

Chapter 5: Understanding the psychology of contemporary democracies

A strong and healthy democracy does not only depend on the electoral process or the functioning of government but also the confidence of citizens in democratic institutions. Citizens need to trust in the institutions of democracy and feel they have some degree of power and influence over them. What political scientists often neglect to ask is, what determines the extent citizens trust democratic institutions? Why do some citizens feel more trusting of democratic institutions than others? This book explores these issues and argues that the way that citizens understand and engage with their political systems is, first of all, contingent on their identities and values. The experiences of citizens with their caregivers, their significant others, their education as well as their ethnic, religious and social background all shape their identities and values. The first chapter also explains that the communication and actions of political organisations, citizens experiences of interactions with political outputs and the mediation of politics also interact with their identities and values. In other words, citizens assess the extent that how the system operates, and the outputs from the system, conform to how their hopes and expectations. Meeting hopes and expectations results in trust and satisfaction and, while we cannot expect 100% trust and satisfaction, we should not find 100% mistrust and dissatisfaction in a functioning democracy. In reality, citizens perhaps sit somewhere on a scale on both dimensions, trusting but sceptical and partially satisfied. Where they sit on these scales will determine their cognitive processes and will shape the general emotional state within a nation.

Our discussion of cognitive processes, in chapter two, has emphasised the different ways in which lived experiences such as the economic crisis can shape identities and values and cognitive interactions with political institutions. In highlighting how some can feel marginalised, despite living in a society where principles of equality can be enshrined in legislation, we show how some citizens can come to believe that the democratic processes do not work for them and so lack legitimacy. This is important as it suggests some sections of society are far closer to having almost no trust or satisfaction in the political system.

Significant challenges are posed to democracies by the emergence of highly polarised positions which can become reinforced in citizens through a desire for their biases and prejudices to be confirmed. Drawing on contemporary examples, in chapter two, we illustrate how citizens often prefer to believe they have sufficient knowledge and that their beliefs are innately correct

and make generalisations while engaging with or selecting new information. The retreat into echo chambers can lead to the development of even more extreme beliefs, and the adoption of a position that is anti-democratic. The widespread usage of digital media and communication from parties and campaigns can exacerbate these issues, as well as encouraging citizens to engage superficially. Extreme beliefs reinforce negative perspectives of ‘the system’ and towards those with alternative perspectives and undermine the pluralist principles on which democratic operate. While personal and group identities becoming blurred, group members become reluctant to question the dominant group narrative. When this narrative does not conform with the dominant narrative in the country, the decline in trust in democratic institutions become inevitable.

We discuss another significant challenge to democracies posed by the use of digital media in chapter three, the flow of simplistic messages. Simplistic messages are important as, instead of carefully and critically evaluating a message, individuals often form their judgements based on these simplistic cues. The flow of simplistic messages may lead to the formation of strong attitudes, but these attitudes may not be well informed. Our discussion exposes a tension at the heart of democracy, relating to political communication. Politicians seek to appear close and relevant to their citizens, but in order to ensure citizens understand and recall their messages they must keep the message simple. Hence, citizens are more likely to be ill-informed, driven more by beliefs than well-informed attitudes and gut reactions based on lived experiences interacting with exposure to simple image-based arguments. This situation is incompatible with the core principles of democracy.

Political participation can be seen therefore as the result of gut reactions. The increase in protests all around the world reflect a declining trust towards politicians. As the simplistic messages of politicians fail to address the economic and social problems of their countries and lived experiences of citizens, mass protests have been witnessed around the world since 2009, as the impact of the economic crash was felt. In chapter four, we show that joining a protest is not a simply based on an emotional reaction to external stimulus. In order for citizens to engage in collective action, the action needs to be familiar to them, involve acceptable levels of personal risk, perceived urgent and important and conform to their social values and norms. Through the analysis of recent protests such as those under the BLM banner, we show how these motivational factors were available for protesters in different countries. We also discuss the value of social media in terms of raising awareness, stimulating emotions and generating

collective effervescence. Today, many citizens may participate in actions that they believe are available, accessible and acceptable and that may have some positive impact for their lives. However, many also remain disengaged. It is becoming more important than ever to understand why there is a decline in the number of people who participate into traditional forms of political action such as voting. In chapter four, we discuss the four motivational factors affecting an individual's likelihood to vote and argue that in order to vote a citizen must first view voting as a democratic duty and believe he/she will have a tangible impact on the outcome. The voting process must also be perceived to be fair and the citizens must feel inspired by one candidate or party. Drawing on the presidential elections in France and the US, we demonstrate how voters were driven by the issue position and/or images of political candidates. Non-participants, on the other hand, believe voting offers little benefit to them.

The inequities in engagement, in trust and the inconsistencies between the principles of democracy and the practices of political communication have never been exposed in the same way as they have in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on theories discussed in the previous chapters, this concluding chapter examines the human impulses and drivers that have shaped nation-specific attitudes to the democracy during the pandemic and offer solutions to tackle the challenges that democratic institutions currently face.

Democracy in lockdown

2020 was a year of contradictions. It was a year when many citizens of democracies rallied around the flag in a national effort to beat the COVID-19 virus and awarded greater support to their leaders. But some citizens took to the streets in support of Black Lives Matter and to protest the restrictions brought in to restrict the spread of the virus. The unprecedented restriction of freedom and mobility impacted the psychology of many societies and accentuated the problems at the heart of democratic systems. In April 2020 statistica.com estimated that one third of the 8 billion population of the planet were under lockdown conditions, by summer 2020 the estimate rose to a quarter. In February 2021 every single nation remains affected and enduring severe restrictions. The measures to control movement ranged from being heavily policed, not only in authoritarian regimes such as China but also France and Italy. Elsewhere compliance with restrictions were brought in as strong government or state advisory policies with lighter touch policing, in particular the UK and USA. Some democratically elected leaders dismissed the threat of the COVID-19 virus, Brazilian president Jair Bolsanaro described it as 'a little flu' and the response of other nations and the World Health Organisation as 'hysterical'.

The response of US president Trump foreshadowed his rejection by voters concerned about the spread and impact of Covid-19. He at different points called it a 'hoax', labelled it the Chinese virus, made wearing face masks a partisan issue, and while later acknowledging the threat prioritised the economy when calling for state governors to relax restrictions. The differing responses are symptomatic to a degree of the style of leaders, the extent they prioritise human life over national economic interests, as well as their preparedness for coping with a pandemic of this magnitude.

The public responses to the measures are further indicative of differing national attitudes to the democracy and the legitimacy of their governments (Lilleker et al., 2021). In this book, we show that trust in institutions might increase or decrease based on the emotional factors such as feelings of belonging, empowerment and of representation. Hence, the measures taken by governments during the pandemic required citizens to view the restrictions as appropriate, necessary and legitimate requests. New Zealand is hailed as the nation which restricted the spread of the virus and deaths most successfully (Boland, 2020). With only 102 confirmed cases on March 23 2020 the Health Minister announced the country would be at Alert Level 3 implementing social distancing and restricting movement. With cases doubling to 205 by March 25, lockdown was implemented and all but essential businesses forced to close. Previously, prime minister Jacinda Ardern managed to bring solidarity and social cohesion when New Zealand faced a white supremacist attack on its Muslim community. Ardern successfully unified her citizens against the attack while showing solidarity with the Muslim community. During the pandemic, while there was some disquiet among business owners regarding the definition of essential business, a combination of daily briefings from Ardern and fulsome support from the media again ensured social cohesion, widescale compliance and no serious challenges.

Contrasting styles, and the perceptions they offer, perhaps explain different public responses. While UK prime minister Boris Johnson pre-recorded his March 24 2020 lockdown announcement and did not provide the media opportunities to ask questions, Ardern gave extensive time for media questions during her lockdown announcement, demonstrating a dedication to transparency and desire to allay concerns (Wilson, 2020). Prior to the lockdown 21-22 March 2020, Utting Research found 62% of New Zealanders were satisfied with the government response, this increased to 84% in a small poll conducted by Colmar Brunton 3-5 April, and 87% in a poll conducted by the same company 20-21 April 2020. New Zealand

instituted a phased return to normalcy on 27 April 2020 with the country having only 1,479 confirmed cases and 19 deaths. Like many other democracies, in September 2020 data showed the GDP of New Zealand had fallen by 12.2%. However, despite economic recession, citizens continued to have trust in their leader (Graham-McLay, 2020). Symbolic acts of proximity played a role. Ardern and other ministers took a 20% pay cut to show their solidarity with those hit by the pandemic. They thus displayed understanding of the challenges citizens faced and signalled their solidarity with them. Ardern has consistently polled well for personal popularity during her leadership of the minority coalition, overcoming the challenges of partnering in government with the nationalist and populist New Zealand First and managing the supply and demand supportive relationship with the Greens allowed her to bridge divisions in politics and the country. Thus, her standing and reputation meant she was trusted handling the crisis. Her reputation was enhanced as she won plaudits from the global media for managing the Covid-19 crisis. The result has been that Ardern won a majority in parliament for her Labour party in the October 2020 election.

Contrasting this with the USA, a federal system where the president may set the general tone and speaks to and for the whole nation, but state governors are the arbiters of more local measures. Trump's message has oscillated between dismissal and acceptance of the severity of the Covid-19 threat, at points contradicting the advice of health experts and publicly opposing instituting the state of emergency on March 13 2020. Measures taken across states differed markedly. New York the state with most cases, California where the first death occurred and Illinois issued stay at home orders 15-21 March 2020, a raft of other states followed over the next four-weeks although a small number of states including North and South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska and Utah instituted no restrictions whatsoever. The contrasting messages at the national and state levels, and inconsistencies have led to high levels of public uncertainty and protests in many states. The inconsistencies are evident. Wyoming, with 559 cases and 7 deaths, closed bars, clubs and theatres, restricted gatherings to nine or less people and advised only essential movement. In contrast Iowa had 7,000 confirmed cases and 162 deaths and only restricted public gatherings issuing no stay-at-home orders. Protests have been witnessed across a range of states, challenging the measures on the grounds they run counter to personal freedoms enshrined in the constitution and repeating the claims of more conservative advocates that the lockdowns are political motivated.

Some of those Americans who protest restrictions and who back Trump's claims that the election result is invalid cite conspiracy theories. Restrictions were framed as the first step towards authoritarian government under which Americans will be subjected to limitations on their ownership of guns, further freedoms of movement and a complete erosion of what is termed the American way of life. As discussed in chapter three, while assessing a new message, citizens often depend on mental shortcuts and heuristics. Conspiracy theories provide the most powerful heuristics. They easily manipulate those who hold strong beliefs and prejudices and create feelings of anger and anxiety. The four factors discussed in chapter four and indicated as necessary to induce a political action (acceptability, availability, deemed urgency and the social eye) are thus formed. Some citizens rejected the health risks and took to the streets to demand their freedoms.

The contrasting levels of coherence across nations and the communication strategies of leaders are not the only way to explain the stark differences. Many of the nations who imposed lockdown also introduced an economic package to support businesses and employees laid off during lockdown. No new measures were introduced in the USA, those made unemployed could apply for government aid but the impact of ten million claimants overloaded the system quickly. The blanket \$1200 for each American taxpayer had little real impact for the hardest hit. Facing a period with no income but normal household bills remaining the same and costs of normal consumer items simultaneously rising due to higher demands it is little surprise that some protested. Such lived privations will also have led many to have sympathy with the tragic George Floyd, whose death was the result of his frustration at being accused of having a fake \$20 bill so preventing him buying cigarettes. The privations felt by many Americans, coupled with claims that Covid-19 is a politically motivated hoax, shifted emotional responses from fear to anger and were expressed within the protests which included a heavily armed militia occupying the Michigan statehouse to demand an end to all restrictions.

Thursday April 30 2020 witnessed many events under the umbrella of the 'American Patriots Rally' calling for a return to work. The Michigan legislature, controlled by the Republican party, and despite 3,788 people having lost their lives to the virus within the state and having over 41 thousand confirmed cases, refused the request of Democrat Governor Gretchen Whitmer to extend emergency measures. This opened up possibilities that Michigan businesses and citizens could sue the governor while her executive powers mean she had the power to extend the measures regardless of the decision in the legislature. Michigan thus witnessed a

battle between different partisan ideologies, ones which remained polarised in the November election, and competing wings of government both of which are democratically elected. The opinion of the mass of Michigan citizens is unknown, although a poll of April 19 2020 by Democrat supporting media outlets the NBC and Washington Post showed 58% of Americans were more concerned about relaxing the lockdown while 32% were more concerned about the economic impact. However, it seems a small number of protestors, given succour by President Trump suggesting lockdowns need to be lifted and conservative advocacy groups and their supportive media, have support of the Michigan legislative. Meanwhile, Michigan governor Whitmer pursued an alternative course underpinned by a different set of values. The division in the polls may reflect stark societal differences. 11.8% of US citizens were said to be living in poverty according to the 2018 census. It is likely this number has grown. Citizens often make their choices based on their political values. As explained in chapter two and four, materialists value basic resources required for their survival such as jobs, economic resources. It is highly possible that the have-nots mainly constitute the group opposing lockdown. With a minimal safety net, they are the most vulnerable to unemployment, increased poverty, becoming homeless and so may seek succour in arguments that suggest lockdown can be lifted. In contrast, a less financially insecure majority may be able to trust the validity of the restrictions as their livelihoods are not as seriously impacted and can view the crisis through a more post-materialist lens. The pandemic, and the 2020 election result, may expose deep divisions in the USA between haves and have-nots, materialists and post-materialists, rather than a simple pro-Biden versus a pro-Trump camp.

Crises like the pandemic are naturally times of heightened anxiety. Anxiety “leads to a bias towards threatening news” (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015). Politicians, media and experts in democracies have more responsibility ever to cooperate and craft clear, consistent messages that aim to create solidarity and convince citizens to act responsibly. As explained in chapter one, citizens need to feel they belong to the society, that they are empowered and represented during the pandemic: leaders must build a culture of we-ness by embodying ‘representing us’, ‘doing it for us’ and crafting and embedding a sense of us in all communication (Jetten et al., 2002: 25-30). Furthermore, to regulate distress, leaders are required to be transparent in their decision-making. Ardern’s government appears to have accomplished this through the government alert level framework which assisted citizens to make sense of what was happening and why (Wilson, 2020). Where leaders play down risks, focus on divisions within society as opposed to calling for unity, offer no instruments to alleviate privations, anxiety turns to anger

which fuels a desire to find an explanation. Some can find an answer in the conspiracy theories that in the USA have linked Democrat state administrations with pro-China conspiracies and a hidden plan to restrict the freedoms Americans see as core to their constitution. Research shows that holding conspiracy beliefs is both a result of lack of trust in institutions as well as a cause of deepening mistrust in democratic processes. It is this mental state that leads to lower levels of adherence to containment-related guidance and legislation (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020). Preventing the rise of conspiracy theories is a key duty of social media organisations and governments, despite impinging of free speech. The recent invasion of the Capitol, the seat of the American democracy, has clearly displayed the dangers posed when conspiracy theories become prevalent among sections of society. Adherents of the QAnon movement, an extreme movement based on conspiracy theories, were on the front lines of the Capitol riot. The riot displayed to the world the danger that conspiracy theories can create (Argentino, 2020).

Democracy without anxiety

Understanding the psychology of democracy allows us to identify a variety of challenges that democratic institutions currently face. They appear not to meet expectations in terms of representing the people effectively. Citizens appear to be turning their back on democracy, some are mobilised by nongovernmental issue-oriented pressure groups, others by populists whose rhetoric deepens the divisions between citizens and their democratically elected representatives. While democracy should be agonistic, as per Mouffe (1999), it should not be antagonistic. Agonism involves respect for different positions; antagonism does not. Social disparities explain to some extent the parsing of political engagement, exposing the dangers that societal inequalities pose for cohesion and increased antagonism. If increasing numbers of citizens seek the security of echo chambers, have their prejudices reinforced or magnified, mistrust and dissatisfaction in democracy can only increase and spread. The glimmer of hope for democracies is perhaps found alongside the gloomier perspective we get from looking at the USA. American politics is naturally an exceptional case. The constitutional arrangements, societal values and underpinning principles are in many ways unique. Equally the style of leadership offered by Trump was sharpening divisions long prior to the pandemic hitting the nation. Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Scandinavian countries, even Ghana (Lilleker et al., 2021) offer better examples of how democratic institutions can be strengthened through offering a more reassuring, transparent, clear and inclusive style of leadership through a pandemic.

In their work *Together Apart*, which set out best practice rules for leaders bringing a nation together to collectively minimise the risks posed by Covid-19, Jetten et al. (2020) argued that citizens need to feel they belong, they are represented, they are listened to and understood. Leaders need to make them feel they are as safe and secure as is possible, and that the government and all democratic institutions are focused on serving the interests of all. Reminding readers of the core principles raised in the first chapters, in order to trust in democratic institutions, people need to feel empowered and significant, both as members of a society and through the processes of democracy, and trust democracy will work equally well for everyone. In short, citizens need to trust that the democratic principles enshrined in legislation will actually be reflected in their everyday experiences of and interactions with the institutions of the state. Failure in any of these dimensions means citizens will lack trust in democratic institutions.

Therefore, within the persuasion and campaigning that modern politics necessitates, politicians must embody, through communication and action, representing all the people and working on behalf of all the people. Political leaders, candidates for office, or parties seeking government should not exacerbate divisions in society but heal them. The USA proved a bad example. While equality is enshrined in the constitution and Bill of Rights, what divides America is used, albeit in private, on the campaign trail. In 2012 Republican candidate Mitt Romney declared at a fundraiser that 47% of American voters were “dependent upon government... believe that they are victims... believe the government has a responsibility to care for them... believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing...”ⁱ. These millions of Americans, Romney declared, would never vote Republican and would back Obama whatever. Four years later Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton, speaking at a similar event, described half of Donald Trump's supporters as a "basket of deplorables" who were "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic"ⁱⁱ. Such declarations signal that large swathes of Americans are unlikely to be represented by that candidate and that it may be unlikely they will work on behalf of the people they have written off as citizens that will not give them their vote. While these are statements designed for a private audience that were made public, they evidence that on the campaign trail some citizens are seen as outside of the orbit of that candidate's target voter group. Once made public they give the impression the attitudes of these voters will also not be considered in the decision-making process. In an age of identity and issue politics, where affective polarisation can divide societies, when it is easier to retreat into an echo chamber than

engage in open, pluralist debate, developing messages that will unify the public become more and more crucial for politicians.

In her acceptance speech Jacinda Ardern declared

“governing for every New Zealander has never been so important more than it has been now. We are living in an increasingly polarized world, a place where more and more people have lost the ability to see one another’s point of view. I hope that this election, New Zealand has shown that this is not who we are. That as a nation, we can listen, and we can debate”ⁱⁱⁱ.

The values espoused in this are not unique. However, they capture well the spirit of a way of performing politics that has the potential to increase trust and satisfaction, bring a nation together around a set of ideals and make people feel they belong to a functional democratic nation. Unlike his predecessor, Joe Biden adopted an inclusive rhetoric in his inauguration speech. Acknowledging the importance of shared values, Biden declared:

“What are the common objects we as Americans love, that define us as Americans? I think we know. Opportunity, security, liberty, dignity, respect, honour, and yes, the truth” (Penna, 2021).

Biden thus reminded the divided American nation of their shared identity. Citizens are often not preoccupied with their large group identities in their daily life but more focused on their subgroup (Volkan, 2004). Reminding them of their national identity, and the core values of the nation is important as national identity is so closely tied to the core identity of citizens, their sense of who they are and their sense of sameness with others in their nation. It can thus connect the public, create belonging and encourage unity and trust that the leader shares those values.

The speech also made reference to the collective memories of American public:

“Through civil war, the Great Depression, World War, 9/11, through struggle, sacrifice, and setback, our better angels have always prevailed. In each of our moments enough of us have come together to carry all of us forward and we can do that now. History, faith and reason show the way. The way of unity... If we do that, I guarantee we will not fail. We have never, ever, ever, ever failed in America when we've acted together” (Penna, 2021).

Here, Biden makes sure collective memories remain vivid in the nation’s mind. This is important as collective memories serve to maintain unity and increase the willingness of

citizens to cooperate with other group members (Gongaware, 2004). Biden also included in his speech a reassurance to Trump's supporters that he will fight for them:

“I will be a President for all Americans, all Americans. And I promise you I will fight for those who did not support me as for those who did” (Penna, 2021).

Adopting an inclusive rhetoric, Biden thus drew a picture of an American president who will represent and fight for the whole nation. For a more vibrant democracy, more effort should be paid to building an inclusive single identity and societal and political trust. Particularly in the face of turbulent times, such as those caused by the pandemic, communication is crucial for reducing tensions and relieving anxiety. Recent events in the US have showed politicians can foster inclusivity, a prerequisite for pluralist democracy, by welcoming differences in the society and bringing citizens together. Determining shared goals and objectives is also important but more important than this is working to meet these objectives. The popularity of Ardern in New Zealand proves the world that attitudes and action can communicate more than words when they executed wisely. While pluralism creates agonism, it also fosters respect and dialogue. An antagonistic society is one riven by inequality and division, neither of these provide the security that is required for citizens to have positive feelings towards democratic institutions.

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ⁱ <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2012/sep/18/mitt-romney/mitt-romney-says-voters-who-support-barack-obama-a/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/election-us-2016-37329812>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/new-zealand-pm-jacinda-ardern-victory-speech-transcript-wins-2020-new-zealand-election>