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Democratic Dissatisfaction

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Abstract: This article critically examines the scholarship on democratic decline and citizens' dissatisfaction as well as it explores the key drivers, manifestations, and consequences of democratic backsliding worldwide. The study highlights how declining trust in democratic institutions, economic inequalities, and the rise of populism have intensified public discontent, leading to increased polarization and support for alternative governance models. By analyzing global trends, including democratic erosion in South Asia, Latin America, and Europe, the article underscores the complex relationship between institutional inefficiency, neoliberal policies, and democratic dissatisfaction. The analysis extends to the role of direct democracy, populist movements, and the strategic voting behaviors of emerging powers in shaping governance responses. Through a synthesis of recent theoretical and empirical contributions, this review offers an understanding of how dissatisfaction interacts with political agency and institutional trust, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and responsive democratic structures to mitigate democratic malaise.

Keywords: democratic backsliding, democratic dissatisfaction, governance, neoliberalism, populism, research trends

Introduction

The political landscape in the world is increasingly characterized by democratic backsliding and growing dissatisfaction with governance. Democratic dissatisfaction refers to the growing discontent among citizens regarding the functioning of democratic institutions, processes, or outcomes, often driven by perceived inefficacy, unresponsiveness, or erosion of democratic norms (Foa &



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Mounk, 2017). Over the past decade, many countries in the world have experienced democratic backsliding, characterized by the erosion of civil liberties, the manipulation of electoral processes and the weakening of democratic institutions. Democratic backsliding is the gradual erosion of institutions, norms, and liberties, often driven by elected leaders from within. Unlike sudden breakdowns, it unfolds incrementally, weakening checks and balances, restricting opposition, and undermining judicial, media, and electoral independence (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). Through executive overreach, rule manipulation, and dissent suppression, it blurs the line between democracy and authoritarianism, creating hybrid regimes that retain democratic facades while hollowing out their core principles (Carothers & Hartnett, 2024). In particular, countries in South Asia, Latin America and the Middle East have experienced a significant decline in democratic governance (Ullah, 2018), which has often led to political instability, economic downturn, and social unrest (Bano, 2024).

The global Democracy Index has experienced a significant decline, dropping from 5.52 in 2006 to a historic low of 5.17 in 2024. Notably, 130 out of the 167 countries assessed either saw a deterioration in their scores or failed to show any improvement, underscoring a widespread democratic backslide (Democracy Index, 2025). The number of countries experiencing democratic decline outnumbers the number of countries improving by more than two to one. The Democracy Index assesses electoral processes, pluralism, civil liberties, government functioning, political participation, and political culture in over 160 countries. Scholarly contributions such as those by Bedock and Pilet (2023) and Berman (2019) critically examine how the erosion of traditional democratic structures – including weakened representation and responsiveness – has led citizens to disengage or turn to alternative political movements such as ¡Democracia Real YA! (Real Democracy NOW!), Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25), Prefigurative Politics, or Counter-hegemonic Movements. Berman (2019) argues that populism thrives in an environment where citizens feel alienated from democratic processes.

As public trust in political institutions wanes due to corruption, lack of accountability and transparency, political culture deteriorates and weakens democratic norms (Ma, Guo & Yu, 2022). In Latin America, for example, scores fell in 16 out of 24 countries in 2023, with Central American countries such as El Salvador and Nicaragua showing a significant regression (Bedock & Pilet, 2023). Democratic dissatisfaction has become a central concern in political science and international relations, reflecting growing public discontent with the performance and legitimacy of democratic institutions. As cracks emerge in the foundations of democratic governance, this review examines the underlying causes and far-



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reaching consequences of this disillusionment. It explores how dissatisfaction intersects with broader socio-political forces, including the rise of populism, deepening economic inequality, institutional erosion, and evolving perceptions of democracy itself.

In the United States, for instance, despite maintaining a score of 7.85 in democracy, public discontent persists, driven by deep political polarization and institutional unresponsiveness. These factors undermine trust in democratic governance, highlighting the growing gap between citizens' expectations and the system's ability to address their concerns effectively (Youngs, 2021). Dissatisfaction with democracy is reflected in the rising support for populist parties across parts of Western Europe, where public disillusionment with traditional political parties persists despite many countries being classified as "full democracies" (Bedock & Pilet, 2023). Meanwhile, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which holds the lowest average score on the Democracy Index at 3.23, continues to grapple with widespread conflict and political instability, further exacerbating democratic deficits (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023).

This article critically examines the existing scholarship on the decline of democracy, with a particular focus on how democratic backsliding contributes to public dissatisfaction. By exploring key themes and recent advancements in the literature, this article analyzes the conceptual and analytical frameworks used by scholars to understand the relationship between democratic erosion and political instability.

The State of Scholarship on Democratic Decline and Dissatisfaction

Berman (2019) contends that populism is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a symptom of long-standing democratic malaise, stemming from the inability of institutions to address contemporary economic and social grievances. Demand-side factors – economic precarity, and cultural anxieties – act as tinder for populist mobilization, while the failure of mainstream political parties to offer compelling alternatives further stokes the flames of discontent (Inglehart & Norris, 2017). Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in Europe, where the collapse of center-left parties has created a political void, allowing right-wing populists to seize the mantle of opposition to the status quo (Rooduijn, 2020). Economic crises and lackluster institutional responses have only deepened public distrust, opening the floodgates for anti-system movements (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Fukuyama, 2021).



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Yet, populism does not arise in a vacuum. The deeper fault lines of democratic instability can be traced to the economic logic underpinning contemporary governance. The neoliberal emphasis on competition, deregulation, and market-driven rationality has not only reshaped economies but has also hollowed out democratic norms, giving rise to widespread dissatisfaction across economic, cultural, and political spheres (Brown, 2019). This frustration manifests in three critical ways: First, the 2008 financial crisis exposed the precarious scaffolding of debt-fueled consumption (Tooze, 2018). Second, widening inequality continues to drive a wedge between capitalism and democracy, fraying the social contract that once held them in tandem (Milanovic, 2019). Third, neoliberal rationality has transformed public discourse into a commercialized spectacle, where pseudo-individualism and hyper-realities – amplified by social media – entrench political echo chambers and deepen partisan divides (Zuboff, 2019).

As faith in traditional democratic institutions wanes, citizens increasingly adopt the mindset of disillusioned consumers, dissatisfied with the “product” of democracy. This sense of alienation finds expression in populist movements, which promise to upend the status quo and reclaim power from distant elites (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This dynamic exacerbates the tension between technocratic governance and populist demands, as expert-driven policymaking collides with a resurgent politics of grievance (Fukuyama, 2021).

In the grand narrative of democracy, the expectation has long been that once a nation establishes democratic governance, its institutions will remain resilient, adapting to new challenges while upholding the fundamental principles of representation, accountability, and civil liberties. However, history and contemporary developments suggest otherwise. Even the most well-established democracies grapple with profound governance challenges, revealing vulnerabilities that, if left unchecked, can erode the very foundations of democratic rule.

Take the United States as an example. The increasing polarization between political parties has led to legislative gridlock, where policymaking is frequently stalled by ideological divisions rather than constructive debate. The inability of elected officials to bridge partisan divides has resulted in government shutdowns, delays in crucial policy decisions, and an erosion of public confidence in democratic institutions. Similarly, in India, democratic governance faces mounting concerns over freedom of the press and judicial independence. The rise of majoritarian politics, coupled with laws that restrict dissent, raises pressing questions about the future of democratic pluralism in the country.



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In Europe, democracies like Hungary and Poland have faced criticism for undermining judicial independence and restricting civil liberties, demonstrating that no democracy is immune to governance challenges. Kelemen (2020) contends that the partial politicization of EU institutions allows Europarties to shield autocratic member governments, thereby impeding meaningful intervention against democratic decline. EU funding unintentionally sustains authoritarian regimes by supporting patronage networks and legitimizing them globally. This paradox allows hybrid regimes to thrive within the EU, leveraging integration while eroding democracy (Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017; Bogaards, 2018).

The erosion of democracy in these states is not merely a consequence of external structural support but is also driven by internal mechanisms of control. Democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland has been facilitated by judicial capture, media monopolization, and nationalist rhetoric that systematically weakens pluralist institutions (Vachudova, 2020). The EU's failure to uphold democratic principles has provided leaders like Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński with the latitude to consolidate power under the guise of national sovereignty and cultural preservation (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Pech & Scheppele, 2017).

Beyond Europe, the consolidation of democracy in post-conflict societies presents another set of formidable challenges. In Colombia, the transition of The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) from an armed insurgency to a political party has been fraught with difficulties. Their political presence remains contentious, as poor election results and ongoing violence against ex-combatants further erode trust in the party and democracy (Ibáñez & Jäger, 2023; Nasi, 2020). Structural barriers to democratization within former armed groups often mirror broader governance struggles in post-conflict societies. The FARC's rigid ideological framework and centralized leadership have impeded efforts at internal democratization, limiting the party's ability to cultivate democratic norms (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2019). Moreover, unresolved historical grievances pose a lingering threat to peace efforts, as internal party fractures and broader political instability continue to undermine confidence in democratic institutions (Arnson, 2021; Theidon, 2022).

Democratic Backslide and Dissatisfaction

Democratic dissatisfaction stems from a gap between government actions and expectations, fueling public discontent and eroding trust. As frustrations deepen, citizens seek alternative pathways (such as grassroots activism, protests, or digital campaigns) to influence governance, whether through institutional adaptation or



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informal mechanisms of political exchange. Gherghina, Saikkonen, and Bankov (2022) argue that in contexts where citizens have limited political knowledge, discontent can lead to an increased tolerance for clientelistic practices, as individuals view patronage networks as a pragmatic means of securing political influence. Similarly, Werner, Marien, and Felicetti (2020) contend that dissatisfaction with government responsiveness frequently drives support for direct democracy, as citizens seek greater agency in decision-making processes.

Public discontent, however, is not a monolithic force; it manifests through diverse and sometimes contradictory demands for political change. Beyond calls for direct democracy or engagement in clientelistic exchanges, dissatisfaction also plays a pivotal role in shaping broader preferences for democratic reform. Bedock and Pilet (2023) illustrate that political discontent influences attitudes toward democratic models in complex ways. “Angry” citizens, frustrated with elite dominance, advocate for mandatory deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) as a substitute for elected representatives, whereas “engaged” citizens – who perceive themselves as more politically efficacious – favor DMPs that complement existing representative institutions. This tension between radical transformation and incremental adaptation reflects a deeper struggle between the desire for systemic overhaul and concerns about institutional stability. Dissatisfaction alone does not automatically translate into support for reform; rather, it interacts with political agency, shaping how individuals engage with participatory governance. For instance, frustration with corruption does not always spur democratic activism – citizens must also believe that their actions, such as voting or protesting, can drive meaningful change.

The link between democratic dissatisfaction and political behavior becomes particularly evident in transitional democracies, where weak institutional trust fosters reliance on informal political mechanisms. In their study of Bulgaria – a democracy in transition – Gherghina, Saikkonen, and Bankov (2022) examine the interplay between dissatisfaction, political knowledge, and the acceptance of clientelistic practices. They find that voters who are both dissatisfied with democratic performance and possess low political knowledge are more likely to accept patronage offers, viewing them as tangible benefits in an otherwise unresponsive system. In contrast, politically knowledgeable voters are less tolerant of clientelism, recognizing its long-term detrimental effects on democratic consolidation, instead favoring programmatic politics. This suggests that dissatisfaction lowers expectations for reform, pushing some toward short-term gains and others toward systemic change.



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Yet dissatisfaction is rarely confined to institutional grievances; it also operates at the intersection of economic realities, political structures, and cultural identities, shaping varied responses to governance. Whether rooted in rural identity or political alienation, discontent serves as both a catalyst for reform and a barrier to systemic change. Bilewicz, Mamonova, and Burdyka (2022) highlight this paradox in the case of Polish farmers' opposition to the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Despite the tangible benefits of CAP subsidies – such as improved living conditions, financial support, modernization, and market integration – dissatisfaction persists due to a perceived loss of autonomy, economic grievances, and socio-cultural tensions. The clash between EU bureaucratic oversight and farmers' traditional agricultural practices underscores a broader struggle over cultural identity and historical continuity, revealing that material gains alone cannot resolve symbolic grievances. This tension between material concerns and symbolic recognition also extends to democratic reform initiatives. Support for deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), for example, reflects a dual dynamic: while some view them as a mechanism for democratic innovation, others see them as an extension of existing democratic structures, reinforcing institutional trust rather than replacing it (Bedock & Pilet, 2023).

Marginalization and Democratic Discontent

Democratic dissatisfaction does not manifest uniformly across society; rather, it is shaped by social structures that distribute power unequally. Gender and minority status influence not only the sources of discontent but also the ability to articulate and address grievances (Goenaga & Hansen, 2022). Women and other historically marginalized groups often encounter higher cognitive and social barriers to political participation, largely due to patterns of political socialization and self-perception. These disparities impose additional cognitive costs on engagement, leading to the systemic underrepresentation of women's perspectives in political discourse. Consequently, assessments of democratic dissatisfaction frequently reflect dominant voices, offering an incomplete picture that overlooks the nuanced experiences of marginalized groups.

The exclusion of these voices not only distorts public debate but also deepens the fractures within democratic systems. While democratic backsliding is often attributed to external pressures, it is increasingly recognized as a symptom of internal governance failures. Disillusionment with neoliberal economic, cultural, and political structures has fueled receptivity to authoritarian solutions, as citizens seek governance models that promise efficiency, responsiveness, or ideological clarity.



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(Bauer & Becker, 2020). However, dissatisfaction does not necessarily translate into a wholesale rejection of democracy. Instead, it frequently fuels demands for alternative governance models that reshape, rather than replace, democratic systems. For example, Zhai (2023) illustrates how China strategically co-opts democratic rhetoric to sustain legitimacy while simultaneously curbing genuine political pluralism and suppressing grassroots participation.

This growing dissatisfaction with democratic representation highlights a core dilemma: while citizens may uphold democratic ideals, disillusionment leads them to pursue divergent pathways of reform. Different interpretations of democratic failure give rise to varied responses. For instance, individuals who lose faith in liberal representation often gravitate toward either populism or stealth democracy – two contrasting governance models that emerge from democratic frustration (Esteban & Stiers, 2024). Finnish election studies highlight that while both perspectives stem from dissatisfaction, their proposed solutions diverge significantly: populists demand direct democratic mechanisms to "return power to the people," whereas stealth democrats favor expert-led decision-making with minimal public involvement. This tension between liberal representation, populism, and stealth democracy reveals deeper procedural contradictions that shape contemporary democratic struggles. Notably, while dissatisfaction often correlates with increased populist support, this effect diminishes among those who favor stealth democracy, underscoring the complexity of democratic discontent.

Beyond national electoral politics, democratic dissatisfaction extends to the global arena, particularly among emerging democratic powers. In countries such as India, Brazil, and South Africa (IBSA), democratic legitimacy and economic growth are leveraged to advocate for institutional reforms in global governance structures like the UN Security Council. However, these aspirations are frequently constrained by domestic political instability, economic volatility, and competition from authoritarian actors (Hodzi, 2019). Entrenched inequalities in the international system further limit their influence, demonstrating that democratic dissatisfaction is not merely a domestic concern but also a geopolitical challenge. The IBSA states' struggle to balance their roles between the Global South and the Western-led liberal order illustrates how dissatisfaction with democracy transcends national boundaries, reflecting broader tensions between aspirations for reform and systemic obstacles.

Crises further intensify dissatisfaction, often transforming latent grievances into active political mobilization. Events such as the 2008 financial crisis and the 2014 refugee crisis illustrate how economic and political instability can serve as catalysts for collective action (Ejrnæs & Harrebye, 2022). After 2010, dissatisfied citizens



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became significantly more politically active than their contented counterparts, leading to widening voter turnout gaps and increased participation in unconventional political movements. Yet the nature of dissatisfaction remains highly context-dependent – each crisis triggers distinct responses, demonstrating that grievances do not emerge in isolation but are shaped by historical, economic, and cultural conditions.

Discussions

Democratic dissatisfaction is a persistent and evolving challenge that shapes political engagement, institutional trust, and governance at both national and international levels. This article highlights how discontent arises from a perceived disconnect between citizens' expectations and the performance of democratic institutions. While dissatisfaction can lead to calls for direct democracy, institutional reform, or increased civic engagement, it can also foster political disengagement, polarization, and the rise of authoritarian alternatives.

Existing research underscores several key drivers of democratic dissatisfaction. Economic inequality, political polarization, and institutional inefficiencies have eroded public trust in democratic governance. Studies show that declining electoral satisfaction fuels both support for populist movements and alternative governance models (Berman, 2019; Bedock & Pilet, 2023). Electoral mechanisms such as referenda can mitigate dissatisfaction by enhancing procedural legitimacy, but they do not fully resolve underlying grievances (Leemann & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2020).

Dissatisfaction is not uniform across societies but is shaped by economic conditions, historical experiences, and political cultures. In transitional democracies, weak institutional trust fosters reliance on informal political mechanisms such as clientelism (Gherghina et al., 2022). Meanwhile, in established democracies, dissatisfaction manifests through demands for greater direct participation or technocratic governance (Esteban & Stiers, 2024). Also, dissatisfaction is not necessarily an indicator of democratic failure – at times, it serves as a catalyst for institutional adaptation and renewal. For example, dissatisfaction with traditional party politics has led to frequent use of referenda and initiatives, allowing citizens to exert direct influence on policy decisions, such as the 2021 referendum in Switzerland on COVID-19 measures, which reflected public demand for greater direct participation in governance. In contrast, dissatisfaction with political instability and corruption in Italy has fueled support for technocratic governance. The appointment of Mario Draghi as Prime Minister in 2021 was a



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response to widespread discontent with traditional party-led governance, illustrating a preference for expert-led, pragmatic decision-making over partisan politics.

At the global level, dissatisfaction with democracy extends beyond national institutions. Emerging powers such as India, Brazil, and South Africa (IBSA) leverage their democratic credentials to push for reforms in international governance structures. However, systemic barriers – including structural inequalities and geopolitical competition – limit their influence, reflecting broader dissatisfaction with global governance (Hodzi, 2019).

Despite the extensive scholarship on democratic dissatisfaction, several unresolved questions remain. First, while economic grievances are frequently cited as drivers of dissatisfaction, the relationship between economic indicators and democratic attitudes is not always straightforward. Some studies find that subjective perceptions of inequality are more influential than objective economic conditions in shaping dissatisfaction (Ramaekers et al., 2023). Second, the role of digital media in shaping dissatisfaction remains contested. While some scholars argue that digital platforms exacerbate political polarization and undermine institutional trust (Zuboff, 2019), others suggest that they provide opportunities for civic engagement and political mobilization (Ejrnæs & Harrebye, 2022). More research is needed to determine the specific conditions under which digital activism reinforces democratic participation versus when it contributes to alienation and extremism. Finally, the long-term implications of democratic dissatisfaction are unclear. While discontent has led to significant political shifts – such as the rise of populist movements in Europe and Latin America – it is uncertain whether these developments mark a temporary disruption or a deeper transformation of democratic governance. Longitudinal studies could help to clarify whether dissatisfaction ultimately strengthens or weakens democratic resilience over time.

There is ongoing debate over whether democratic dissatisfaction primarily reflects institutional shortcomings or deeper ideological shifts. Some scholars argue that dissatisfaction is a symptom of governance failures, where ineffective institutions drive citizens toward alternative models of governance (Fukuyama, 2021). Others contend that democratic dissatisfaction signals broader ideological realignments, where citizens are no longer committed to liberal democratic principles (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Resolving this debate is critical for understanding whether democratic backsliding is reversible or indicative of a fundamental shift in political culture.

There is also disagreement over whether dissatisfaction leads to constructive engagement or political disengagement. Some research suggests that



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dissatisfaction motivates civic activism, protest participation, and policy innovation (Ejrnæs & Harrebye, 2022). However, other studies indicate that prolonged dissatisfaction can foster apathy, cynicism, and a retreat from democratic participation altogether (Truex, 2022). To build on existing scholarship, future research should explore three key areas: 1) The intersection of economic and political grievances: More empirical work is needed to disentangle how economic instability, inequality, and perceptions of fairness shape democratic dissatisfaction across different socio-political contexts – comparative studies across diverse economies could clarify these relationships. 2) The role of digital information ecosystems: Given the growing influence of social media in shaping political attitudes, further research should examine how online environments contribute to or mitigate democratic dissatisfaction. Investigating the impact of algorithm-driven political content on trust in institutions is particularly relevant. 3) Longitudinal studies on democratic resilience: the long-term effects of dissatisfaction require multi-year studies to track and better comprehend how dissatisfaction evolves and whether it leads to democratic renewal, authoritarian shifts, or cyclical instability. Examining historical cases alongside contemporary trends can provide deeper perspectives into these dynamics.

Conclusion

Democratic dissatisfaction is not inherently a sign of democratic failure; rather, it reflects the ongoing evolution of political engagement and governance. While dissatisfaction poses challenges, ranging from increased polarization to the rise of alternative governance models, it also presents opportunities for democratic renewal through institutional reforms and civic engagement. Addressing dissatisfaction requires inclusive policymaking, stronger institutional responsiveness, and an awareness of both material and symbolic grievances. This article contributes to the understanding of how dissatisfaction functions as both a challenge and a catalyst for democratic transformation.

Responsive institutions, inclusive policy-making, and structural reforms are critical to addressing democratic discontent. Without these, the gap between citizens and the state widens, eroding public trust and fueling disillusionment. Strengthening democratic resilience demands transparent governance, participatory decision-making, and mechanisms that empower marginalized voices, ensuring democracy remains adaptive, accountable, and capable of addressing contemporary societal concerns.



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