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

More in Common

Robert Bosch Stiftung

Executive Summary

There is growing concern about the future of democracy. In addition to the now well-known phenomenon of political disenchantment present across most major Western democracies, more fundamental questions have recently arisen around trust in institutions and the democratic process itself. These doubts have been exacerbated by new social and political forces which, considered together, amount to a significant new challenge to democracy as a system of government.

Civil society actors, foundations, political leaders and other institutions working to strengthen democracy are therefore asking themselves which projects and formats work best in this context, where strategic gaps in existing approaches may exist and which audiences they need to reach in order to make an impact.

For civil society action to be effective in tackling the challenges of current democratic dynamics, a first step should be to gain a better understanding of what democracy currently means to people as a whole and to specific groups in particular, what their expectations of the political system are, and how they experience democracy in their daily lives. With this in mind, the Robert Bosch Stiftung and More in Common have joined forces to conduct a practice-oriented and cross-national study, using a specially developed methodological approach to investigate people's relationship to democracy.

Working with opinion research firms YouGov and KANTAR, More in Common surveyed **more than 10,000 people in Germany, France, Britain, Poland, and the United States at the beginning of 2021 on attitudes toward and experiences of democracy**. The aim was not to compare countries, but rather to understand the different challenges democracy is facing in each specific national context.

Particular focus was placed on those segments of the population who are neither active supporters nor vocal critics of democracy but are furthest removed from the democratic debate.

Finding 1: There is no aspiration for alternatives to democracy.

Our research shows that the idea of democracy as such still enjoys great popularity in the Western world. **Everywhere, the vast majority of people say "yes" to the principle of popular rule** and are committed to fundamental common values such as the rule of law, free elections, and freedom of expression. This suggests that threats to democracy are unlikely to arise from a broad outright rejection of this form of government.
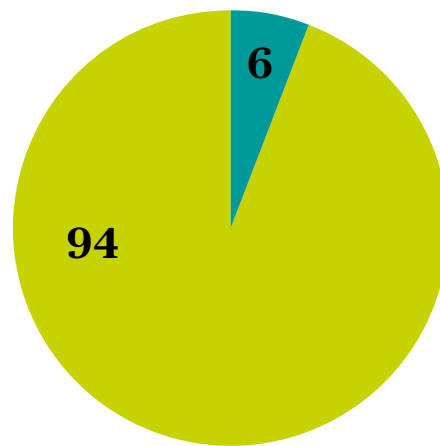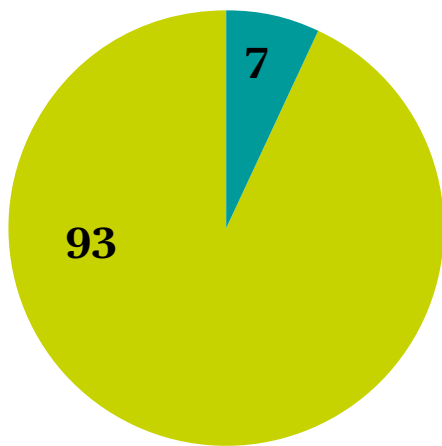
Support for democracy as a principle

The idea of democracy is widely accepted in Germany

Democracy as a principle

Importance of living in a democracy

In favor %

7

93

6

94

■ More in favor of the idea of democracy
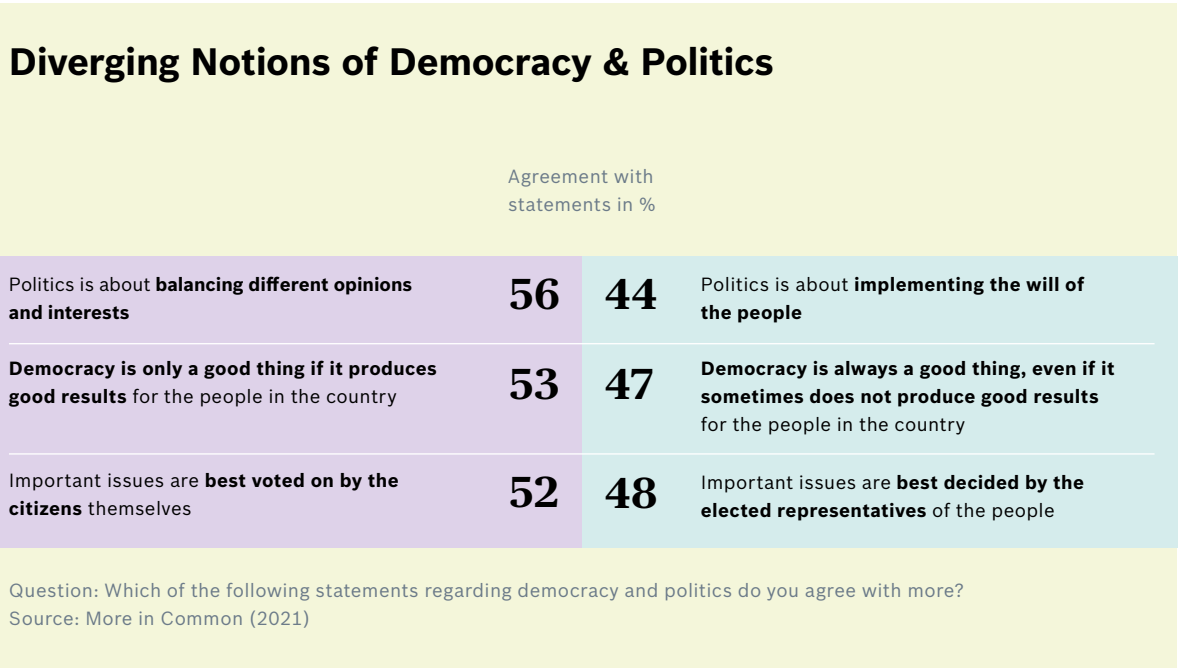■ More against the idea of democracy
■ Rather important
■ Rather unimportant

Questions: 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)

GERMANY

Finding 2: People have different ideas about what constitutes democracy and what goals it must fulfill.

Nevertheless, this study does not give the all-clear. On the contrary, it reveals very different ideas about, expectations of, and experiences of democracy. In particular, the interplay **between people's notions of an ideal democracy and their lived experience of real-world democracy is significant and impacts on social cohesion as a whole**. This study therefore calls on us to look beyond nominal concepts to more precisely examine actual dynamics and better understand effective interventions.

Diverging Notions of Democracy & Politics

Agreement with statements in %

Politics is about **balancing different opinions and interests**	56	44	Politics is about **implementing the will of the people**
Democracy is only a good thing if it produces good results for the people in the country	53	47	**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	52	48	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)

GERMANY

Finding 3: Democracy "in itself" is not enough: people link satisfaction with democracy to results.

The promise of democracy generates resentment and uncertainty if it is not fulfilled in concrete ways that positively impact people's daily lives. This is true in "material" terms, for example, in France (where the state plays a comprehensive and active role in creating social cohesion), but also in Germany and Poland, where many people equally value the state's function of "care". For many, **satisfaction with democracy is a question of tangible lived results, not just principles and processes**. Democracy must "deliver" results for people. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy should be understood in this context, too.

Democracy as the best form of government to ...

Numbers in %

... ensure that individual liberties are respected

| 41 | 48 | 9 | 2 |

... ensure that the rights of minorities are respected

| 34 | 52 | 12 | 2 |

... promote the economic development of a country

| 31 | 54 | 13 | 2 |

... address the concerns of all citizens

| 34 | 51 | 13 | 3 |

... ensure justice

| 35 | 50 | 12 | 3 |

... reduce social inequalities between citizens

| 31 | 52 | 14 | 3 |

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

| 31 | 50 | 15 | 3 |

... protect the environment and biodiversity

| 28 | 51 | 18 | 3 |

... ensure order

| 27 | 49 | 20 | 5 |

■ 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).
Please note: Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

FRANCE

Finding 4: Democratically ambivalent groups exist in all five countries surveyed and need to be better understood and addressed.
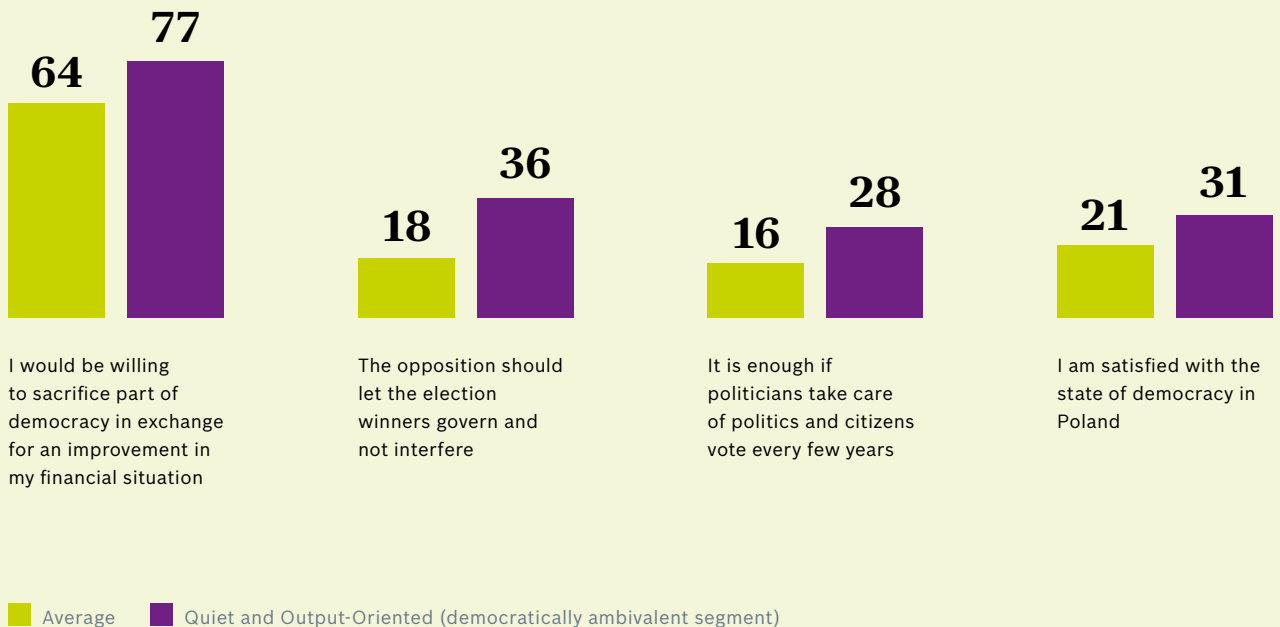
Our study identifies specific segments of the population that are ambivalent toward democracy. Depending on the national context, these segments make up between 24 and 51 percent of the population in the European countries examined. Some of them are conspicuous, first of all, **for their lack of attachment to democratic principles and their distance from democratic life**. This ambivalence takes on different forms in different national contexts, ranging from satisfied apathy to civic confusion and sympathy for authoritarian alternatives. Meanwhile, there are others **whose demands on the democratic state remain unfulfilled and who therefore turn away in resignation**. For these people, democratic reality is often one in which they do not appear and which does not meet their needs.

In Europe, the "democratic ambivalence" of certain segments of the population is almost never directed against the concept of democracy itself, but rather indicates a weakened relationship with democratic norms or their practice. In the United States, on the other hand, we note worrying politicization and polarization of the concept of democracy, making even regular conversations about democracy, its values and norms almost impossible.

In the other countries, too, everything should be done to prevent democracy itself from becoming a victim of toxic polarization. Poland is already a particular source of concern on this front.

Democratic ambivalence in Poland

Agree in %

64 **77**	**18** **36**	**16** **28**	**21** **31**
I would be willing to sacrifice part of democracy in exchange for an improvement in my financial situation	The opposition should let the election winners govern and not interfere	It is enough if politicians take care of politics and citizens vote every few years	I am satisfied with the state of democracy in Poland

■ Average   ■ Quiet and Output-Oriented (democratically ambivalent segment)

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).
Are you satisfied with the state of democracy in Poland? Source: More in Common (2021)

POLAND

Finding 5: Crises of confidence and discourse characterize all five countries.
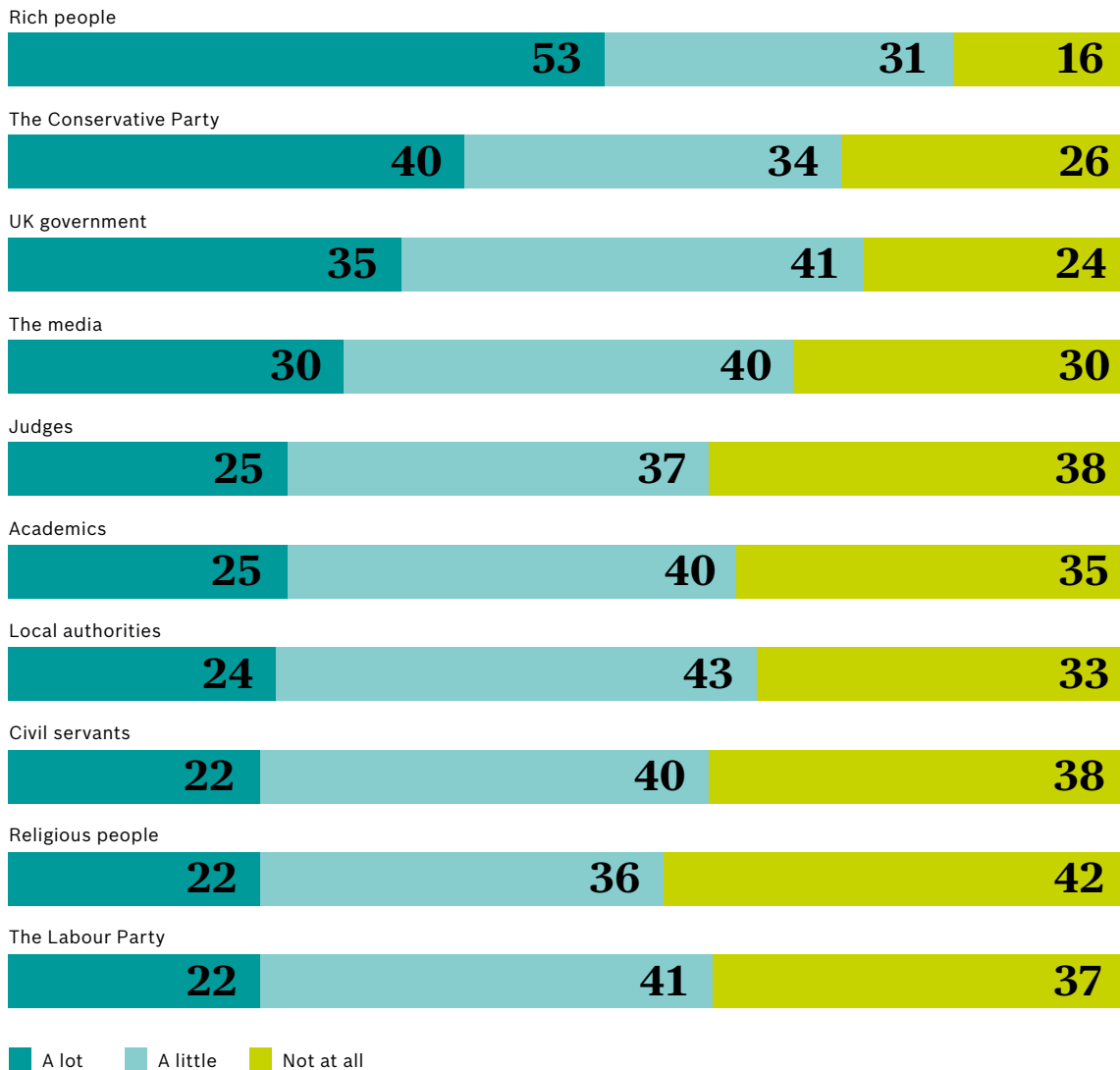
In all countries surveyed, we find widespread distrust of political decision-makers, élites and the media. Strengthening public trust, especially in a post-pandemic world rife with conspiracy myths, will be one of the most urgent tasks ahead. The US and Poland face additional challenges as **political distrust is rife** not only toward élites but **among citizens themselves**. Opposing political camps in these countries feel so alienated from each other that they accuse each other of having intentions detrimental to democracy itself.

Closely related to this is the overarching motif of **a crisis of public discourse**. The ability to talk to each other in a democracy has, in the eyes of our respondents, suffered severely. This finding is most obvious in the US, but in Europe as well, many people are concerned by the "increasingly hateful" tone in public debates and personal conversations.

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 %

Rich people

A lot	A little	Not at all
53	31	16

The Conservative Party

| 40 | 34 | 26 |

UK government

| 35 | 41 | 24 |

The media

| 30 | 40 | 30 |

Judges

| 25 | 37 | 38 |

Academics

| 25 | 40 | 35 |

Local authorities

| 24 | 43 | 33 |

Civil servants

| 22 | 40 | 38 |

Religious people

| 22 | 36 | 42 |

The Labour Party

| 22 | 41 | 37 |

■ A lot   ■ A little   ■ Not at all

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)

GREAT BRITAIN

Recommendations

The future of democracy cannot be adequately secured if it relies only on a small segment of committed democrats. **It must also rely on the support of those who may not currently be active or vocal supporters, but are not opponents of democracy.** Even in societies with long democratic traditions, there are people who are not close to democracy or are disillusioned with it, who do not vote and do not feel part of the political process. This creates a vicious circle: because pro-democracy organizations and actors rarely come into contact with these segments of the population, they become invisible to the pro-democracy camp, who find it increasingly difficult to address them. This study provides an initial evidence base for understanding and addressing these important democratically ambivalent groups.

One thing has become clear: democracy matters to many people, but we should not assume it means the same thing to everyone. This study reveals people's different hopes and expectations, experiences, and needs with regard to their democracy. We hope this offers new approaches for civil society to better engage these groups as well as for political actors, media groups, and other stakeholders who must understand and address a crisis of trust. This is especially true for ambivalent segments of the population, whose perspective on democracy is rarely heard and certainly different from the view of more visible and politically engaged groups.

The results also show that the best paths to re-engage key segments may come from interventions outside the democratic space *stricto sensu*. Social engagement to deliver understandable and tangible policy results (for example on inequality, justice, and giving social recognition to under-represented groups), is likely to be among the most impactful work when addressing democratically ambivalent groups.

It should be a cause for concern that many people feel unheard. In addition to delivering better outcomes, there is a need for innovation concerning the process and formats of democratic participation and convening. Existing barriers to participation should be minimized and efforts should be made to listen to and reach groups that are less naturally inclined to political deliberation.

Many current formats of values-based pro-democracy work may not be fully engaging ambivalent groups, precisely because they lack a sufficient connection to people who distrust politics. Instead of trying to instantly convince people of the "intrinsic" norms and merits of liberal democracy, civil society actors should instead focus on building their understanding and relationships with those citizens who are furthest from the democratic space. **"Relationships, not just values"** could emerge as a strategic heading to address larger parts of the population and thus strengthen the foundations of democracy. Civics education, participation mechanisms, trust-building, or discourse improvement can be viewed through this lens in a new way.

Summary of findings per country

In **Germany**, there is strong support for democracy, which has grown out of the country's history. Germans have internalized many constitutional principles and demonstrate mature democratic reflexes. Yet despite the solidity of that support for democracy, we find a trust crisis lurking beneath the surface between Germans and their political leaders. In the eyes of many, the political system does not produce sufficient results and does not listen closely enough to citizens. Criticism of the élites and of the media is quick to receive broad support. Against that background, competing definitions of what democracy is and what it should be emerge, 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".

A systemic crisis is developing in **France**, where a political system that has always had high demands for the active role of the state (which promises to deliver nothing less than "liberty, equality, fraternity") is falling short of that aspiration 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.

In **Great 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 largely polarized society are not accurate. We find that people are frustrated and feel powerless with respect to political élites, 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 "fixing" the relationship between the people and politics.

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

The **United States** can be considered one of the essential cradles of modern Western democracy. In the collective American imagination, there is no alternative to this form of government – Americans by definition are committed to democracy. However, American democracy is under immense pressure, which has become strikingly apparent over the last several years. The problem is not indifference to the form of government, but an exceptionally toxic degree of political polarization. The relationship between opposing camps is so fraught that people are prepared to assume the worst of each other. As such, each side accuses the other of aiming to destroy democracy. And the more strident the voice, the more attention it is given. The result has been significant damage to the entire republic.

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"

Pre-election

Average

| 37 | 51 | 11 |

Democrats

| 36 | 55 | 9 |

Republicans

| 33 | 54 | 13 |

Independent

| 40 | 46 | 14 |

Pre-election

Post-election

Average

| 39 | 51 | 10 |

Democrats

| 17 | 69 | 14 |

Republicans

| 59 | 35 | 7 |

Independent

| 46 | 45 | 9 |

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.

USA

The **Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH** is one of Europe's largest foundations associated with a private company. It works in the areas of health, education, and global issues. With its charitable activities, it contributes to the development of viable solutions to social challenges. For this purpose, the Foundation implements its own projects, enters into alliances with partners, and supports third-party initiatives. Since it was established in 1964, the Robert Bosch Stiftung has invested around 1.9 billion euros in charitable work.

More in Common is an initiative to build more united, inclusive, and resilient societies, with teams in Germany, France, the UK, and the US. Since 2017, we have interviewed thousands of people about their social experience, listened to them in focus groups, and learned a lot about what fuels polarization and social division in practice-oriented projects and studies. In the process, the topic of democracy has been omnipresent: We see how important a functioning democracy is for cohesion (and vice versa), but also that people associate different ideas with democracy.