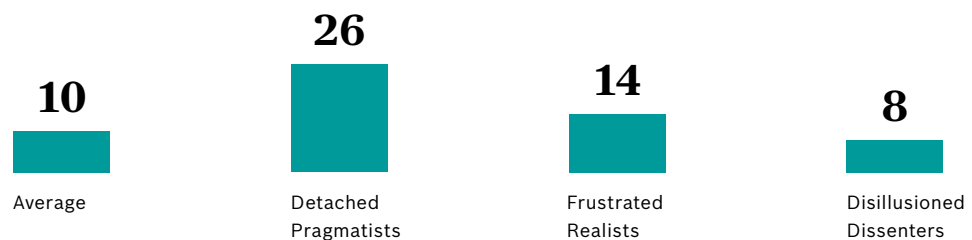
**Figure 34:**

### **Support for authoritarian alternatives**

Detached Pragmatists are much more likely to say we need to consider alternative forms of government

**“We need to consider alternative forms of government where leaders are given more power.”**

Agree in %



Question: Which do you agree with more? (Pair of opposites)

Source: More in Common (2021)

**Detached Pragmatists are the least likely to hold views about the structure of decision-making**, with one in two neither supporting nor opposing more devolution (49 percent, compared to 35 percent overall). However, if forced to choose, they are more likely to default to supporting a strong central government that can make choices for the whole country (by a 66 to 34 percent margin, compared to a 54 to 46 percent margin overall). They are also least likely to vote, or to know how to vote, in a hypothetical referendum on Britain becoming a republic or remaining a monarchy (36 percent). But this does not reflect dissatisfaction: among all the segments, they are the second-most likely to believe that the monarchy is good for democracy in the UK (61 percent).

### **Frustrated Realists (26 percent)**

**“I question: What am I voting for? Democracy feels like Britain’s Got Talent, lots of people voting for something I don’t care about.”**

– Quote from focus group

**Key words:** Realistic, under threat, isolated, overlooked, skeptical, distrustful

**In their own words: What is democracy?** Right to vote, freedom to choose, listen to the people, majority wins, people debating

#### **Demographic and Political Profile**

- Medium-low education levels and lower incomes
- More likely to be men (55 percent men versus 45 percent women)
- More likely to be a low-income earner, dependent on state support
- More likely than average to have voted Conservative (56 percent versus an average of 45 percent), and most likely to have voted Brexit Party (5 percent versus an average of 2 percent)
- Most likely to have voted to leave the European Union in 2016 (58 percent versus an average of 41 percent)

Frustrated Realists are the largest segment of the British population, comprising just over a quarter. They are very critical of democracy: seventy percent believe that democracy is rigged to serve the rich and influential, and 90 percent believe that most politicians do not care about what people like them think. Almost half of Frustrated Realists feel that Britain is a democracy in name only (47 percent, compared to an average of 35 percent). Their skepticism of democracy often translates into anti-democratic sentiment.

#### **Participation in Civic and Political Life**

**Frustrated Realists exhibit among the lowest levels of participation in civic and political activities**, with below-average engagement on every measure, and in some instances only half the level of engagement shown in the country overall (such as volunteering in their local community). They are among the least likely to donate to charity (38 percent, compared to an average of 52 percent).

The attitudes of Frustrated Realists toward democracy appear to be shaped by their low levels of trust in other people. More than two-thirds believe that you cannot be too careful with most people (68 percent, compared to an average of 51 percent). They are also more likely than others to believe that in Britain today, it is every person for themselves (52 percent feel this way while 27 percent think that we look after each other). At a personal level, they have a lower sense of

belonging than almost any other segment, whether that relates to their local neighborhood, community organization, or even friends and family. Almost a third feel that the differences between people in the UK are too great for them to be able to work together anymore – 31 percent compared to the overall average of 18 percent.

Among the Frustrated Realists, 72 percent say that they follow current events most or some of the time (compared to 79 percent overall). Those who follow current events do so because they like knowing what is going on in the world, because they think that politics affects everyone, and – to a much greater extent than most others – because they “do not trust politicians to do the right thing”. Thirty-six percent cite the latter as a justification for following politics, compared to an overall average of 25 percent. For those who do not follow current affairs much or at all, their main reason relates to distrust, and because they tend to view politicians as being all the same and driven by self-interest.

**“In the most recent election: in the end, I chose not to vote, and I didn’t feel proud of that. But I thought, well, any vote would be a lie, because I don’t really believe in it. (...) I’ve always been interested in politics, but I don’t know if I’ll ever truly believe that my individual input is going to do an awful lot.”**

– Frustrated Realist from Dronfield

Their weak participation is likely the result of a combination of anger and frustration, a perception that public actors tend to be arrogant and look down on others, and a feeling that they cannot make much of a difference. **In this respect, Frustrated Realists are not characterized by apathy or detachment.** In fact, 62 percent say that they would like to have more of a say in decisions that affect their local communities (only 7 percent are not interested at all) and they express similar views when it comes to their desire to shape decisions affecting the future of the country. **But their skepticism shines through when asked about their power to change things: they feel that citizens do not have much agency.** They are almost twice as likely as the general population to strongly believe that citizens’ decisions and actions have little influence on how society works (37 percent compared to 20 percent overall), with an additional 30 percent somewhat agreeing with this proposition. They are less likely than any other group to feel confident that people can find ways to improve things in their area if they want to make a difference.

**A distinctive feature of Frustrated Realists is their perception of being looked down on by virtually all groups in public life in the UK.** Similarly, they do not feel adequately respected and valued in life. Frustrated Realists feel looked down on by political parties (91 percent by Conservatives and 86 percent by Labour). A large majority of the Frustrated Realists also feel looked down on by rich people, judges, civil servants, and academics. This helps explain why they are also least likely to believe that experts are better qualified than the general public to make decisions (with 41 percent believing that experts are better qualified than the general public, compared to 63 percent on average).

The perception that the current crop of politicians is unqualified to make decisions on behalf of the public was a key grievance in focus group conversations with Frustrated Realists. Many argued that most politicians fail to grasp what real communities need, lack real experience, and are too far removed from the areas they serve – only appearing once every four years asking for a vote. As a Frustrated Realist from South Wales remarked: *“Can you imagine if we had one election, where there were two or three people that were totally inspiring and we couldn’t choose between them because they were so brilliant, instead of having to choose the least offensive one.”*

Frustrated Realists perceive threat more acutely than others – 80 percent say that the world is becoming an increasingly dangerous place (compared to 70 percent overall). They are much less likely to feel that a person’s chances of living a safe and untroubled life are better today than ever before. Their concerns also extend to the idea that democracy itself is under threat in the UK, with 62 percent believing that it is, while only 6 percent believe it is not. **Frustrated Realists are also more likely to believe in conspiracy myths.** Seventy percent of them are convinced that there are secret, powerful groups controlling what happens and what is reported in the media (compared to 53 percent overall). They are twice as likely to believe that the COVID-19 vaccine is part of a government plan to track and control its citizens (14 percent, against 8 percent overall).

### ***Democratic Norms and the British Model***

Their lack of trust in others is mirrored in their pronounced skepticism about the accuracy of election results, with 32 percent not trusting election results, versus 19 percent of all Britons.

In principle, consistent with most Britons, the majority of Frustrated Realists still believe in democracy as the best model for governing Britain, but they hold more negative perceptions than others. They are more likely to believe that democracies are not better than other systems at making fairer societies (20 percent of Frustrated Realists versus 13 percent overall) or that democracies in general are not good at maintaining order (43 percent of the Frustrated Realists agree with this premise).

Perhaps reflecting their desire to speak out and challenge the system, **Frustrated Realists have a strong attachment to freedom of speech and expression,** and they are more likely than average to consider this to be the most important aspect of democracy. They are also more likely than any other group to believe that there is too little freedom to express what they think in the UK (45 percent, compared to an average of 28 percent). More than half often feel that they are not free in the UK (53 percent, compared to an average of 31 percent). Although three-quarters of Frustrated Realists would prioritize public health over protecting freedom, one in four would prioritize freedom, a higher proportion than seen in any other group.

The depth of frustration felt by Frustrated Realists may help explain their lower commitment to many of the norms of liberal democracy:

- More than any other group, they believe that the will of the majority should prevail. Fifty-seven percent say that in a democracy, the concerns of racial/ethnic minorities should take a back seat if they conflict with the majority, and 51 percent say the same about those not currently in political power. But this does not imply a “winner takes all” approach. A Frustrated Realist from Workington, Cumbria, for example, remarked: *“We should go with what the majority wants, (...) but of course listen to (minority) views and reduce negative impact where possible.”*
- The Frustrated Realists are the only group exhibiting majority support for the idea that the



UK needs a leader who is willing to break the rules to fix the country's problems (53 percent compared to an average of 36 percent).

- They are significantly more likely to think that once a government has been voted in, it should have much more power to make decisions with fewer constraints (43 percent, compared to an overall average of 30 percent).

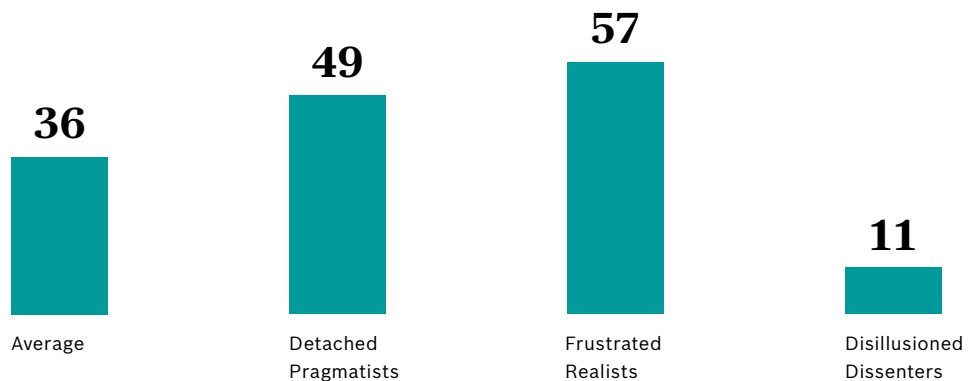
**Figure 35:**

### **Democratic majorities and protection of minorities**

Frustrated Realists are most likely to believe in the notion of majority rule

**“In a democracy, the concerns of racial/ethnic minorities should take a back seat if they conflict with the majority.”**

Agree in %



Question: Which do you agree with more? (Pair of opposites)

Source: More in Common (2021)

## Disillusioned Dissenters (9 percent)

**“It feels like it’s [politicians’] divine right to be in that position, like some of them are there because of their fathers and stuff, just like the conveyor belt of it. I feel locally, I could do stuff, but with the big stuff, we can’t. If I did what they’ve done in their jobs, I’d have just been sacked and that’d be it, but they get payoffs.”**

– Quote from focus group

**Key words:** Interested, disillusioned, dissatisfied, democracy-seeking, principled, concerned

**In their own words: what is democracy?** Choice, ability to have a say, ability to impact things, voice our concerns.

### **Demographic and Political Profile**

- More likely to be young (around one in five in the 18-24 age bracket, more than twice the overall average) and less likely to be in oldest age brackets
- More likely to have university education (two in five)
- More likely to be male (gender split of 57 to 43 percent)
- More likely to live in London or East of England, and less likely to be from the South West.
- Almost twice as likely to have voted Labour or Liberal Democrat in 2019 than overall averages (58 percent Labour, 19 percent Liberal Democrat), and much less likely to have voted Conservative (9 percent versus a 45 percent average)
- Among those who voted in the 2016 EU referendum, vote split three to one in favor of Remain

**Disillusioned Dissenters have a clear view of what democracy should be, and a commitment to democratic principles. When it comes to conventional measures, however, they often exhibit low levels of democratic participation.** Their disillusionment may prevent them from voting or engaging in many traditional forms of democratic participation, yet many are involved in their local communities, from participating in legal actions to prevent school closures to improving sheltered housing and protecting natural heritage. At a national level, they often feel the problems with the system are so deep-seated that their involvement cannot make a difference, though many think citizens have a responsibility to question and criticize when things go wrong. They also believe that good citizenship involves treating other people as you would like to be treated, following the rules, and respecting different cultures.

### **Participation in Civic and Political Life**

Disillusioned Dissenters are interested in social and political issues and are dissatisfied with British democracy. They have views about what a democracy should be, but they do not believe that Britain lives up to those views. In the words of one Disillusioned Dissenter from Sheffield, Britain is a “compromised democracy”. They are committed to democratic principles, but they participate much less in civic and political life than others. **They feel let down and frustrated by the outcomes of our democratic system, but this disillusionment is more likely to prevent them from taking action rather than seeking to change things.**

While they are more likely than average to say they follow current affairs most or some of the time (86 percent, against 79 percent overall), on all measures of civic and political engagement, the Disillusioned Dissenters are less likely to participate, with the single exception being the share reporting that they signed a petition in the past year (48 percent, compared to 43 percent overall). They are much less likely to volunteer (3 percent, against 12 percent overall), donate money to a campaign or charity, donate blood, or even share content on personal social media pages in support of an issue (15 percent, compared to a 22 percent average).

**Disillusioned Dissenters are not skeptical about democratic principles, but they are deeply skeptical about whether participation is worthwhile, given how democracy works in practice.** Almost all believe that politicians do not care what people like them think (96 percent, compared to an average of 84 percent). Likewise, four in five believe that British democracy is rigged to serve the rich and influential (82 percent, against an average of 62 percent). They feel looked down on by the government and especially by wealthy people and the governing Conservative Party. Only 15 percent believe that the mainstream media accurately reflects the views of people like them.

**Despite these deeply negative perceptions about how British democracy functions, Disillusioned Dissenters wish for things to be better.** More than any other segment, Disillusioned Dissenters feel that they should pay more attention to current affairs (46 percent, compared to 38 percent overall). Large majorities say that they would like to have more of a say in decisions that affect the country and their local communities (87 and 79 percent, respectively, against an overall response of 65 and 63 percent).

Disillusioned Dissenters are more likely to feel that radical change is needed to improve society (73 percent, against 54 percent overall). However, they are slightly below average in their confidence that citizens can change society through their decisions and actions. The lack of agency felt by Disillusioned Dissenters might also be connected to their **below-average levels of belonging** (64 percent state that they know where home is and where they belong, compared to 75 percent overall).

Another factor that helps explain their lack of confidence in participating is **that they do not identify with most people in politics**. Only 14 percent say there are enough people in politics with whom they can identify – fewer than any other segment. A further contributing factor may be their below-average levels of trust in others. Almost three-quarters believe that the world is becoming an increasingly dangerous place, and 55 percent believe that you cannot be too careful with most people. Forty-two percent are concerned that other people hold competing values and beliefs on important issues (compared to 32 percent overall), although they believe that people who disagree with them politically deserve the same rights as they do, reflecting their commitment to democratic principles.

### Democratic Norms and the British Model

Disillusioned Dissenters believe that the UK democracy is facing serious threats, more than almost all other groups (69 percent, compared to 58 percent overall). More than two in three are not satisfied with the way democracy works (68 percent). Asked whether the UK is a genuine democracy or one in name only, 54 percent say the latter. When asked to identify the greatest challenges facing democracy in the UK, they say the system is run by elites, the quality of political leadership is poor, and politicians are not accountable. **Disillusioned Dissenters strongly support democratic reforms:** nine in ten think that the first-past-the-post system makes the UK less democratic, and a similar number believe MPs should follow their conscience and not their party when casting votes in parliament. Almost a quarter say that they do not trust the results of elections in the UK.

Disillusioned Dissenters are nevertheless committed to democracy as the best form of government for the United Kingdom, and they reject alternative forms in which leaders are given more power. They are also convinced that democracies are generally better at making fairer societies (88 percent, on par with the overall average) and that democracy is the best way to ensure an orderly and peaceful society. They are not willing to trade off democratic rights and freedoms, even if it would make their family better off or mean that their party could stay in power.

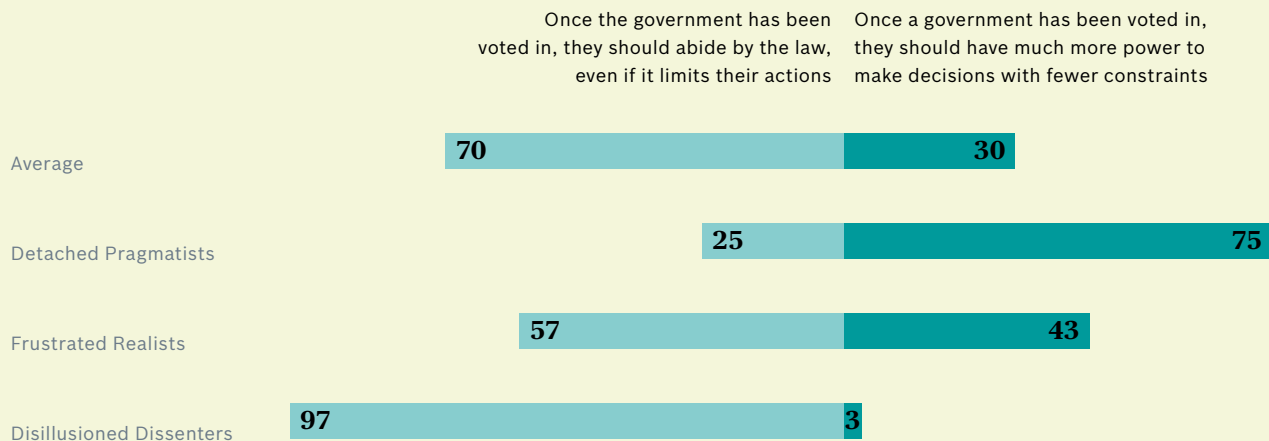
**They tend to be more committed to democratic processes and the rule of law than almost any other group.** They say that once the government has been voted in, it should abide by the law, even if it limits the actions that the government can take, and they also prioritize politicians following rules and procedures, even if it takes longer to make decisions (87 percent, against 71 percent overall). More than any other segment, Disillusioned Dissenters believe that the concerns of racial or ethnic minorities should be taken into consideration, even if they conflict with those of the majority (89 percent, against 64 percent overall).

Figure 36:

## Constraints on the power of governments

The rule of law is most important for Disillusioned Dissenters

Agree in %



Question: Which do you agree with more? Source: More in Common (2021)

**“People want their own lives reflected in their politics; their own values and experiences at the country’s heart.”**

– Marc Stears (2021), *Out of the Ordinary*

In their manifestos for the 2019 General Election, major political parties all committed to significant democratic and constitutional reform. Yet if reform is to rebuild confidence and engagement among those parts of the public least committed to the UK democracy, it needs to address the concerns identified in this chapter. **Trust in British democracy will only be strengthened, and democratic culture made more resilient, if more people feel heard, represented, and respected.**

**Democracy in Britain is not confronting an immediate, existential crisis. There is very little appetite for less democratic approaches to governing.** There are deep frustrations with British democracy, but those frustrations are focused on democratic actors – politicians and the media – and the system’s failure to fulfil its promise. These are not anti-democratic sentiments, but they do pose a longer-term threat to democracy – especially against the backdrop of a heightened sense of division. The system remains resilient to the extent that few blame those divisions on democracy itself.

To repair the erosion in public trust in the UK system of government, British democracy needs to demonstrate to a generation exhausted by division that it can bring people together, resolve differences, and find solutions to real-world problems that improve people’s lives. **Citizens also need to feel that their own participation in democratic processes is worthwhile and that they can make a difference.** The post-Brexit, post-pandemic period is an ideal time to begin repairs, as it has afforded a break from an intensely combative and divisive period in national politics. But in an information environment optimized for conflict, divisive forces are certain to reassert themselves. The system remains vulnerable to future divisions, especially among the one in four Britons in the Frustrated Realist segment.

This study has focused on three groups who are the most dissatisfied or least engaged with British democracy: one satisfied but not engaged (Detached Pragmatists); one dissatisfied, interested, but less engaged (Disillusioned Dissenters); and one neither satisfied nor engaged (Frustrated Realists). **Understanding the population through the lens of different values or attitudinal segments can help identify specific targeted and practical interventions that will be more effective in strengthening confidence and participation in our democracy.** Rather than imagining an idealized world in which all citizens are informed, democratically active, and satisfied, a focus on these segments helps identify the real-world interventions that meet people where they are now and that might shift them toward more healthy democratic attitudes and behaviors.

**Conversations with Britons across all three segments suggest that both top-down and bottom-up changes can increase their confidence and engagement with democracy.**

The focus of this chapter has been understanding attitudes toward democracy, rather than testing different approaches to democratic repair.

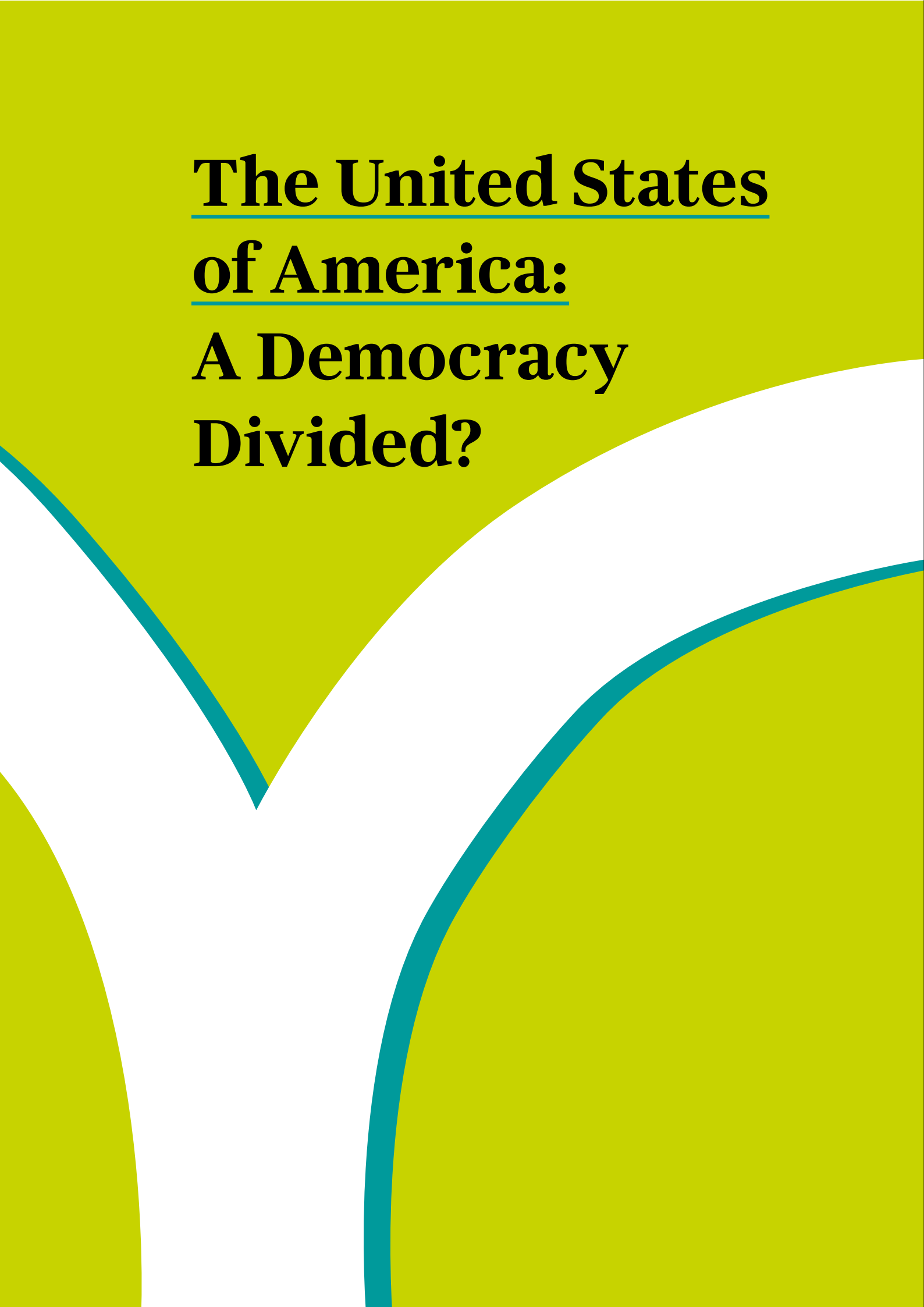
However, based on these quantitative and qualitative findings, we have identified the following priorities to strengthen confidence and participation across the three groups:

- Given the central role of information flows and social networks in how democracy operates in the 2020s, we need **media organizations to be more active in prioritizing measures to strengthen public confidence** and address the stark reality that only one in four Britons feel that the mainstream media represents them. Media organizations need to understand the harm to public trust resulting from engagement strategies that foment outrage and polarization – whether on social media, on broadcasting channels or in traditional print media.
- Efforts to regulate social networks (whether by tech giants or regulatory bodies) should be guided by **Britons’ expectation of social media companies to enforce rules when they are violated**. As one Detached Pragmatist said: *“If it’s illegal on the street, it should be illegal online.”* The digital town square provides an invaluable forum for people to freely engage in debate, but this does not excuse abuse and hate speech. Most feel that basic courtesy and respect for each other should apply equally in the digital town square.
- Efforts to strengthen democratic engagement should focus on those communities where people feel a sense of belonging. In particular, **we should explore the potential for workplaces to play a greater role as spaces that can foster stronger democratic engagement and participation** (which can be done without politicizing those efforts).
- A person’s upbringing plays a key role in shaping their norms and democratic behavior. Even many decades later, Britons often refer back to their childhood as the time when their ideas about citizenship and their civic responsibilities took shape. Improving the **quality of and resources available to citizenship education** can help in these formative years of democratic behavior. Investments that we make today will continue producing dividends through to the dawn of the 22nd century.
- Frustration with the extent of partisanship in politics is a major factor reducing trust and participation in our democracy. For two-thirds of Britons, politics is not an important part of their personal identity. Those two-thirds would feel better represented in political life if political actors were more like them. Given the multiple incentives toward partisanship within parties, this is a very significant challenge, but practical steps such as helping **political actors develop greater professional competence in disagreeing better** (specifically, both giving and taking offense less easily) could help make public debate in the UK less partisan and divisive.
- Demonstrating to the public that **officials and elected representatives** are accountable for their actions would strengthen confidence, restore trust, and challenge widespread cynicism stemming from a belief that the system is being run for the benefit of elites. As one Disillusioned Dissenter said: “If I did what they’ve done in their jobs, I’d be sacked.” Codes of conduct should be clearly enforced, and officeholders should face serious sanctions or lose their jobs if they breach those codes.
- To increase confidence in democracy, people need to see themselves represented in Britain’s national life. This requires parties to **select candidates with a greater diversity of backgrounds and life experiences** and who are more relatable to ordinary Britons – and to select fewer whose only experience is working in politics and related fields.

- Few factors are more significant to future confidence in Britain's democracy than **the quality of political leadership**. Most feel poorly served by their leaders, perceiving them as cynical and dishonest. As a result, they pay less attention to debates, often seeing all politicians as the same, and are more willing to set aside democratic norms. In an age where many people have a deep instinctive understanding of how politicians use marketing tactics to manipulate them, they want leadership to be more authentic, transparent, and honest – and to represent people and local communities rather than representing a political party.
- While most people do not have the time or capacity to engage deeply with individual issues, many want it to be easier to make their voices heard on the issues of the day. Governments should expand the ways in which people can engage in **local and national decision-making processes** – experimenting with different approaches, with an eye to finding those that engage the most diverse range of people.

The United Kingdom is moving into a new, post-Brexit era, and (prospectively) a post-pandemic era. This is a good time for **a wider conversation about “the system” and what reforms might strengthen democracy and make the system more representative, responsive, and participatory.**

**The United States**  
**of America:**  
**A Democracy**  
**Divided?**

The background features abstract, flowing shapes in shades of green and teal. A large teal shape curves from the top left towards the center. Below it, a white shape curves from the center towards the bottom right. Further down, a large green shape curves from the bottom left towards the center. The overall composition is dynamic and modern.



# The United States of America: A Democracy Divided?

## Introduction

Democracy in the United States of America has faced numerous tests in recent years. Extreme polarization in government and among the country's electorate, nationwide protests against racial injustice, enormous health and economic impacts of a pandemic, a president who was impeached twice in one term in office, a contentious and contested presidential election, and the violent storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021: All of that forms the backdrop for the current state of democracy in the United States, with a post-election article from *The Atlantic* proclaiming, "The Crisis of American Democracy Is Not Over."<sup>32</sup>

**32** Serwer, A. (2020, 8 November): The Crisis of American Democracy Is Not Over. *The Atlantic*.

Other recent headlines similarly portray American democracy as being on its last legs – "Fragile Democracy" and "America in Danger"<sup>33</sup> – or herald that "Our democracy is in crisis."<sup>34</sup> The popular opinion seems to be that democracy in America is in greater danger than at any point since the Civil War.

**33** Salmon, F. (2021, 8 January): America in Danger. *Axios*.

Our study has found, however, that the story in America is much more complex.<sup>35</sup> **While there are certainly concerning trends, and though these trends have a definite impact on Americans' current attitudes toward the state of their democracy, we also see a resilient confidence in, and a commitment to, democracy as a system that do not seem at risk of eroding in the short term.**

**34** Editorial of the New Yorker (2020): Special series: "The Future of Democracy." *The New Yorker*.

**35** In collaboration with YouGov, More in Common surveyed a total of 2,000 adults in the US about their attitudes to democracy, the current political climate, and their own role in community and society. The quantitative survey took place in January and February 2021, followed by qualitative focus groups in March 2021.

While some studies point to distinct groups that do not actively participate in the democratic system,<sup>36</sup> our research shows a more nuanced distribution of attitudes. **We find views that imply a loss of faith in a particular tenet of democracy often coexisting alongside intense faith in other tenets.** For instance, although nearly eight in ten Republicans believe that elections in the United States have become fraudulent and corrupted, the majority also does not believe that the solution is to reduce or do away with elections in the US. Similarly, while Democrats are more supportive of suppressing speech or limiting freedoms to protect against hate and violence, they maintain a strong regard for checks and balances, and reject alternative forms of government in which leaders are given more power.

**36** Amandi, F. et al. (2020): The 100 Million Project. *The Untold Story of American Non-Voters*. Knight Foundation.

Yet, even if there is no imminent collapse of Americans' faith in the norms of democracy, we do see flashing yellow lights in their confidence in its mechanisms. In particular, Americans have become deeply polarized in their attitudes toward elections and sources of information (e.g. the media, science, and experts). This is most acute with respect to a segment of the population we have identified as "Embattled Conservatives" – Americans who, despite overwhelming evidence indicating a free, fair, and accurate election, believe the election was stolen from former President Donald Trump. Such beliefs laid the groundwork for two acts unprecedented in American history: many Republican members of the House of Representatives voting against certifying the 2020 election results; and the horrific storming of the US Capitol on January 6.

It is in this context that we find *polarization* to be a much more urgent challenge to democracy in the United States than indifference. **An analysis whose "search grid" is primarily set on apathy and distance from democratic norms or politics as a whole did not, therefore, seem to us to be sufficient to best capture current threats to US democracy.** For this reason, our research focused more on dynamics such as affective polarization toward one's political opponents, the willingness to justify extreme acts in defense of one's own side (or in defense of democracy), and other, similar phenomena. In this report, we highlight segments of the American population based on these developments.

## National Context

Previous More in Common research has highlighted how Americans' shared faith in democracy as a system has persisted through recent events.<sup>37</sup> A consistent share of the population (roughly eight in ten Americans), both before and after the 2020 election period, agree that democracy is preferable to other types of governments. There was, and remains, a strong belief in the importance of voting and elections.

At the same time, More in Common's research has shown that Americans' attitudes toward threats to democracy and the nation diverge strongly, with **perceived perils varying along party lines**. For instance, gerrymandering and racial injustice are at the forefront for Democrats, while threats from the mainstream media and voter fraud stand out among Republicans. An even more divisive reality is that, **in an era of partisan news and insular engagement with one's preferred social media network, differences among Americans have become dangerously tribal**. Partisan voices increasingly obscure the more complex and less strident views held by an "Exhausted Majority", the large segment of the population open to listening and changing their minds.

Other studies that have examined democracy in America have found a similar dynamic. In *Democracy Maybe*<sup>38</sup>, a June 2020 report, The Voter Study Group found that an overwhelming majority of Americans embrace democracy (80 percent) and exhibit strong opposition to authoritarian forms of government. Still, there are worrying indications of "equivocation" or "conditionality", and there is evidence of Americans "dabbling" in authoritarianism, especially among conservatives, who are disengaged, distrustful of experts, and have negative attitudes toward racial minorities.

A 2017 report, *The Republic is (Still) at Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution*,<sup>39</sup> found that the **notion of distrust is the most concerning risk for American democracy**, noting: "When distrust for major institutions combines with distrust for other citizens, the result is declining support for democracy itself." In a country which has known no system of government other than democracy, the vocabulary by which we might better understand threats to democracy includes terms such as trust, identity, and polarization.

## Trends and Dynamics Around Democracy

### **Encouraging Signs**

In our research on attitudes toward democracy in the United States, More in Common uncovered several often overlooked and underappreciated indications that the bedrock of democracy in America remains robust. Encouraging signs include:

- Democracy as a fundamental part of American identity
- Support for democracy over alternatives
- Engagement in the system
- High regard for the foundations of democracy
- Overarching belief in or desire for unity

<sup>37</sup> Hawkins, S. et al. (2018): *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape*. More in Common.

<sup>38</sup> Drutman, L., Goldman, J., Diamond, L. (2020): *Democracy Maybe. Attitudes on Authoritarianism in America*. Democracy Fund Voter Study Group.

<sup>39</sup> Levine, P., Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. (2017): *The Republic is (Still) at Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution. A Briefing Paper for the Democracy at a Crossroads National Summit*. iCivics.

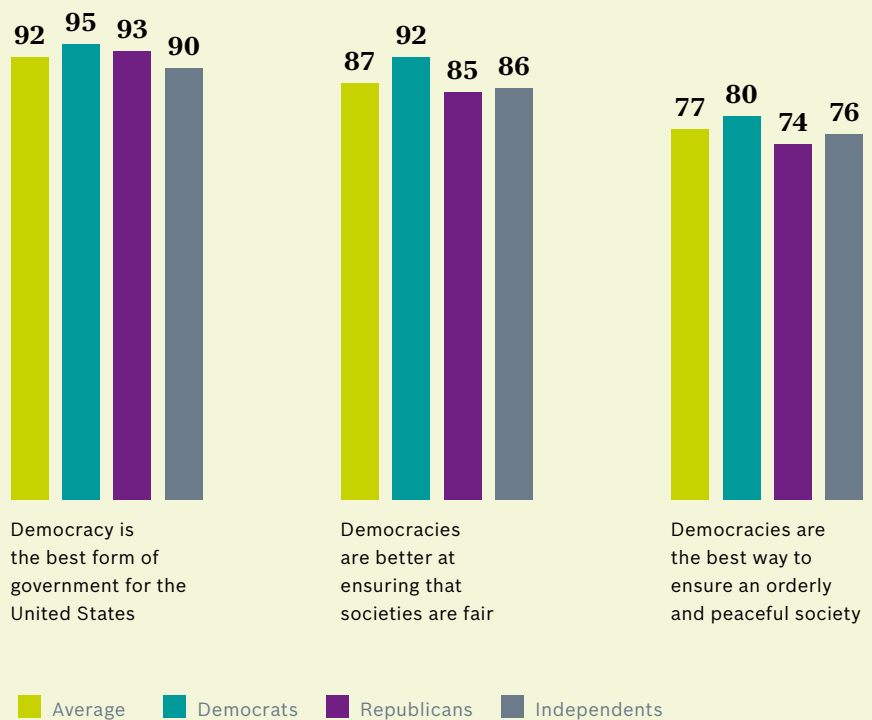
**We see that the idea of democracy helps form the fabric of national identity in America.** More than nine in ten Americans believe that democracy is the best form of government for the United States, and eight in ten attach strong importance to living in a country that is governed democratically. Further, we find that democracy, the only form of government that Americans have collectively known, remains preferable in their mind to any alternative. Nearly eight in ten Americans regard democracy as imperfect but still preferable to other forms of government. A strong majority also hold the belief that in general, democracies are better at ensuring that societies are fair and orderly.

**Figure 37:**

## Views toward democracy remain robust among Americans

### Democracy as a Normative Bedrock

Agree in %



Question: Which of the following statements do you agree with more (pair of opposites)?  
 Source: More in Common (2021)

Overt support for systems in opposition to democracy is only voiced by a small minority. Fewer than 10 percent support the idea of considering alternative forms of government in which leaders are given more power, and only one in ten strongly agree that America needs a revolution at the current moment in time.

When it comes to civic engagement, there are encouraging signs regarding the resilience of American democracy. **More than 80 percent of Americans indicate that they have participated in some form of political or civic engagement in the past year.** And with record voter turnout in 2020, two-thirds voted in a local election. Additionally, 54 percent of Americans continue to follow government and public affairs “most of the time”, while just 4 percent say they do not follow them “at all”.

Despite the contentious nature of the 2020 election, most Americans continue to hold democratic elections sacred. Seventy percent oppose the idea of doing away with elections in the US, even if doing so would mean that their preferred political party could stay in power. Similarly, two-thirds of Americans disagree with the idea that fewer elections would mean a more united country.

Americans also continue to hold the main tenets of democracy in high regard, including checks and balances and the separation of powers among the three branches of government. The vast majority, 80 percent, view these elements of the American system of government to be “indispensable”, while just one in five see them as contributing to dysfunction. Further, only 10 percent of Americans strongly agree that the country needs a leader who is willing to break the rules.

**Despite the polarization that currently exists in US politics and society, we find an underlying current of belief in unity.** Nearly two-thirds of Americans describe their differences as not so big that they cannot work together. Fully eight in ten Americans hold the opinion that people who disagree with them politically deserve the same rights as they do, while conversely, just 27 percent believe that the concerns of those not in political power should take a back seat if they conflict with the interests of the majority.

### **Cause for Concern**

Yet the devastating events of January 6, 2021, including the incitement of violence stemming from the former administration’s rhetoric and use of social media, the storming of the Capitol, and the accusations of election fraud leading up to (and subsequent to) these events indicate that although the foundation of American democracy may be strong, there are real and urgent concerns.

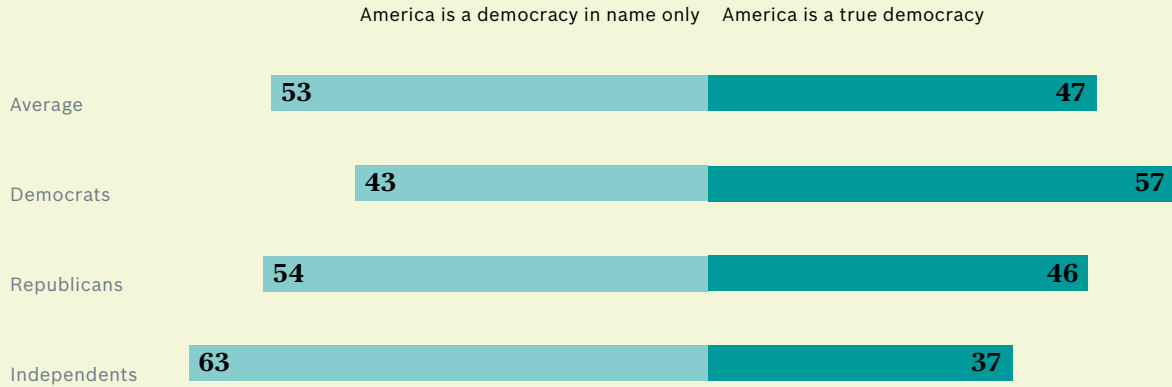
**Many Americans do not feel that democracy is working in its current state.** The government is largely seen as having become too dysfunctional to govern the country effectively, and just 4 percent of Americans strongly agree that elected officials are better qualified than ordinary people to make decisions affecting the public. When asked to assess the government in broad terms, less than a quarter strongly agree that America is the best democracy in the world at this point in time, and 53 percent describe America’s present system of government as a democracy in name only.

Figure 38:

## America, a true democracy?

Despite strong support for the idea of democracy, half of Americans do not feel that democracy is working in its current state

Agree in %



Question: Which statement do you agree with more? Source: More in Common (2021)

A majority of Americans strongly agree that there are serious threats to democracy in the country today, with evidence of threats coming in large part from:

- Divisiveness and weak community ties
- Disagreement with respect to democratic freedoms
- A perceived lack of true representation
- Distrust in experts and the media
- Absence of a shared truth
- Racial tensions and injustice

**Polarization influences Americans' current views on free speech, law and order, and the role of government in protecting its citizens from speech that promotes hate or violence. It also introduces uncertainty into the conduct of free and fair elections.**

In the lead-up to the 2020 election, 68 percent of Republicans believed that Democrats were more likely to engage in voter fraud, and roughly nine in ten Republicans believed that people not eligible to vote would be able to cast ballots. These perceptions have not abated since the transition to a new administration. We also find soft, but still notable support for actions which raise tension with the balances of rights critical in a democracy, such as the limitation of speech. A plurality of Americans, skewing strongly Democratic, believe that there is too little protection from speech that promotes hatred or violence in the United States. Democrats show more support than Republicans for government restrictions on citizens' freedoms to ensure public safety or to prevent the incitement of violence. Likewise, nearly 90 percent of Democrats (versus just a quarter of Republicans) agree that social media companies have the right to limit speech on their platforms if they determine that rules were violated.

Republicans, by contrast, have undergone a significant shift in their attitudes toward freedom of expression from before the election to afterwards (and after January 6). Six in ten now agree that Americans have too little freedom to say what they think, versus just a third saying the same prior to the election.

**Figure 39:**

## Freedom of expression

The 2020 Presidential election and its aftermath significantly influenced views on freedom of expression, most notable among conservatives

Numbers in %

### “There is ... freedom of expression”

Average



Average



Democrats



Democrats



Republicans



Republicans



Independents



Independents



Pre-election

Post-election

■ Too little   ■ Right amount   ■ Too much

Question: Do you believe that nowadays in America we have too little, the right amount, or too much freedom to express what we think? Source: More in Common (Nov 2020; Mar 2021). Please note: Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

A lack of consensus on the results of the 2020 presidential election is clear: Nearly all Democrats (93 percent) agree that Biden won the election fairly, while just 15 percent of Republicans concur. Two-thirds of Republicans believe that Trump won the election, but had it stolen from him. We see a similar divide in related attitudes about election fraud, with six in ten Republicans indicating that fraud had “a lot” of effect on determining the 2020 presidential winner, versus nearly nine in ten Democrats saying that it had “none”.

These troubling signs may represent more of a moment-in-time response to the partisan nature of these events rather than signaling any larger collective shift toward anti-democratic principles. **But they do highlight fissures in how Americans of different political ideologies are experiencing democracy.**

**A deep partisan divide likewise exists with regard to trust in the media, experts, and science.** Roughly four in ten Americans, skewing heavily Republican, agree that social media companies, the mainstream media, and academics/intellectuals “look down on people like me a lot”. A notable majority of Republicans (69 percent) also strongly disagree that “the mainstream media accurately reflects the views of people like me”, and just 5 percent of Republicans strongly agree that experts are better qualified than ordinary people to make decisions that affect the public, or that it is important to heed the advice given by experts and scientists.

Ties to local communities, which often nourish democratic engagement, are also strained. While Americans continue to participate civically and politically in some way overall, just 10 percent say that they have a strong sense of belonging in their local neighborhood, and roughly half that many feel the same sense of belonging to a community organization.

**This lack of a sense of belonging is further evidenced by the finding that fewer than one in ten Americans strongly agree that their rights as citizens are respected by their fellow Americans.** Furthermore, seven in ten Republicans and more than six in ten Democrats agree that those from the opposing political party look down on them “a lot”. **A large segment of Americans feel that they are not represented in current politics or by current politicians.** Only a third agree that “people like me have a say in politics”, and just 18 percent believe that most politicians are interested in “what people like me think”. While a majority of Americans continue to follow government and public affairs on a regular basis, among those who do not, a common reason for disengagement is the amount of anger and conflict in politics.

Finally, race is a complex issue uniquely salient to understanding the fabric of democracy in America. **Divisiveness in the United States extends most deeply to issues surrounding race.** With the Black Lives Matter movement and protests occurring across the country, two-thirds of Americans overall agree that racism continues to be a significant issue in the country today, but that opinion skews to nearly 95 percent of Democrats and just a third of Republicans. Similarly, a majority of those who lean liberal strongly agree that white supremacy threatens the survival of people of color in America, while a larger majority of conservatives disagree with this view and are more likely to see racial problems in the country as rare, isolated situations.

## Overall Assessment of the State of Democracy in the United States

There is a dissonance between democracy as an abstract construct and experiential democracy. Belief and confidence in democracy as a system of government remain strong in the United States, while at the same time, there are practical elements of democracy as experienced by Americans that feel fragmented.

By examining the ways in which Americans experience democracy, and by developing a nuanced understanding of those segments of the population that indicate ambivalence toward key democratic norms, principles, institutions, and behaviors, we can arrive at an actionable approach to these threats.

## Segments of Concern in the United States

In America's hyper-polarized moment, **where we see attitudes about the country and the country's democracy inextricably linked to ideological identity**, and where we see an overall lack of a shared truth or common agreement on the facts, a more acute and salient concern specific to the United States lies in these tribal<sup>40</sup> or team dynamics. These dynamics result in cynicism toward aspects of American democracy when they are perceived as not being in support of one's own "side" or "team".

This cynicism appears alongside the urgent concerns outlined in the previous section: disillusionment with the system and a sense of victimhood, in the form of distrust of elected officials or the federal government; distrust in the media and in experts, science, and facts; and a general disappointment in the results of democracy for oneself or one's side.

Considering this dynamic, we have identified three segments of the electorate, which are described below. Two of the segments have a strong undercurrent of victimhood and disillusionment, which manifests as cynicism (Embattled Conservatives and Activist Mavericks). The third segment is disengaged in the more traditional sense of passivity and has lower involvement in civic life (Disengaged Moderate Conservatives).

These three segments – each in its own distinct way – illuminate the most pressing challenges facing American democracy. At a moment when headlines are painting a picture of an American democracy engulfed in crisis, these three segments reveal a more complex and nuanced picture. Understanding these three segments and their unique attitudes toward democracy may not make the overall picture much brighter, but it does reveal opportunities for specific and curated strategies to strengthen support for democracy.

### **Embattled Conservatives (31 percent)**

Embattled Conservatives demonstrate strong support for the idea of democracy, yet also express and embody deep cynicism and ideological tribalism.

**40** The term "tribalism" describes strong group references and loyalties and is used in the context of social dynamics to denote processes of demarcation and identification (see e.g. Fukuyama, F. (2018): *Against Identity Politics. The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy*. In: *Foreign Affairs* 90, 2018.)



### **Demographic and Political Characteristics:**

An older population with more retirees than average (33 percent are retired, versus 22 percent overall)

- Largely white (83 percent), male (58 percent), married (51 percent), Republican (58 percent), and conservative or very conservative (72 percent)
- Suburban (52 percent), but also more rural than other segments of the population (33 percent)
- More religious than other segments (51 percent say that religion is very important in their life, versus 37 percent overall)

### **Distinguishing Characteristics:**

- Deep distrust of the 2020 presidential election results
- Highly engaged, proud to be American, strongly pro-democracy as a construct
- An elevated sense of victimhood
- Cynicism toward the federal government and toward politicians
- Cynicism and distrust toward the media, experts, science, and facts
- Cynicism and grievance regarding issues of race

**Embattled Conservatives are not disengaged and not detached from others.** On the contrary, they are highly politically and civically engaged, with 91 percent having participated in some activity in this regard in the past year. They are almost universally registered to vote (97 percent), and a high proportion have voted in a recent local election (81 percent, versus 67 percent of the population overall). Nearly two-thirds follow government and public affairs most of the time, compared to 54 percent of the population on average, and a full two-thirds strongly agree that they want more of a say in decisions that affect the country's future (versus half of the population overall).

Embattled Conservatives are proud to be, and strongly identify with being, American. Roughly eight in ten in this segment (versus less than half overall) strongly agree that they are proud to be American and nearly as many say that being American is very important to their identity. **Given their sense of national pride, they unsurprisingly hold the idea of American democracy in high regard.** This segment of the population offers the strongest agreement that America is home to the best democracy in the world (68 percent versus 49 percent overall). Sixty-four percent strongly agree that democracy is imperfect, but is still preferable to other forms of government, and 95 percent affirm that democracy is the best form of government for the United States.

Cynicism is evident, however, in their responses to how they are currently experiencing democracy. More than nine in ten Embattled Conservatives see serious threats to our democracy (even more than the 83 percent of the overall population), and 45 percent strongly agree that the government has become too dysfunctional to govern the country effectively (notably higher than the 26 percent overall result).

In a focus group with this segment, all participants said that they feel that the country is currently moving in the wrong direction, pointing to a nation divided on politics and race and unable to practice civil discourse with one another, needing nothing short of a national tragedy to unite us and pull us together in the same direction for the country. As one woman in a focus group stated: *"We're just so divided as a country right now. There are so many different aspects to it. For example, cancel culture. Politics is also a huge reason for division. Of course, race, too. It's always weighed against Black people. Can't we just, you know, get along? It's just a big mess."*

**While Embattled Conservatives are politically engaged, they are frustrated by the lack of a sense of agency or by a feeling of alienation, and they lack faith in politicians and the government.** Over three-quarters of Embattled Conservatives agree that “people like me” do not have any influence over what the government does (compared to 65 percent overall), and a higher-than-average 94 percent feel that politicians do not care what people like them think. They see little influence on society coming from citizens’ actions in general, and strongly disagree that their rights as citizens are currently being respected by the government.

Those in the focus group echoed this attitude, with the general sentiment being that it is not necessary to put much into the system to be a good American or a good democratic citizen. For them, aside from voting, it is more about just being the best person that they can be, and more about what democracy is doing for them. James, an Embattled Conservative, shared: *“I don’t think there’s anything we can really do. Personally, I’ve done a lot of things to improve my life. But I think the government’s going to do what they want to do, no matter what, no matter what we say, no matter what we do.”*

And while the segment overall expresses a strong connection to their family and friends, **Embattled Conservatives feel alienated from their neighbors and a weak sense of belonging in their local communities.** One focus group participant said:

**“We’re really alienated as a country. I really haven’t known a lot of my neighbors for pretty much my whole life. I can really count the number of friends I have with fingers and toes. A lot of people are just so cloistered, and they don’t have any social interactions, and they tend to live in their own little worlds.”**

– Quote from focus group

**A strong sense of victimhood is one of the most characteristic traits of Embattled Conservatives. This shapes their impressions of the government and may feed into their lack of agency or the feeling that there is no need to contribute to a system to keep it healthy.** More than half of this segment disagrees that “people like me” have it easier than most, and nearly as many (49 percent) agree that the system works against them (compared with 40 percent overall). They feel looked down upon a lot by the federal government (62 percent, versus just 34 percent overall), by Democrats (92 percent), the mainstream media (90 percent, compared to 42 percent overall), social media companies (83 percent, versus 42 percent overall), and academics and intellectuals (72 percent, compared to 36 percent overall).

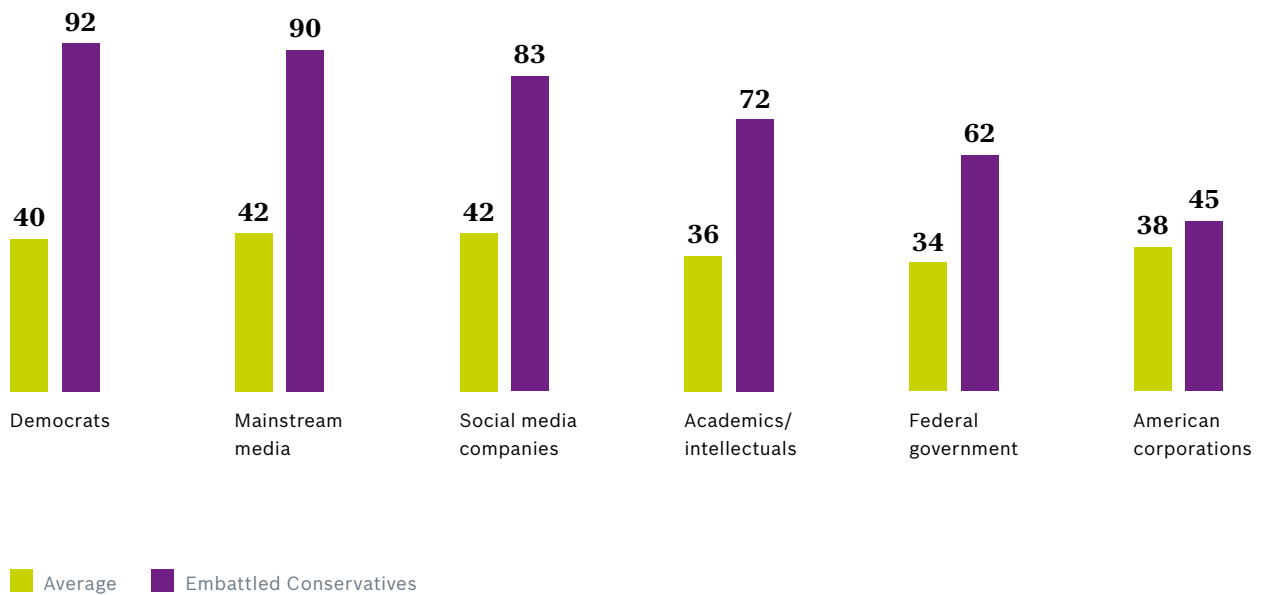
Figure 40:

## Victimhood

Embattled Conservatives feel a strong sense of victimhood from different groups and sectors

### I feel looked down upon a lot by ...

Agree in %



Question: In general, to what extent do you feel that people from the following groups look down upon people like you?  
Source: More in Common (2021)

More than eight in ten Embattled Conservatives disagree that elected officials are better qualified than ordinary citizens to make decisions that will affect the public, and six in ten say the same about experts. Nearly a third of this segment agrees that when it comes to really important questions, scientific facts do not help very much (compared to 18 percent of the population overall), and a similar proportion disagrees that it is important to listen to and heed the advice given by experts and scientists (versus just 12 percent overall). Furthermore, half of this segment agrees that it is important to be loyal to your beliefs, even in the face of contradictory evidence.

**This cynicism toward experts and scientific facts coexists with a strong distrust of the media.** More than eight in ten, a proportion that is double that of the population overall, have no confidence at all in the news media and strongly disagree that the mainstream media accurately reflects the views of “people like me”.

In focus group discussions, members of this segment discussed how hard it is to gather unbiased information, asserting that you have to do it on your own by going to multiple websites that are not part of the mainstream media and by turning to your social media feeds. One participant lamented:

**“It’s hard to try to find a news source that’s unbiased. I remember years ago, the news were just facts, but now, news shows from Fox to CNN to NBC are about their opinions, not about the facts.”**

– Quote from focus group

This level of distrust in many, if not most, sources of credible information, creates vulnerabilities in the American democracy by impeding efforts to arrive at a shared understanding of reality. This dynamic also creates risks that people gather news from information sources which reaffirm pre-existing beliefs and amplify perceived grievances.

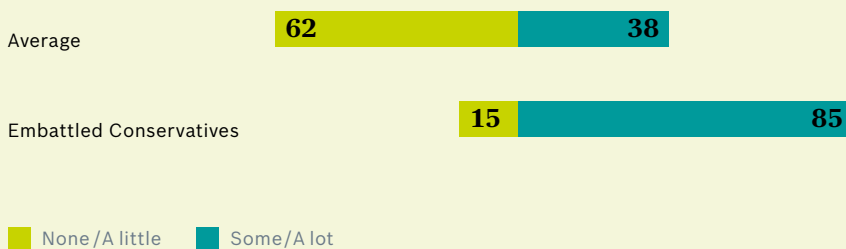
**In perhaps the most alarming sign for democracy, this suspicion manifests in a deep distrust of the election results and a declining faith in the integrity of elections in the country.** Nearly nine in ten Embattled Conservatives believe that elections in the US have become fraudulent and corrupt. A full three-quarters of them believe that Trump won the 2020 election, but had it stolen from him, and nearly as many (72 percent) think that fraud played a significant role in determining the 2020 election winner.

Figure 41:

## Election integrity

**What effect did fraud have in determining the winners of the 2020 election?**

Agree in %



Question: In your view, what effect did fraud have in determining the winners of the 2020 election?

Source: More in Common (2021)

In the focus group, members of this segment expressed the belief that Big Tech and the government were working together to silence or suppress news of the election fraud and that this was a threat to American democracy. As one woman put it: *“During this past election, people were concerned about different forms of fraud, and it felt like the government and Big Tech were suppressing and not allowing any of those concerns to be heard. It seems like they are working together to silence a lot of opposing voices. It feels like people aren’t going to be able to share their thoughts and have freedom of speech as much.”*

**The sense among Embattled Conservatives that certain groups are seeking to silence their voices emerges in their views regarding protection against hate speech.** The segment agrees to a greater degree than average that people with extreme views have the right to express them (87 percent, versus 67 percent overall), and that they themselves often feel like they cannot freely express their opinion (67 percent, compared to 38 percent overall). They strongly believe that the government should not be able to suppress or limit speech or freedoms under any circumstances. Likewise, more than eight in ten Embattled Conservatives agree that under no circumstances should social media companies be allowed to ban or censor users (versus less than half of the overall population).

But in the focus group discussion, those in this segment were most aggrieved by the perception that the Black Lives Matter protests were not being denounced, but that the Capitol riot was – highlighting the “team” dynamics and sense of victimhood particularly experienced by this segment of the population. An Embattled Conservative said: *“The government is quick to denounce the Proud Boys and say they’re awful, but then they won’t denounce Antifa. They’re very willing to denounce the Capitol riot, but they weren’t able to denounce the Black Lives Matter riot. So, it feels like the government is very one-sided and hypocritical.”*

**This sentiment of being on the losing side of a power imbalance extends beyond issues of speech and expression to issues of race and inequality.** Fifty-eight percent of Embattled Conservatives worry about becoming a minority in America and 55 percent say they sometimes feel like a stranger in their own country. In a further demonstration that Embattled Conservatives do not believe systems of oppression fall along racial lines in America, a large majority agrees that racism was a problem in the past but is not a significant issue in the country today, and that white supremacists pose little danger in the United States.

#### **Activist Mavericks (4 percent)**

Activist Mavericks, who comprise 4 percent of the population, are highly engaged and ideological. Accordingly, they should not be understood as democratically indifferent. They do not believe the election fraud narrative and are instead more concerned about addressing voter suppression. **The salient feature of this segment is their significantly higher than average desire to support extreme action.** This sentiment, which often manifests itself as support for human and civil rights, can also indicate a potential rigidity in orientation that could lead to more anti-democratic views or behaviors.

**Demographic and Political Characteristics:**

- Predominantly male (66 percent), white (69 percent) but also Hispanic (20 percent), and suburban (58 percent)
- A younger population with more students than average (24 percent, versus 8 percent overall), and a greater share than average that has never been married (69 percent, versus 36 percent overall)
- No strong party affiliation (57 percent are Independent or Other), but lean very liberal (65 percent)
- Less religious than other segments (58 percent say that religion is not at all important in their lives, versus 27 percent overall)

**Distinguishing Characteristics:**

- Highly engaged politically and civically, highly thoughtful about the issues
- Not proud to be American
- Pro-democracy and anti-authoritarian, but see a democracy “in name only” in America
- Belief in radical change to fix the system; anything is justified in defending democracy
- Distrustful of the federal government, politicians, and the way the system is working
- Less happy and hopeful and more anxious
- Anti-corporations/big business
- Support for minorities and equality

As with Embattled Conservatives, and unlike Disengaged Moderate Conservatives, this segment of the population is not disengaged. They are instead more highly engaged than the average American, with 95 percent having participated in some activity in this regard in the past year, the highest proportion of any segment of the population. An above average 73 percent have voted in a recent local election, and a similar share follows government and public affairs most of the time – again, more than any other segment. Activist Mavericks are also much more likely than the population on average to have shared content on social media in support of an issue (73 percent), purchased or boycotted products related to an issue (54 percent), signed a petition (53 percent), or donated to a political cause (51 percent).

Activist Mavericks want more of a say in both local (74 percent, versus 68 percent overall), and national (94 percent, compared to 81 percent overall) decisions that affect them and the country, even more so than Embattled Conservatives.

Unlike Embattled Conservatives, however, Activist Mavericks are more open to thinking through ideas, less rigidly “team” oriented, and more supportive of experts, science, and facts. Nearly eight in ten strongly disagree that changing your mind is a sign of weakness (compared to 45 percent of Embattled Conservatives, and 53 percent overall). A near universal 91 percent agree that it is important to listen to and heed the advice of experts and scientists.

Activist Mavericks do not question America’s free and fair elections, regardless of the winner, but are more concerned with all Americans having equal and fair access to voting. Eighty-three percent agree that Biden won the 2020 presidential election fairly, and most believe that fraud was not at all a factor in his victory. Concerns about voting rights were voiced by a focus group participant, who said: “There are so many levels of voter suppression. Black people have a hard time voting. Indigenous people have a hard time voting. Transgender people have a hard time voting, whether or not we’ve changed our documents.”

**This segment's cynicism is evident, however, in their views of the federal government and how democracy currently functions in America.** Ninety-six percent feel that most politicians do not care what people like them think and that politicians want their vote, but do not actually care about their well-being. In fact, eight in ten agree, with nearly half strongly agreeing (a parallel to Embattled Conservatives), that the government has become too dysfunctional to govern the country effectively.

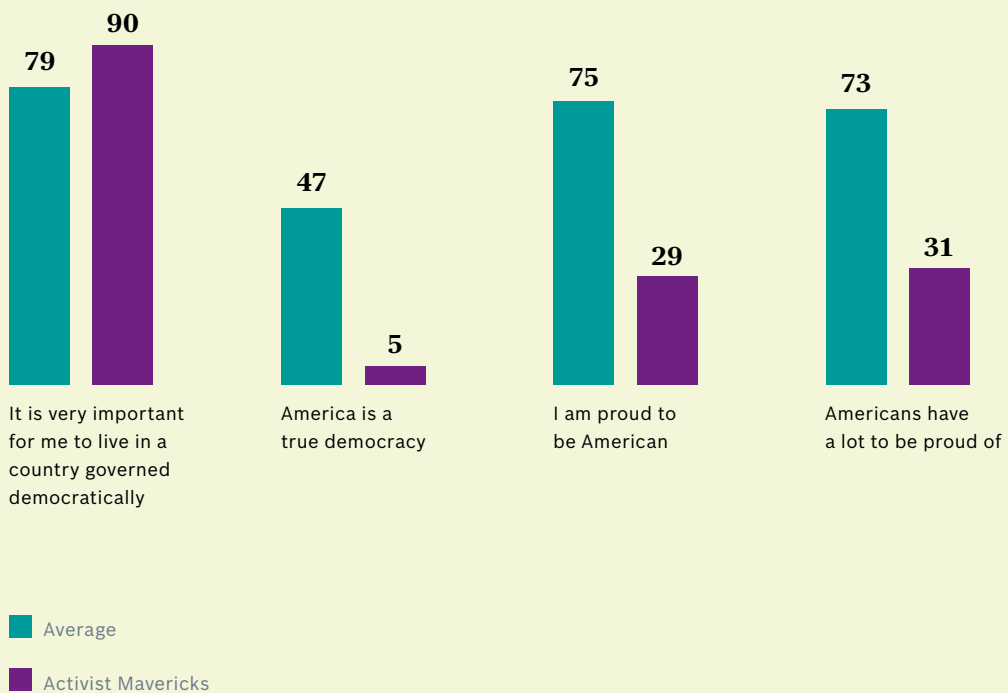
While Activist Mavericks hold in high regard the importance of living in a country that is governed democratically, reject alternative forms of government, and strongly oppose anti-democratic limits on rights, freedoms, or elections, nearly all (95 percent) feel that to some degree, America is a democracy in name only. Only 5 percent say that America is a true democracy, and only a third (29 percent) say they are proud to be American, or that Americans have a lot to be proud of (31 percent). This outlook toward national identity presents a particularly challenging dynamic when we consider how interwoven democracy and Americanism are in the United States overall.

**Figure 42:**

### Democracy and patriotism

Activist Mavericks are deeply discontented with democracy in the US and express anti-American sentiments

Agree in %



Questions: How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? Which statement do you agree with more (pair of opposites)? Source: More in Common (2021)

**Activist Mavericks feel victimized by the government and are extremely suspicious toward corporations.** More than four in ten (compared to 20 percent overall, though similar to the 40 percent of Embattled Conservatives) strongly disagree that their rights as citizens are respected by the government, and a far higher than average share of 73 percent believes that the system works against “people like me”, or that the federal government looks down on them a lot (68 percent). An even larger share of the segment (82 percent, the highest of any segment) feel that American corporations “look down on me” a lot, and 48 percent (compared to just 17 percent overall) believe that it is definitely true that big corporations are conspiring against ordinary Americans. This sentiment is clearly expressed by a participant in the focus group.

**“I do not believe that anybody should be working full time and not be able to pay for a place to live, pay for medical and dental care, have quality of life, have food. And today, I just think it’s outrageous, the exploitation of workers. I’ve become a socialist over the last few years, I don’t even believe in capitalism anymore. I think it’s a predatory system. It’s destroying people.”**

– Quote from focus group

**For Activist Mavericks, anything is justified when defending democracy at home, a sentiment which, while currently espoused in the name of supporting democracy, may have the potential to lead to anti-democratic views or behaviors over time.** For example, nine in ten say that confronting others online (compared to 26 percent of the population overall) is justified in defending democracy, while more startlingly, six in ten justify the destruction of property (versus just 6 percent overall), and nearly three in ten justify physically attacking other people (compared to 4 percent overall).



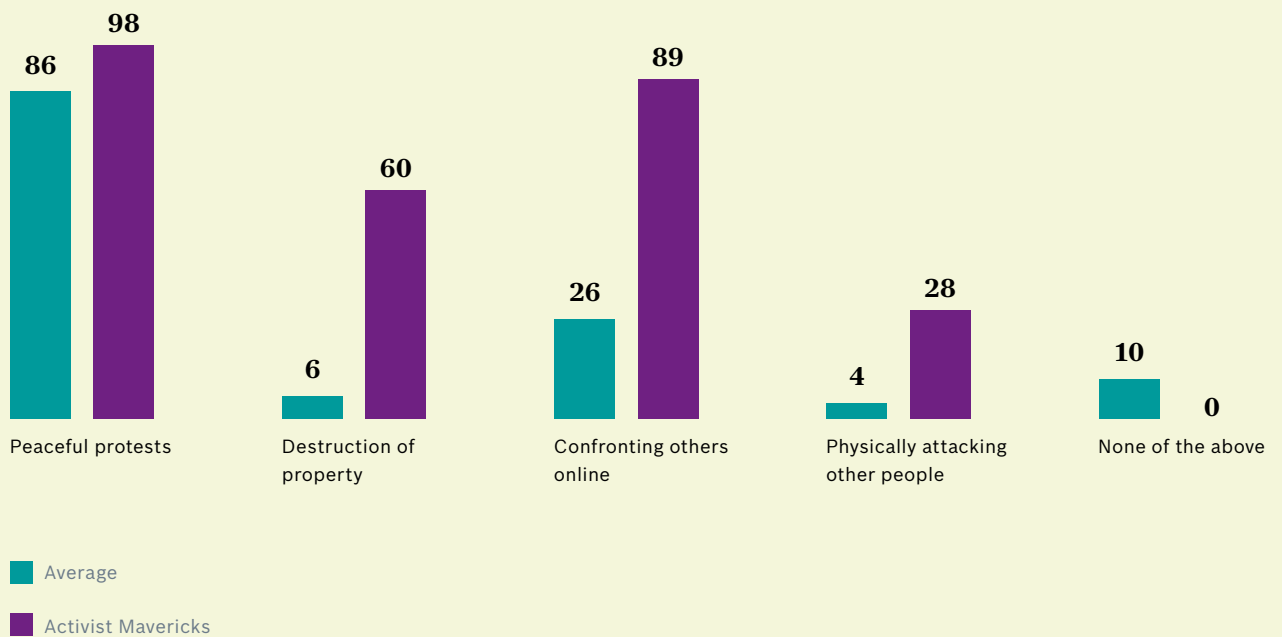
Figure 43:

## Legitimate action

Activist Mavericks view all and any actions as justifiable when defending democracy

### Which of the following actions are justified when defending democracy?

Agree in %



Question: Which of the following actions are justified when defending democracy here at home?  
Source: More in Common (2021)

This understanding, or even support, for extreme action in the name of democracy is reflected in this comment on the Jan. 6 Capitol riot by a participant of the focus group discussion:

**“My problem with it is not about violence. My problem is that the whole event was based on a lie, a lie that was repeated by tons of people and by the media over and over again. My issue was not so much that people stormed the Capitol. During the George Floyd protests, I would have stormed the Capitol if the opportunity had presented itself. I wouldn’t have hurt anyone in the process. I identify with that type of anger and frustration with the government and with our country. But my issue is that the Jan. 6 riot was based on a lie.”**

– Quote from focus group

Perhaps most concerning in terms of potential threats to democracy is that Activist Mavericks hold this cynicism alongside an appetite for extreme or radical action. Eighty percent of this segment of the population (compared to 52 percent overall) say that improving our society requires radical changes, and more than six in ten agree that in order for the government to actually represent the people, America needs a revolution (versus 26 percent overall).

#### **Disengaged Moderate Conservatives (13 percent)**

To underscore the extent to which polarization and political tribalism have become the biggest concerns facing the American democracy, we include here for comparison a more democratically indifferent segment of the population that shares some ideological views with the Embattled Conservatives: the Disengaged Moderate Conservatives.

#### **Demographic and Political Characteristics:**

- Predominantly female (64 percent), white (57 percent) but also Hispanic (20 percent), have children under the age of 18 (31 percent), and a larger proportion of homemakers than other segments (12 percent)
- Less educated and lower income than other segments
- A mixture of suburban (44 percent), urban (31 percent), and rural (25 percent)
- No strong religious identification
- More unsure how to describe their political viewpoint – 33 percent are Republican, 31 percent Democratic, 22 percent Independent, and 13 percent are Not Sure

***Distinguishing Characteristics:***

- Indifferent in the passive sense; they do not participate in democracy nor do they have any strong interest in democracy
- No strong opinions in general – most typically respond neither agree nor disagree to statements, or do not know
- Apathetic toward the defense of democracy
- Indifferent/no strong opposition to leaders with more power

This segment of the population is disengaged politically and civically. Forty-eight percent have not participated in any political or civic activities in the last year (compared to just 17 percent of the population overall), and more than a fifth, higher than other segments, indicate that they never fulfill obligations to their community.

**Disengaged Moderate Conservatives have other concerns that may stand in the way of their democratic engagement.** Compared to other Americans, they are more likely to have gone without enough food in the past year, to have felt unsafe from crime at home, and to have gone without medicine or treatment, and they are more likely to have had to borrow money. They also have a lower sense of belonging in their community, with 14 percent, twice the average share, indicating that they do not feel that they belong in any community.

At the same time, however, just 19 percent follow government and public affairs most of the time (compared to 54 percent of the population overall), and those who do not indicate that aside from not trusting politicians and wanting to avoid the anger and conflict in politics, they also find politics boring. **Additionally, Disengaged Moderate Conservatives do not express a desire to be more engaged than they are.** A plurality neither agree nor disagree that they would like to have more of a say in decisions that affect them and their local neighborhood (53 percent) or that they would like more of a say in decisions that affect the country's future (44 percent).

**Disengaged Moderate Conservatives display apathy toward democracy.** Only half of the segment (compared to eight-in-ten in the population overall) see it as strongly important to live in a country that is governed democratically. They offer the lowest agreement of any segment that democracy is the best form of government for the country (71 percent, versus 92 percent overall), and nearly seven in ten say that nothing is justified when defending democracy at home (not even peaceful protests).

This is not to say that the segment is dissatisfied with their experience in American democracy. A majority indicate that we have the “right amount” of freedoms to express what we think, of the press, to organize and protest, and the right amount of protection from speech that promotes hate and violence. Collectively, they express no strong sense of victimhood or feeling that they are looked down on.

**Figure 44:**

## Political and civic engagement

Numbers in %	<u>Average</u>	<u>Embattled Conservatives</u>	<u>Activist Mavericks</u>	<u>Disengaged Moderate Conservatives</u>
Voted in a local election	<b>67</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>27</b>
Donated to charity	<b>46</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>16</b>
Signed a petition	<b>38</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>10</b>
Shared content on personal social media in support of an issue	<b>35</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>11</b>
Purchased products or boycotted products related to an issue	<b>31</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>6</b>
Donated money to a campaign group or political organization	<b>26</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>5</b>
Donated money to my place of worship	<b>24</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>
Volunteered in my local community	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>5</b>
Donated blood	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>
Attended a protest, rally, or march	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>1</b>
None of the above	<b>17</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>48</b>

Question: Which of the following have you taken part in in the past year? Source: More in Common (2021)

**With respect to attitudes toward democracy, the most notable concerns are in this segment's soft acquiescence to some anti-democratic views.** While the segment does not strongly endorse any need for radical change – six in ten neither agree nor disagree that America needs a revolution – they do espouse greater agreement than other segments of the population with a need to consider alternative forms of government where leaders are given more power (28 percent, versus 8 percent overall). A quarter of the segment does not know if the United States needs a leader willing to break the rules (compared to just 13 percent overall). Similarly, just 55 percent see checks and balances in government as indispensable (compared to 80 percent of the population overall).

Yet their equivocal convictions toward tenets of democracy do not seem to make them particularly vulnerable to the falsehoods about the 2020 election that precipitated the attack on the US Capitol. They are divided in opinion on who won the 2020 presidential election, with 41 percent saying it was Biden, 31 percent believing it was Trump, but that he had the election stolen from him, and 28 percent expressing uncertainty about who won. They are also uncertain about whether elections in the United States have become fraudulent or corrupted (46 percent neither agree nor disagree).

This indifference characterizes most of their views toward the more salient threats to American democracy. A majority neither agrees nor disagrees that they would accept some limitations on their rights if their family would be better off than they are now (60 percent); and a similar proportion neither agrees nor disagrees that they would be willing to do away with elections in the United States if it meant their preferred political party could stay in power (56 percent). Likewise, Disengaged Moderate Conservatives neither support nor strongly oppose government suppression in the name of public safety, or conversely, the protection of the rights of others. Roughly half neither agree nor disagree that the government should limit the speech of people who are inciting violence, that people with extreme beliefs have a right to express their views, or that people who disagree with them politically deserve the same rights as they do.

The attitudes expressed by this segment are not encouraging with respect to the health of American democracy, but they do not present as urgent a threat when compared to the more polarized views evident in other segments.

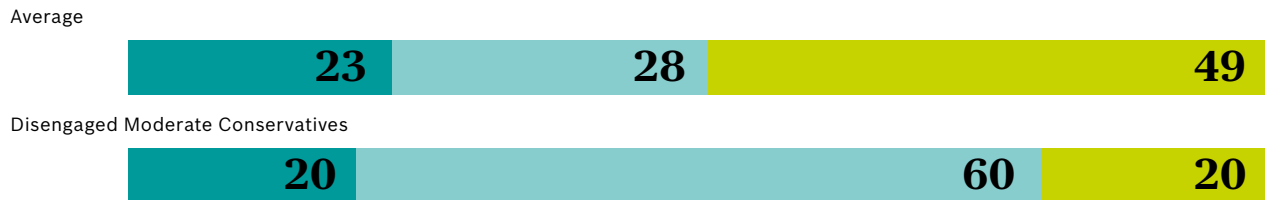
Figure 45:

## Rights and trade-offs

Disengaged Moderate Conservatives have no strong viewpoints on issues related to democratic rights and culture

### I would accept some limitations to my constitutional rights if it meant my family would be better off than they are now

Numbers in %



### If it meant my preferred political party could stay in charge, I would be willing to do away with elections in the US



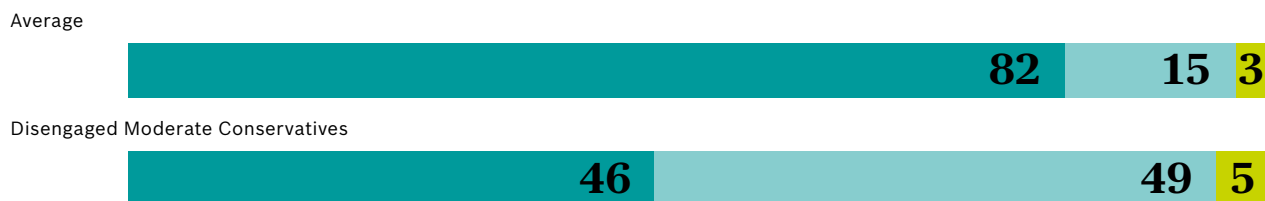
### The government should limit the speech of people who are inciting violence



### People with extreme beliefs have a right to express their views



### People who disagree with me politically deserve the same rights as I do



■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree

Questions: How much do you agree with the following statements? How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
Source: More in Common (2021)

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The echoes of the January 6 attack on the Capitol are still audible. As recently as March 25, former president Trump repeated false claims of a stolen election while being interviewed on television.<sup>41</sup> In this context, it is critical to address the risks evident in Americans' attitudes toward democracy. But it is also necessary to have a clear sense for the intensity and pervasiveness of the various risks.

<sup>41</sup> Porter, T. (2021, 26 March): "Laura Ingraham Cut Trump off When He Tried to Repeat False Claims That the Election was Stolen, As Fox News Faces Defamation Lawsuits". Insider.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. eg. Educating for American Democracy. Retrieved from [www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/](http://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/).

**Contrary to what might be inferred from the commentary about American democracy, More in Common has found that indifference or disengagement is not the most urgent threat.** It is clear that democratic indifference is a problem. However, there remains a strong sustained faith in the norms and tenets of democracy as a system of governance. The more concerning threat to American democracy is that of ideological polarization – the degree to which many Americans are willing to see issues entirely through a partisan lens of “us versus them”.

This polarization cuts across the political landscape, and efforts need to be made to reduce polarization in the broadest way. At the same time, specific efforts should be tailored to address the root causes of polarization that animate distrust in both elections and credible information sources. Our findings indicate three potential pathways for constructive impact:

- **New models for community-building to create healthier ecosystems of facts, information, and discourse.** There are few spaces where Americans interact with fellow citizens of diverse ideological views. Many current initiatives focus on direct bridge-building that brings liberals and conservatives together. Such efforts are producing important results but are limited in scale. America would benefit if there were more efforts to catalyze new movements that would bring Americans together under shared, non-political identities – e.g., as food enthusiasts, music fans, yoga practitioners, members of faith groups, etc. – but where healthy norms of information can be created. Social relationships are an important source of confirming or challenging one's own beliefs, and fostering more ideologically diverse social networks could remove some of the toxic polarization evident in America today.
- **Elevate “in-group moderates”.** This strategy would address both polarization and democratic indifference by identifying and supporting groups and messengers with credibility among polarized segments of American society to foster a healthier political culture. In the American context, this would likely involve engaging faith networks, veterans and military families, and small business owners. Such individuals and groups could credibly provide venues for accessing information, discussing political issues, and engaging with Americans of different ideological backgrounds.
- **Expand civics education.** There is a robust movement to reinvigorate American civics education for the youth.<sup>42</sup> This could be complemented by initiatives that build, test, and scale new models for adult civics education. These programs could take the form of new online learning modules, partnerships with video gaming and mass media content producers, or new podcasts or video series.

A successful democracy requires more than just confidence in the norms and tenets of democratic governance. It requires a threshold level of trust across ideological lines and the willingness to see political opponents as fellow citizens and not as enemies. As this report makes clear, ideological polarization – and its corrosive impacts on democracy – is at a concerning level in the United States. Yet it remains in Americans' power to address this risk by working together to bolster the resilience of democracy.





# Conclusion

The comprehensive overview of attitudes toward democracy in Germany, France, Poland, Britain, and the US that we have compiled over the past several months has revealed one thing quite clearly: The idea of democracy as such enjoys great popularity in the Western world. That is true of very old democracies, like in the United States, and more recent democracies, such as in Poland. **Everywhere, the vast majority of people say “yes” to the principle of popular rule** and express support for shared values like the rule of law, free elections, and freedom of opinion.

That also means that the dangers facing democracy of the kind currently seen and feared by many are less characterized by an open rejection of this form of government. In none of the countries we investigated did we find an appetite for an alternative to democracy that would attract a majority.

Nevertheless, this study of attitudes toward democracy in five countries does not in any way give the all-clear. It plainly shows that there are differing views and expectations of democracy as well as varying experiences with democracy – differences that have significant effects on democratic cooperation in all five countries, in disparate forms and severity. As such, stopping at the level of terminology is insufficient if we want to better understand the current dynamics facing democracy in the Western world.

This interplay between conceptions of democratic ideals on the one hand and evaluations of “real-existing democracy” on the other produces relevant findings in all five countries – along with broader insights that should engender concrete action at the level of civil society. The more precise view of those population segments in the relevant countries that do not have a well-grounded relationship to democracy, but which are not hostile to it, provides additional relevant findings regarding societal dynamics.

## Country-Specific Findings

In **Germany**, there is strong support for democracy, which has grown out of the country’s history. The people have internalized many constitutional principles and demonstrate mature democratic reflexes. Yet despite the solidity of that support for democracy, there is nevertheless a crisis of trust lurking beneath the surface between citizens and their political leaders. In the eyes of many, the system does not produce enough results and does not listen closely enough. Criticism of the elite and of the media is quick to receive broad support. Against that background, competing definitions of what democracy is and what it should be are more strongly evident, with people frequently talking past each other, even as they believe they are saying the same thing. Competing sides lay claim to being the “real democrats”. In the history-laden German political debate, such uncertainty can quickly spread.

In **France**, a systemic crisis is developing in a political system that has always reserved a significant and active role for the state (“liberty, equality, fraternity”), but which is falling short of its lofty aspirations in the eyes of many. In this context, it is important to note that there is an openness anchored in the collective French imagination to a strong, perhaps even authoritarian-leaning leader who will renew the system – despite the fact that the French people would, at the same time, like to have a greater say in political developments. This uniquely French set of circumstances, including persistent systemic critique, a vertical understanding of leadership and republican self-confidence, makes the country susceptible to political upheaval.

The people of **Poland** likewise exhibit strong support for the democratic form of government, although the country was the youngest democracy investigated in this study. Political debate in Poland, however, suffers from the fact that willingness to compromise is weak, as are the paths available to solve conflicts in society. The result is that democracy itself is frequently viewed through the lens of party politics: Many Poles see democracy functioning only when the party they support is holding power. In addition, Poland's liberal democracy has never sufficiently managed to establish a reliable bond with "results-oriented" citizens by presenting a material offer of social security. That inability has provided a welcome gateway to the current government, which has systematically undercut the rule of law in recent years, while nevertheless maintaining significant popular support.

In **Britain**, people have faith in a stable democracy and exhibit reliable, democratic reflexes. The debates surrounding Brexit, to be sure, have left their mark and intensified acrimony, but the frequent reports of a completely polarized society are not precisely accurate. It is more the case that many people are frustrated and feel powerless with respect to the political elite, who they believe are paying too little attention to the opinions of the voters and are producing inadequate results. People also frequently have a skeptical approach to the media. That means that in the United Kingdom, the focus should first and foremost be on reestablishing trust and "repairing" the relationship between the people and politics.

The **United States** is considered a cradle of Western democracy. In the collective American imagination, there is no alternative to this form of government – Americans are committed to democracy by definition. The problems with the American democracy, the existence of which the last several years have made impossible to deny, is thus not indifference to the form of government, but an exceptional and toxic degree of political polarization. The relationship between the camps is so fraught that people are prepared to assume the worst of each other. As such, each side accuses the other of undermining democracy. And the more strident the voice, the more attention it is given. The result has been significant damage to the entire republic.

### **Recurrent Themes**

Out of these national perspectives emerges a handful of potent, partly transnational themes.

The first of those pertains to the **expectations people have of their polity**, expectations that are not necessarily covered by the idea of "democracy as such". Instead, the country analyses clearly confirm how specific expectations of democracy can lead to resentment and uncertainty if they – from the perspective of voters – are not met. That applies from a "material" perspective to countries like France, for example, where the republican state is expected to play a substantial, formative role (which represents an interesting contrast to the thinking of many Americans), but also to Germany and Poland, where many people likewise see the "caring" element of a democracy as a central function. **As such, satisfaction with democracy is also always a question of tangible results, not just of procedure and rule-of-law principles.** Accordingly, the system must "deliver" – and satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy must consistently be understood within this context. In some cases, such as France, dissatisfaction with political results can be a factor in the desire for an alternative system.

Even if such phenomena appear in weaker forms in other countries, the US provides a further example of normative expectations and interpretations that vary across the population, opening the path to conflict. In the debate over **freedom of expression versus the need to protect vulnerable groups from discrimination**, competing notions clash – in an already tense atmosphere – when it comes to which of those principles should enjoy primacy. Both sides in this debate see themselves as defenders of fundamental values.

Tensions of this nature lead us to the second overarching theme: the crisis of trust. Essentially, all countries display issues of distrust and a lack of confidence within the polity. All countries exhibit a widespread, fundamental skepticism among the populace of political policymakers and of the media.

Once the coronavirus pandemic is overcome, the strengthening and even reestablishment of public trust will be one of the most urgent tasks to address. Particularly given the attraction exuded by conspiracy myths in many countries, the restoring of trust should be a priority in the coming years.

A lack of faith in political leaders often goes hand in hand with a feeling of impotence among citizens. Particularly in France, Germany, and Britain, many people feel they are not being sufficiently heard or seen, and frequently react with either resignation or, in the worst case, rejection. Not everyone explicitly shares this feeling, and all countries are home to a smaller or larger share of the population that is satisfied and trusting. But differences in the level of trust within the population should be closely considered as an important factor in societal cooperation. It can produce additional imbalance when – in a situation of crisis like the coronavirus pandemic, for example – those who trust and those who distrust confront each other with mutual incomprehension.

A second dimension of distrust is particularly apparent in countries where polarization is extreme, such as in the US and Poland (interestingly, the oldest and youngest democracies in our study): **The existence of political distrust between citizens themselves.** The political camps in the two countries and their supporters seem to be so far apart that they are prepared to accuse each other of wanting to harm democracy. As a consequence, people are no longer debating each other in a political way within the democracy; rather, they feel as though they are *fighting for democracy itself*. As a result, commonality suffers immensely.

Directly connected to that is the third theme: a **crisis of discourse**. Many feel that the manner in which people currently speak with each other within democracy has suffered, to the point that many people no longer speak with each other at all. Once again, this finding is particularly striking in the toxic debate climate in the US, though there is also cause for concern in Europe. Many seem to be concerned about the “increasingly hateful” tone they experience, one which no longer seems open to compromise. Furthermore, qualitative focus groups underline that people have not just experienced this shriller tone on the “political level”, but also in concrete exchanges with others – insofar as they still engage in discussion about societal issues and do not avoid them entirely.

In addressing the discourse crisis in particular, it is important not to infer from the similar motives present in the countries studied that the same social struggles are being fought everywhere along identical lines of conflict. Rather, the country chapters in this study underscore that similar needs must be negotiated on the basis of very different basic social conditions.

**Figure 46:**

## Central themes in study results

### Recurrent themes across populations

- Different normative expectations toward democracy (e.g., regarding outcomes of democracy, ways of decision-making, “hierarchy” of democratic principles)
- Crisis of trust between citizens and democracy
- Crisis of discourse

### Recurrent themes among identified segments

- Normative vagueness toward democracy (lack of emphasis)
- Aversion due to disappointment with “output”/results of democracy

It can be assumed that many of the themes identified can also be found in other countries that were not a part of our study. There, too, it would be useful to consider new perspectives pertaining to the dynamics surrounding their respective democracies – with national contexts always being taken into account.

**Figure 47:**

## Democratically ambivalent segments

In parentheses: respective share of national population\*

### Germany

- Passive Indifferents (16 Percent)
- Disappointed Output-Oriented (8 Percent)

### France

- Skeptics (25 Percent)
- Critics (13 Percent)

### Poland

- Quiet and Output-Oriented (26 Percent)

### Great Britain

- Detached Pragmatists (16 Percent)
- Frustrated Realists (26 Percent)
- Disillusioned Dissenters (9 Percent)

### USA (deviating method and focus of investigation)

- Embattled Conservatives (31 Percent)
- Activist Mavericks (4 Percent)
- Disengaged Moderate Conservatives (13 Percent)

\* Due to autonomous segmentation in each country, the figures cited here do not provide any directly comparative information on the respective state of democracy.

## **Findings about Particularly Ambivalent Target Groups**

The methodological focus of this study was, in addition to the findings pertaining to the population at large, to determine whether there were certain segments of the population in the countries chosen that were not fundamentally opposed to democracy, but which also had no stable relationship to it. Because if such segments exist, the criteria used in the political and societal efforts aimed at strengthening liberal democracy may have to be adjusted. We wanted to understand what groups political and civil society actors should seek to better approach and reach. As such, the following results do not reflect the entire population, but rather potential target groups that have an ambivalent approach to democracy.

In all five of the countries we examined, it was possible to identify people characterized by **normative vagueness or, by extension, a personal distance to democracy**. In such cases, there is frequently a simple lack of connection to the values, procedures and institutions of the polity – a feeling that the system has little to do with one’s own life. This is a pattern most clearly seen among the Quiet and Output-Oriented in Poland, the Passive Indifferent in Germany, the Detached Pragmatists in Britain, and the Skeptics in France, despite the shared phenomenon naturally finding different expressions due to national vagaries. (In Poland, it is found in a society not too far separated from pre-democratic times, while similar themes are exhibited in other countries, despite democracy being more established there.) The spectrum stretches from satisfied non-involvement, to a feeling of disorientation regarding one’s own role within the system, to the belief that authoritarian alternatives could fundamentally be better at producing good results than a democracy, with which one do not have a tight relationship anyway.

Then there are those **whose expectations of a democratic state are not being met** and who therefore either turn away out of dissatisfaction or who (not in all cases) become more receptive to “alternatives”. This applies, for example, to the Disappointed Output-Oriented in Germany, the Critics in France, and the Frustrated Realists in Britain. For these people, democratic reality is often one in which they are not present (they feel a need for participation or to be heard) and which does not meet their needs to a sufficient degree. A relevant share of the population thus wonders why they should actually trust the system or become involved in it. Only in some cases (in France, for example) do these people develop certain authoritarian impulses. All share the conviction that they are nevertheless democrats, but are dissatisfied with the intrinsic value of the existing “(liberal) democracy”.

**These ambivalent, though not antidemocratic groups are of relevant size almost everywhere** (in Europe between 24 and 51 percent) **and have a need for activating participatory and policy offers**. It is a different situation for those parts of the population that we have also identified and which have a strong feeling that their mission is to rebel against the current order (such as the Critically Active Citizens in Germany and the Activist Mavericks in America). They vehemently insist on their interpretation of certain community principles and have demonstrated a significant militancy. These people are not, in a literal sense, indifferent or ambivalent to democracy, but they are prepared to question shared convictions and narratives as well as the collective search for compromise. Their efforts to put either “the system” or “the other side” in its place can be harmful to common ground, in addition to taking on authoritarian attributes.

Overall, we definitely see in many countries **a certain indifference within certain population groups – who almost never reject the term democracy itself, but tend more to have weakened ties to its norms and/or its functioning.** For environments like those in Poland, Germany, and Britain, the concept of democratic indifference is quite helpful to enable a different approach to civil society work, one which is more deeply rooted in people’s perceptions. It is vital, though, to consider the **different sources of this indifference, which should be seen more as “ambivalence” than complete disinterest.** This finding generally applies to France as well, but one should not forget the traditional propensity of many French citizens to call the validity of their system into question in moments of dissatisfaction and even to search for alternative polities.

In the most strongly polarized country, the US, by contrast, the term indifference does not lead us any closer to the primary challenge facing the country’s democracy. Rather, US society is dealing with a **politicization of the concept of democracy**, which has already made a discussion over normative principles and preferences virtually impossible. One of the key tasks facing Germany, France, and Britain will be that of putting a stop to further developments toward such deep polarization – and it is especially vital in Poland, where the process of polarization already seems to be well underway.

## **Recommendations**

One thing is clear: Democracy is important to many people, but it is also a multi-faceted concept. This circumstance alone makes it particularly challenging to find the “right” approach. The strengthening and further development of liberal democracy remains a shared, never-ending task.

We see that people have competing expectations, experiences, and needs when it comes to democracy. Attempts to deploy a “one-size-fits-all” strategy for civil society communication and activism, which focuses on specific aspects of democracy, are therefore unable to reach all population segments equally effectively. Likewise, political actors must directly confront the crisis of confidence they face in all the countries studied. This is especially true for ambivalent segments, whose perspective on democracy is rooted in their very own premises – and which certainly deviates from the perspectives of those who are more politically engaged. As such, it is highly recommended that existing efforts at strengthening liberal democracy be augmented by approaches that are focused on specific target groups in order to account for ambivalent attitudes toward and experiences with democracy.

If this focus on target groups is taken seriously, approaches will emerge that strengthen democracy without saying so on their cover. To reach those ambivalent groups who place particular importance on tangible results from politics, it will be important to address such expectations and thus strengthen their trust in democracy. In other words, efforts to reduce inequality and increase recognition of certain societal groups can very much be a facet of democracy work.

The feeling harbored by many that they are neither seen nor heard is concerning. As such, in addition to improving political communication, the strengthening and perhaps reorientation of formats for democratic participation and involvement make sense. In doing so, however, it is vital to lower the hurdles to participation, particularly to reach those groups that are less intrinsically inclined to take part in political deliberation. Particularly in times when people are complaining about a raw tone in the public discourse, the formats described should provide a space in which open and unbiased discourse is also relearned to some extent.

Democracy work is frequently – and correctly – understood as values work. People need shared normative principles to be responsible citizens. But this alone is not enough. Some values-oriented formats of democracy work could be missing the mark when it comes to indifferent groups, because they lack human connection. Many people currently do not have a trusting approach to politics. Even in the past, though, people did not become democrats in a vacuum. Rather, they developed a relationship with “their” system, including its values, through suitable representation, contact points, and institutional links. The necessity of this development has not changed. In addition, the advanced polarization in many countries shows that there could be a lack of democratic glue binding people together. There is a clear conclusion to be drawn here for civil society campaigns: Instead of trying to “convince” others of the benefits of liberal democracy, there is a need on many levels for constructive relationship building.

“Relationship-building and not just values work” could thus be a thematic heading for efforts to address larger parts of the population and thus broaden the democratic foundation of society. After all, democracy is also about belonging. All topics such as participation, trust-building, or the improvement of debate can be viewed anew through this lens.

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