

American Public Support for Democracy Has Declined Generationally

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Abstract

Americans' support for democracy, once thought to be solid, has now been shown to be somewhat shaky. One of the most concerning aspects of this declining attachment to democracy is a marked age gap, with younger Americans less supportive of democracy than their older compatriots. Using age-period-cohort analysis of 12 national surveys collected between 1995 and 2019, we show that this age gap is largely a function of a long-term generational decline in support for democracy, with little evidence of an independent life-cycle effect apparent. The combination of generational decline without a positive and counterbalancing life-cycle effects offers a sober prognosis of how support for democracy in the United States might look in future.

Keywords:

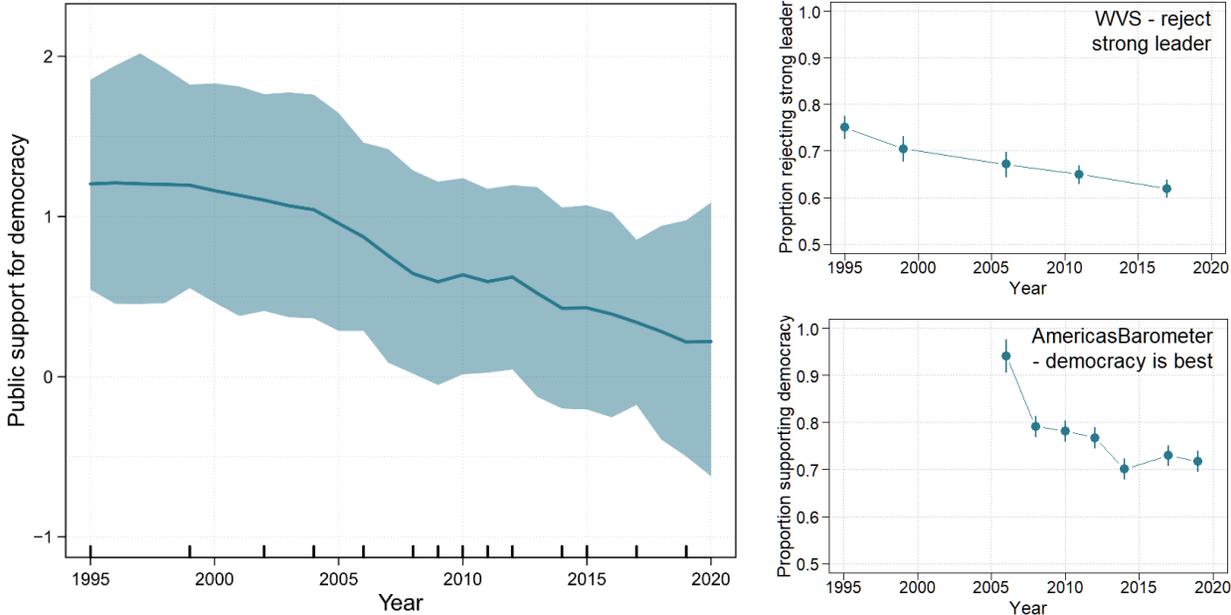
Support for democracy; United States; generations; age-period-cohort

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The commitment of the American people to a democratic system, long taken for granted,¹ is now in doubt. A growing body of research has demonstrated Americans’ shaky support for democracy when this is understood as support for *specific* democratic norms or institutions and a preference for pro- vs anti-democratic political candidates (e.g., Bartels 2020; Graham and Svulik 2020; Gibson 2021; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022). There is, however, considerable evidence now that Americans’ commitment to democracy *even in the abstract* is also in decline (Voeten 2017; c.f. Drutman, Goldman, and Diamond 2020).

Figure 1: Declining Public Support for Democracy in the U.S., 1995 to 2020



Note: The figure on the left shows Bayesian estimates of latent public support for democracy in the United States, based on Claassen (2020). Data are standardized such that the mean level of support for democracy across 144 countries and 32 years equals zero and the standard deviation equals one. The US estimates rely on survey data from the World Values Survey, AmericasBarometer, Pew Research, and the Comparative

¹ Graham and Svulik make this point vividly by quoting Robert Dahl: “It is nearly impossible to find an American who says that he is opposed to democracy or favors some alternative” (Dahl 1966, 40, cited in Graham and Svulik 2020, 392).

Study of Electoral Systems. Years in which survey data were collected are shown by the rug plot on the x-axis. The figures on the right show the proportions of US residents offering support for democracy in response to two particular questions routinely fielded by the World Values Survey (top) and AmericasBarometer (bottom) surveys; see the supplementary information for question wordings.

Figure 1 reports time-series estimates of support for democracy in the United States. The composite measure, which is obtained from Claassen's (2020) dynamic Bayesian estimates of democratic mood across multiple countries and years, shows a consistent decline. Although the credible intervals overlap, US support for democracy fell from well above the global average (zero) in 1995 to close to the global average in 2020. These trends remain visible when one examines specific survey questions: whereas 75% of Americans rejected a system of government with a "strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections" in 1995, only 62% did so in 2017 (Figure 1; upper right plot). And while 94% of Americans agreed that democracy "is better than any other form of government" in 2006, only 71% continued to do so in 2019 (Figure 1; lower right plot). While majorities remain supportive of democracy in principle (Drutman, Goldman, and Diamond 2020), it is clear that Americans' level of support has declined substantially over the past few decades.

One of the most concerning aspects of this ebbing attachment to democracy is a marked age gap, with younger Americans more hesitant about democracy and more supportive of non-democratic alternatives (Gibson 2021; Malka et al 2020; Inglehart 2016; Norris 2017). However, it remains unclear whether this is a life-cycle effect, where younger citizens have always been more skeptical about the core principles of the political system (e.g., Norris 2017), or whether it is an indicator of generational change, in which the younger generations have lost support for democracy (Foa and Mounk 2016). The consequences couldn't be more starkly different: if a life-cycle effect, youthful detachment will naturally transform into system support with the passage of time; if a cohort effect, it is American political culture that could be transformed, as older

generations who are more supportive of democracy are replaced by younger generations who are more open to authoritarian governance.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects of age on American's support for democracy. Using Bayesian Generalized Additive age period cohort models, and data from 12 national surveys collected between 1995 and 2019, we attempt to separate the effects of ageing (i.e., life-cycle effects) from the effects of generational change (i.e., cohort effects). We find little evidence of a life-cycle effect. Instead, we show that American's support for democracy and rejection of authoritarian rule has decreased generationally.

Data and Methods

We collect survey measures of support for democracy from two public opinion projects: the World Values Survey (WVS) and the AmericasBarometer (AB). Each has polled nationally representative samples of Americans multiple times across a decade or more. Between 1995 and 2017, in five separate surveys, the WVS fielded five questions asking U.S. respondents about their support for democracy or rejection of undemocratic rule.² And between 2006 and 2019, in seven surveys, the AB included a single question asking U.S. respondents about their support for democracy. The included survey questions are described in Table 1.

² The advantage of the WVS battery is that it includes three questions that do not mention the word “democracy,” which is sometimes thought to be tainted with positive (or negative) connotations; specifically, in the United States, “democracy” is still regarded by some as antithetical to republicanism (see Whittington 2014).

Table 1: Summary of survey measures of U.S. support for democracy

	Years	Items	Pooled N
World Values Survey	1995, 1999, 2006, 2011 & 2017	Evaluate democracy Reject military rule Reject strong leader Reject expert rule Democracy has problems, but is best (only asked in 1995 & 1999)	8,819
AmericasBarometer	2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2017 & 2019	Democracy has problems, but is best	9,609

Notes: See supplementary information for question wordings

We analyze each dataset separately, testing if our results remain robust across the two. Since there are five “support for democracy” items included in the WVS, we first estimate a scale using a graded response model, a form of item-response theoretic (IRT) model. This allows for varying item intercepts (“difficulties”) and item slopes (“discriminations”); it also permits us to retain respondents who responded to fewer than all five questions. The single support for democracy item included in the AB is treated as ordinal due to the use of a seven-point response set.

It is well known that linear age, period, and cohort effects are not separately identifiable even when one has access to data that includes different age groups and is gathered over a period of many years (see Fosse and Winship 2019 for a review). Researchers instead estimate linear combinations of these effects (e.g., the overall trend, period + cohort effects) or treat one or more of these effects as non-linear. Two specific models have been favored for this task by researchers in political science: hierarchical age period cohort models (HAPCMs; e.g., Schwadel and Garneau 2014; Smets and Neundorf 2014) and generalized additive models (GAMs; e.g., Jiang and Carriere 2014; Grasso 2014; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2020). The essence of each approach is to separate the effects of interest (e.g., age, cohorts) into both a linear and a non-linear component. The latter can be identified for age groups, periods, and cohorts even though only two of their

linear effects are identifiable. The HAPCM accomplishes this by modelling cohorts (and often also age groups and periods) as random effects. The GAM approach models cohorts (or year of birth) using cubic spline functions. We prefer the latter as it avoids having to rely on arbitrary cohort or generational definitions (Jiang and Carriere 2014). Our HAPCM results are similar, however, and are included in the supplementary information.

Specifically, we model respondents' support for democracy as a function of their cohort (using cubic splines for year of birth), age (using four-category random effects for age groups 18-29, 30-44, 45-59, and over 60), and the period of the survey (using fixed effects for survey year). We include controls for Republican and Democratic identity (vs. independent), having a degree, identifying as female, identifying as white, living in the South, and self-reported income (unit normal standardized within each survey wave). The single support for democracy item in the AB data is modelled as an ordinal variable using ordered logit GAMs and HAPCMs. The IRT measure of support for democracy obtained from the WVS data is treated as a continuous variable and modelled using linear GAMs and HAPCMs.

We estimate all models, GAM and HAPCM, using Bayesian Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) methods, which allows more complex model to be fit and more accurate variance estimates to be obtained than the corresponding restricted maximum likelihood methods. We use the brms package which calls the Stan modelling platform from R. Weakly informative priors are used. All models show R-hat statistics of close to 1 (typically less than 1.02), indicative of convergence.

Results

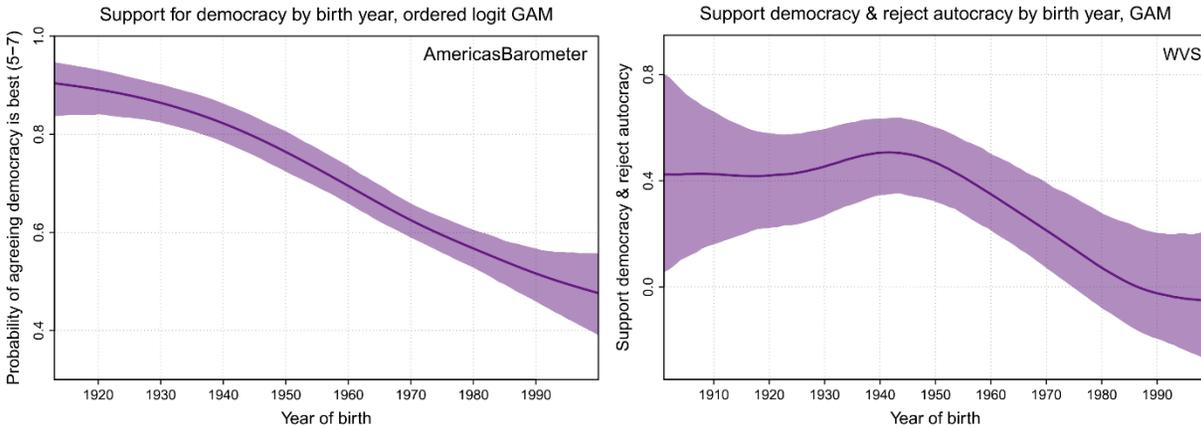
One conjecture about the decline of democratic support in the United States is that American Millennials have particularly lower levels of democratic support, the result of a shared generic socialization experience. Such a conjecture is not *prima facie* implausible. Cohort effects in other social and political attitudes and behaviors have also been uncovered in the US, including in political tolerance (Schwadel and Garneau 2014), electoral turnout (Smets and Neundorf 2014), civic participation (Caren et al. 2011), or social trust (Robinson and Jackson 2001). Rationales as to why American Millennials should be less committed to democracy have also been offered. Those born in the 1980s and 1990s represent the first group of Americans whose crucial formative years were spent in the post-Cold War world, a context – claim Foa and Mounk (2016; 2019) – where threats to democracy became less plausible and vivid than was previously the case. At the same time, Millennials have also spent their formative years under deteriorating economic conditions (Denemark et al. 2017: 184), including growing income inequality and stagnating incomes for the lower and middle-classes and (Foa & Mounk 2019: 1021). These conditions may have rendered American Millennials more open to contemplating alternatives to the democratic status quo.

In Figure 2 we present the smoothed GAM estimates of support for democracy across year of birth. The AmericasBarometer results (left) show that, the more recent the year of birth, the lower the agreement with the notion that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.”³ Respondents born before and during WW2 (i.e., the “Silent

³ For the purposes of displaying the estimates in Figure 2, we take “agreement” to be equal to selecting response option 5 or higher where response option 7 is labelled “strongly agree and

Generation”) are more than 80% likely to express support for democracy in this way, adjusting for the effects of age at the time of the survey, period, and demographic factors. Respondents born after 1980 (i.e., “Millennials”) are less than 60% likely to offer support for democracy.

Figure 2: GAM estimates of support for democracy by year of birth



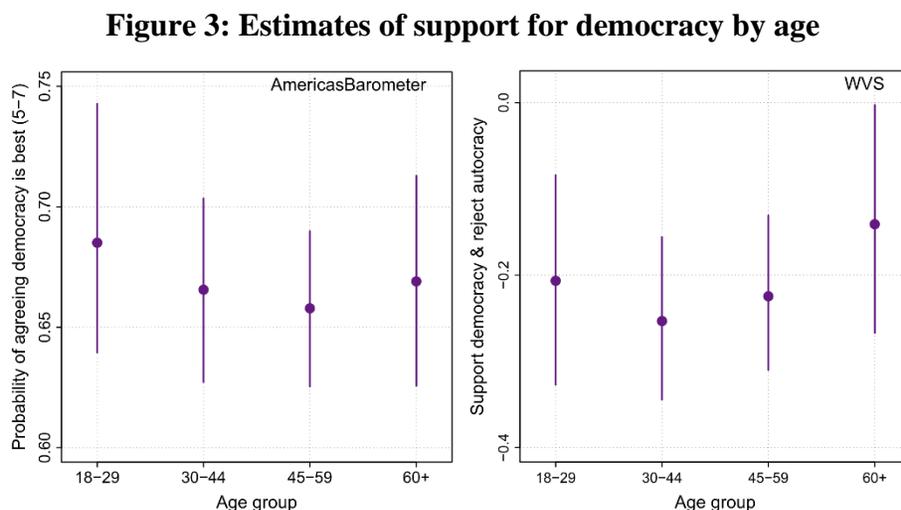
Notes: AmericasBarometer estimates (left) are from a single item; ordered logit GAM used; “Agreeing democracy is best” is defined as selecting response category 5 or higher. WVS estimates (right) use a five-item scale; linear GAM used.

The WVS results (right panel, Figure 2) show, on their face, a slightly different result. Support for democracy remains stable for the 1910s to 1940s birth cohorts, perhaps even rising slightly, peaking for those born around the time of WW2. However, support then follows the same precipitous decline as seen in the AmericasBarometer data. By the Millennial generation, support

option 1 is labelled “strongly disagree.” The underlying hierarchical GAM treats the outcome as ordinal however.

for democracy is more than half a standard deviation lower than its WW2 peak – net the effects of age, period and demography.⁴

Yet both analyses also show that there is nothing unique about the Millennial generation in terms of its support for democracy, measured either using a single survey question (as in the AmericasBarometer data) or with a more nuanced measure encompassing rejection of autocratic forms of government (as in the WVS data). Instead, while the generations born up to the 1940s show high levels of democratic support, each generation born after that is less supportive of democracy than the one before. Millennials are just at the tail end of a long-term trend.



Notes: Predicted effects of support for democracy by age group, with other variables set at means or modes. AmericasBarometer estimates (left) are based on an ordered logit GAM. WVS estimates (right) are based on a linear GAM. In both models, age is specified as a set of random effects.

Importantly, these results are obtained while simultaneously adjusting for (non-linear) age effects. That younger Americans are less supportive of democracy than their parents could just be

⁴ We find similar cohort effects if we use a scale comprising only the three questions measuring rejection of authoritarian rule. See the Supplementary information.

a function of a *life-cycle effect* (Norris 2017; Alexander and Welzel 2017), linked to the greater political indifference and inattention of younger citizens (Nemčok and Wass 2021), their lower experience with the functioning of a democratic regime (Sapiro 2004), or even the systematic descriptive and substantive underrepresentation of the young in most democracies (Sundström and Stockemer 2020; Curry and Haydon 2018). However, as we can see in Figure 3, in contrast to the marked cohort effects we found before, there is not much of a life-cycle effect in democratic support in the United States according to our models. There are no significant differences between the four age groups once cohort and period effects are considered.

Conclusions

American support for democracy is not as solid as it once seemed. While a growing number of authors have demonstrated weak support for specific democratic institutions, democratic norms or candidates committed to democracy, we show that support for democracy as a regime – even in the abstract – is weaker than it once was.

Existing research has found a marked age gap on support for democracy in the U.S., with younger citizens demonstrating significantly lower levels of democratic commitment. Some have attributed this gap to a cohort effect, for which the Millennial generation is argued to be particularly responsible. Others have attributed to a life-cycle effect, in which support for democracy is learned as one matures and becomes socialized into the political system.

Using age-period-cohort analysis, we find no evidence for such a life-cycle effect. Furthermore, we demonstrate that generational decline in support for democracy did not start with Millennials. American support for democracy has been weakening in one cohort after the next since the Second World War. This trend echoes the findings of age-period-cohort analyses of

political tolerance (Schwadel and Garneau 2014) and civic participation (Caren, Ghoshal, and Ribas 2011) in the United States. But it diverges from the findings of a previous age-period-cohort analysis of European support for democracy, where “generational disparities are narrow in most cases (...), and members of this [most recent] cohort remain committed to democracy as a viable system of government” (Wuttke et al. 2020a: 10).

The combination of generational decline and the lack of a positive life cycle effect offers a sobering prognosis of how American support for democracy might look in future. Younger generations already have substantially lower democratic support than the older generations whom they will replace. Without a positive life-cycle effect to counter this intergenerational replacement, the US faces a continued decline in public commitment to a democratic system of government.

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