

THE STATE OF THE UNION

21st-Century Democracy in Europe

The annual summit for high-level reflection on the European Union

STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

10.30 – 11.00

SALONE DEI CINQUECENTO

Is there a crisis of democracy in Europe?

ADDRESS BY

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A crisis of democracy in Europe?

- **an accumulation of crises in Europe:** the euro crisis, Brexit, the refugee crisis, the rise of strongmen and of illiberal governments in Eastern Europe, and of populist challengers in Western Europe
- **pessimistic debate on the crisis of Western democracies**
 - Merkel (2013): ‘erosion, not crisis’; Diamond (2015): ‘a democratic recession’; Plattner (2017): ‘on the defensive’
 - Mounk (2018): ‘The people vs democracy’, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018): ‘How democracies die’, Runciman (2018): ‘How democracy ends’

- **Not for the first time:**
 - crisis talk in the 1970s – demand overload, ungovernability (Crozier et al. 1975)/legitimacy crisis (Habermas 1973, Offe 1972) => Beliefs in government project
- **Is this time different: are we heading for a crisis of democracy?**
 - The Economist (June 16th, 2018): ‘reports of the death of democracy are greatly exaggerated. But the least-bad system of government ever devised is in trouble. It needs defenders’.

Four perspectives to discuss the situation of democracy:

- **the birds' eye perspective:** long-term trends worldwide
- **the citizens' perspective:** support for democratic principles vs dissatisfaction with democracy
- **the voters' perspective:** the rise of populist challengers as a reaction to rising democratic dissatisfaction
- **the elites' perspective:** populists in power

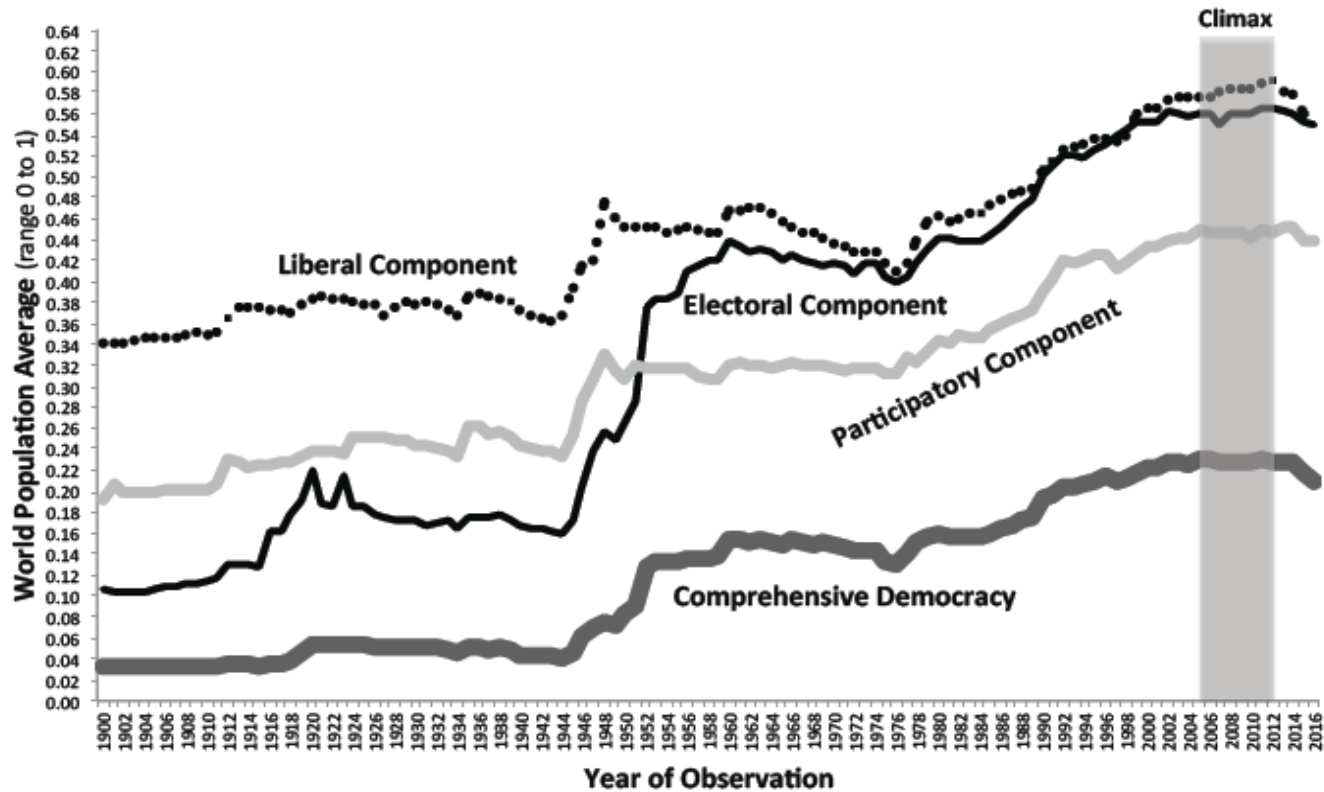


The birds' eye perspective

Centennial trends

- V-Dem data for
 - Comprehensive democracy
 - its participatory, liberal and electoral components

The birds' eye perspective



Note: Data are from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (www.v-dem.net) and cover between 85 (in 1900) and 175 countries (in 2016). To calculate yearly global averages, we weight countries for the size of their population. Comprehensive Democracy is the product of V-Dem's Electoral, Participatory and Liberal Components.



The citizens' perspective

- **Ever since Almond and Verba (1965):** stable democracies require supportive attitudes and norms
 - If the people hold democratic values, democracy will be safe
- **Focus on Europe (ESS6, 2012):** Europeans' support for democracy
- indicator: In general, how important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? (0=not important at all/10=extremely important)



The citizens' perspective

- **Results per region:** average support
 - Nordic countries,
 - Western Europe,
 - Southern Europe,
 - Central- and Eastern Europe,
 - hybrid democracies (Russia, Ukraine, Kosovo)



The citizens' perspective


European region	average importance
Northern Europe	9.2
Western Europe	8.5
Southern Europe	8.6
Central- and Eastern E.	8.1
Hybrid democracies	7.3
Total	8.4

Evaluation of really existing democracies:

- Indicator: how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country? (0=extremely dissatisfied/10=extremely satisfied)


Discrepancy between ideals and reality:

- discrepancy=average satisfaction-average support
- the 'democratic paradox'?



The citizens' perspective

European region	democracy in general		
	impor- tance	satis- faction	discre- pancy
Northern Europe	9.2	7.0	-2.2
Western Europe	8.5	5.9	-2.6
Southern Europe	8.6	4.2	-4.4
Central- and Eastern E.	8.1	4.4	-3.7
Hybrid democracies	7.3	3.6	-3.7
Total	8.4	5.1	-3.3



The citizens' perspective

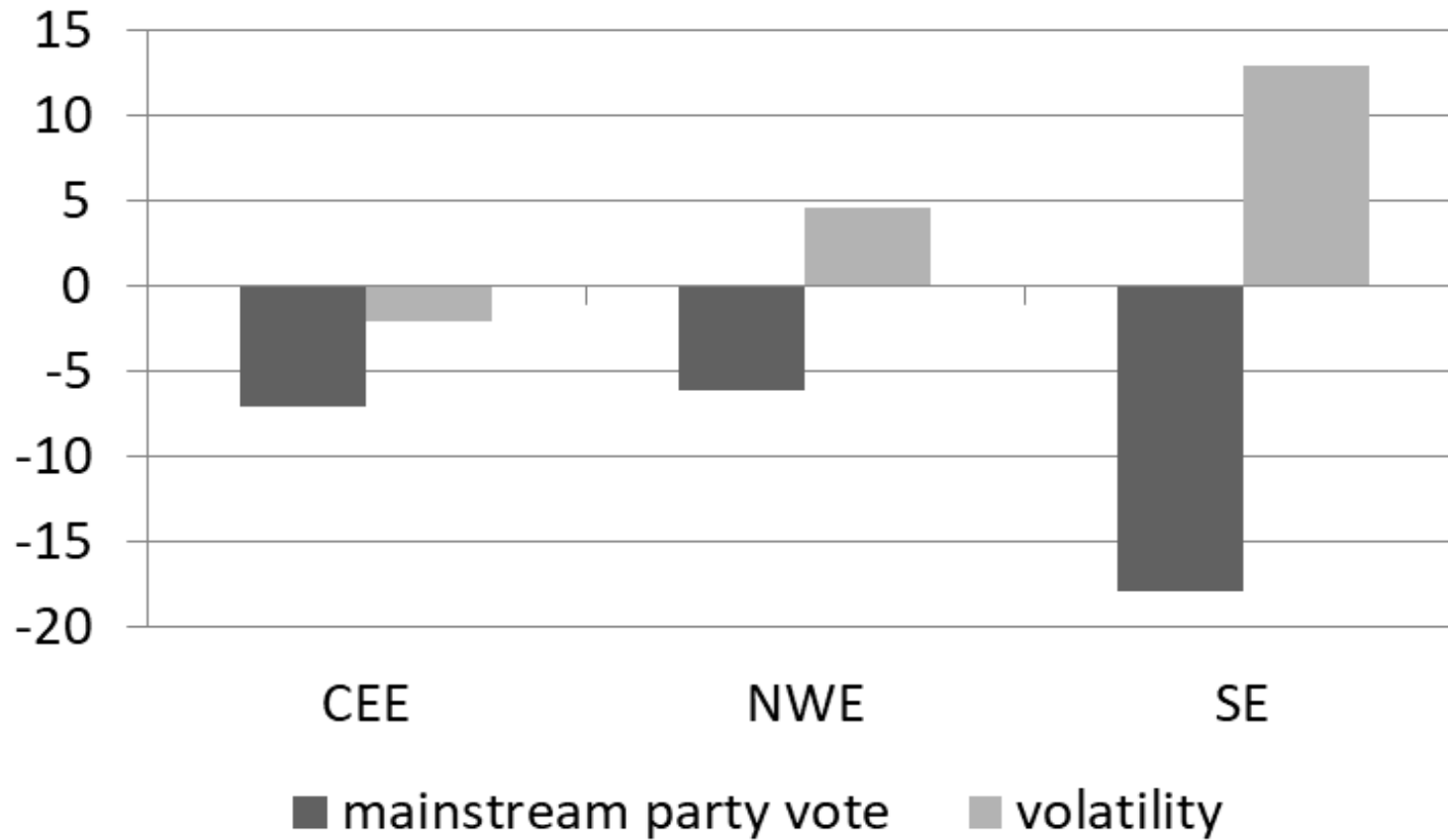
Where does the **democratic dissatisfaction** come from?

Democratic dissatisfaction: consequence of a crisis of representation, related to two set of factors

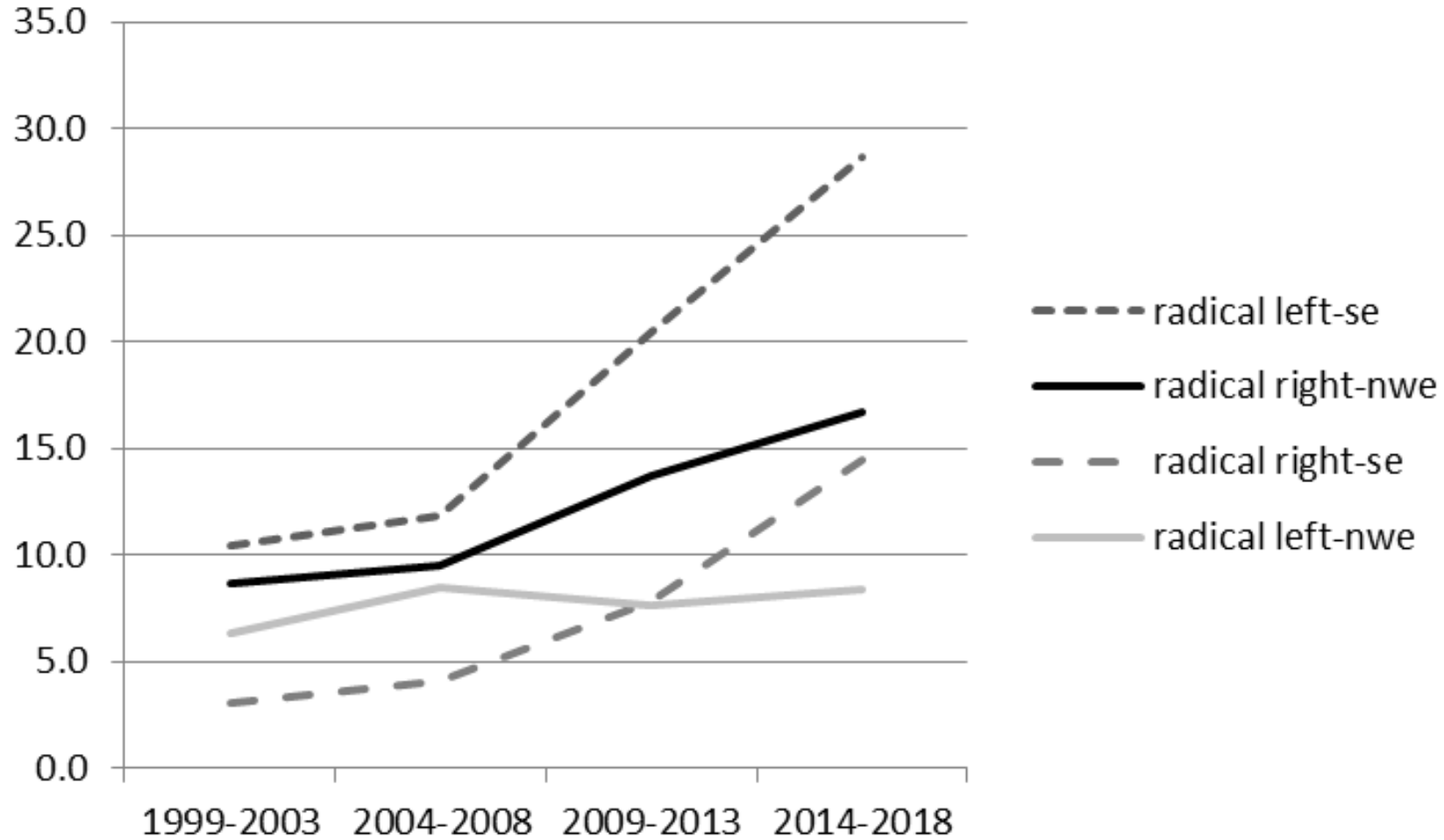
- Lack of responsiveness of the parties to new demands of the citizens:
 - the voters' demands (result of social conflicts) and
 - the mainstream parties' failure to represent them
- performance failure:
 - economic crisis (in the Great Recession) and/or
 - political crisis (result of foreign interventions and domestic corruption, scandals, incompetence)

- **Consequence of democratic dissatisfaction:**
 - The decline of mainstream parties and increasing volatility in party systems
 - rise of new populist challenger parties from the left and from the right

The voters' perspective



The voters' perspective



- **New populist challenger parties** pursue a double logic: they.....
 - **express/fuel democratic dissatisfaction:** populism (anti-elitism, strong emotional appeals) => demand popular sovereignty and political renewal
 - **express substantive demands** (social conflicts)
 - **radical right:** opposition to immigration, European integration, and cultural liberalism => new conflicts opposing nationalist conservatives to cosmopolitan liberals
 - **radical left:** opposition to rising inequality, support for social protection (redistribution) => renewed conflicts about material (class) interests

Is the rise of populist challenger parties dangerous?

- **Populists' challenge: a democratic corrective** – populists' aim to 'cash in democracy's promise of power to the people' (Canovan 1999)
 - **Expand the political agenda/debate:** put key societal conflicts on the agenda of democratic politics
 - **Increase the options for elections:** there are alternatives
 - **Increase electoral participation:** bring back to democratic politics groups that have been left unrepresented by the mainstream parties

What happens if populists are in government?

- **The real danger: in power, populist leaders attempt to implement their project of political renewal => an illiberal vision of democracy....**
- **The extent of the danger depends on**
 - the populist leaders themselves
 - the constraints they encounter

Constraints:

- **Institutional:** checks and balances, electoral systems (coalition governments)
- **Partisan:** parties as ultimate gatekeepers – loyalist/semi-loyalist/disloyal opposition:
 - Trump's take-over of the Republican Party vs
 - Zuma's replacement by Cyril Ramaphosa in the ANC
- **International:** external leverage and linkage
 - EU membership conditionality vs
 - Disciplining of members ('Haider affair', Orban/Kaczynski)
- **Market:** 'lo spread'

Constraints:

- **Voters:** democracy's power of self-correction
 - Hungary and Poland, Turkey and Russia vs
 - Armenia, Malaysia, Maldives (2018); Slovakia (presidential elections), Turkey (local elections), Ukraine (presidential elections) (2019)

Populists in government – regional differences in Europe:

- **Northwestern Europe**, radical right: moderating effect (e.g. Norway, Switzerland)
- **Southern Europe**, radical left: moderating effect (e.g. Greece)
- **Central- and Eastern Europe**: limited moderating effect



Conclusion:

- There is reason for concern, but no reason to dramatize
- There is widespread dissatisfaction with democracy, especially in southern/central-eastern Europe, but also very widespread support for the principles of democracy
- Democratic dissatisfaction gives rise to challenger parties which express this dissatisfaction/legitimate substantive concerns and offer new alternatives



Conclusion:

- In western/southern Europe: once in government, challenger parties tend to moderate/the dissatisfaction of their voters tends to evaporate
- In central-eastern Europe: most dangerous situation: illiberal leaders get power undivided in a context of weak democratic traditions
- An afterthought: populist challengers may be just a temporary phenomenon, characteristic of a crisis of representation and of restructuring party systems

Thank you for your attention!

