



Neil Howe

Demography

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Are Millennials Giving Up on Democracy?

06/02/17 07:35AM EDT

TREND WATCH: What's Happening? *Across Europe and the United States, support for anti-establishment candidates is rising. The success of far-left and far-right political campaigns is being powered by young people, who are losing faith in liberal democratic institutions—and are surprisingly open to undemocratic or even authoritarian alternatives.*

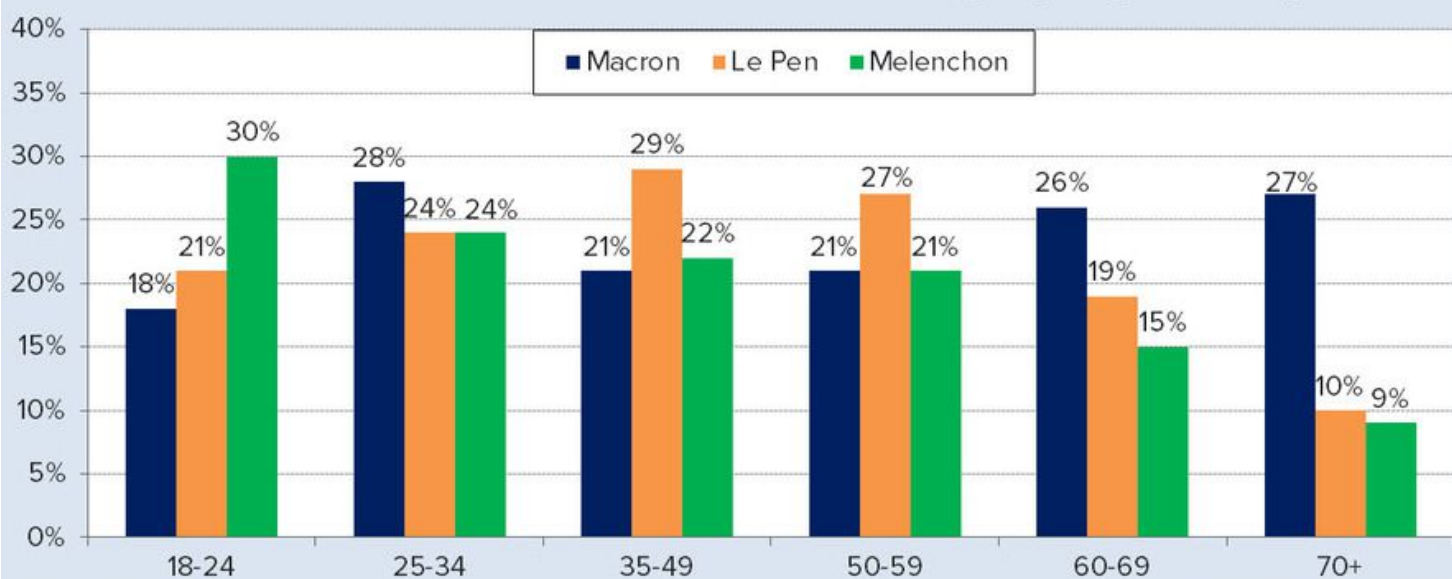
Our Take: *Though political disaffection has been growing among all age groups, there are real differences in how younger and older generations view politics that reflect their respective phases of life and divergent views of government—and point to a broad desire among Millennials for security, simplicity, and planning in all areas of their lives.*

At age 39, the newly elected Emmanuel Macron is the youngest president in the history of France. He's younger, in fact, than most of his voters: French Millennials, eager for radical change, mostly preferred either the far-left or far-right alternative to the centrist Macron.

The election results in France point to a youth insurgency that has boosted parties and candidates at the political extremes around Europe. In the first round of elections, when voters had their pick of candidates who promised to maintain the status quo, a majority of young voters rejected centrism by casting their ballots for the far-right Marine Le Pen and the far-left Jean-Luc Mélenchon (a Hugo Chávez fan who favors 100% tax rates on the rich). By contrast, voters over age 60 preferred Macron, pushing him forward to the next round.

FRENCH YOUTH SUPPORTS FRINGE CANDIDATES

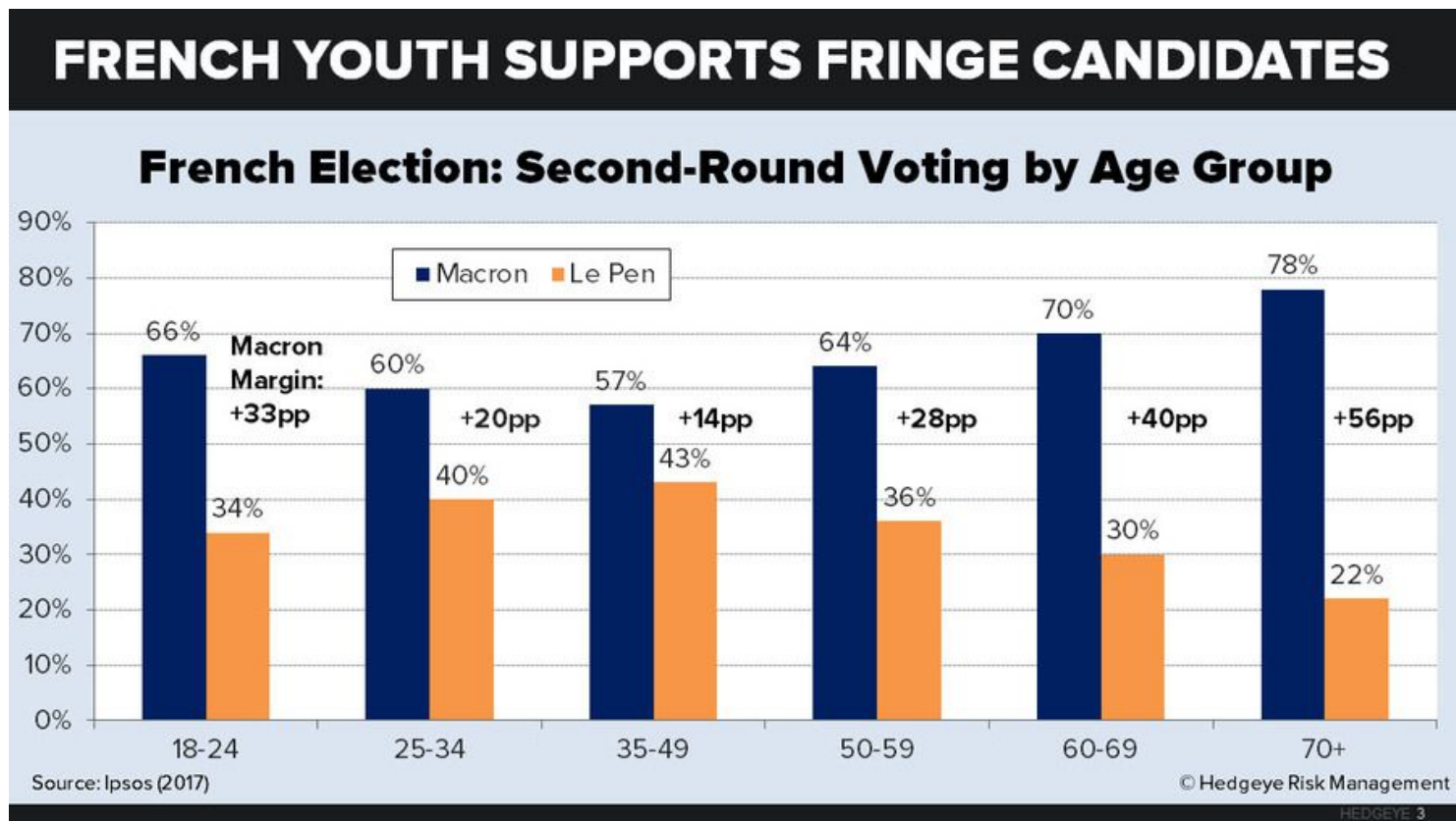
French Election: First-Round Voting by Age Group



Source: Ipsos (2017)

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Even when the field was reduced to two choices, an impressive share of young voters went far-right. Although Macron defeated the far-right Marine Le Pen in every age group, Le Pen secured 34% of the vote among 18- to 24-year-olds and 40% among 25- to 34-year-olds. By contrast, she won just 27% of the vote among the 65+.



Some are saying that Macron's victory, coming after Brexit and the election of Trump, represents a "turning of the tide" against populism. Not hardly. Both Brexit and Trump were in fact statistical coin tosses: Either could easily have turned out differently. Ditto for the French election. If the neophyte Macron had stumbled a bit in his final two weeks, the second round could have pitted Mélenchon against Le Pen—a contest that would have triggered white-knuckle panic on the Euronext Paris exchange. As it is, Macron comes to power with no party and a thin, technocratic mandate in a nation clamoring for sweeping reform. He will be lucky to avoid the fate of Italy's Matteo Renzi, another charismatic young whiz kid whose stint as leader was overwhelmed last December by populist fury.

YOUTH SUPPORTING POPULISM AROUND THE WORLD

What is not a coin toss—but rather an inexorable tide—is the rising appeal of populist candidates, parties, and platforms across Europe that make such victories ever-more likely. Back in May 2014, the radical right and left more than doubled their share (to 28%) of the EU Parliament in Strasbourg. Ever since, prominent populist (and Eurosceptic) parties have been rising up to vie for national leadership and influence national policy: including National Front (France), Party for Freedom (Netherlands), Danish People's Party (Denmark), Swedish Democrats (Sweden), Finn's

Party (Finland), Jobbik (Hungary), Freedom Party (Austria), Five Star Movement (Italy), and Golden Dawn (Greece).

There are two striking and perhaps alarming things to keep in mind about today's European populists.

First, they tend to be authoritarian. They are mostly fond of leaders (like Vladimir Putin) who rule with an iron fist. On the right, they are dismissive of democracy and civil liberties when they come to power (say, in Hungary or Poland). On the left, they favor huge new state power over the economy (as do the leaders of Italy's Five Star Movement).

Throughout history, in fact, waves of populism and authoritarianism tend to arrive together. After all, if people think none of the incumbent elites can be trusted, they are also likely to favor a new strongman to set things right. The very word *populism* derives from "populares," the ordinary people who favored Julius Caesar in the late Roman Republic (against the Senatorial "optimus" or "privileged people" who feared his dictatorship and ended up assassinating him).

Second, they are disproportionately favored by young voters in almost every nation. In Italy, for example, young voters are fueling the sizable lead for the Eurosceptic Five Star Movement. The typical AfD supporter in Germany is under 30. In France, as we have seen, over 50% of voters under age 30 voted for the extreme right- or left-wing candidate, versus under 30% voters over age 60. The youth tilt is especially pronounced where youth employment is faltering, fertility is low, and net emigration rates are high—for example in Central Europe (the so-called "Visegrad nations"). An amazing 67% of first-time Polish voters supported Andrzej Duda, the right-wing victor, in 2015.

All this isn't just happening in the West. Across Asia, a similar story is unfolding: New leaders such as Japan's Shinzo Abe, China's Xi Jinping, India's Narendra Modi, and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte all promote socially conservative, ethnically majoritarian, country-first policies and aggressive economic planning. Along the way, they are achieving historically high popularity ratings. Nationalistic passions have sparked numerous territorial disputes, such as the recent clashes in the South China Sea.

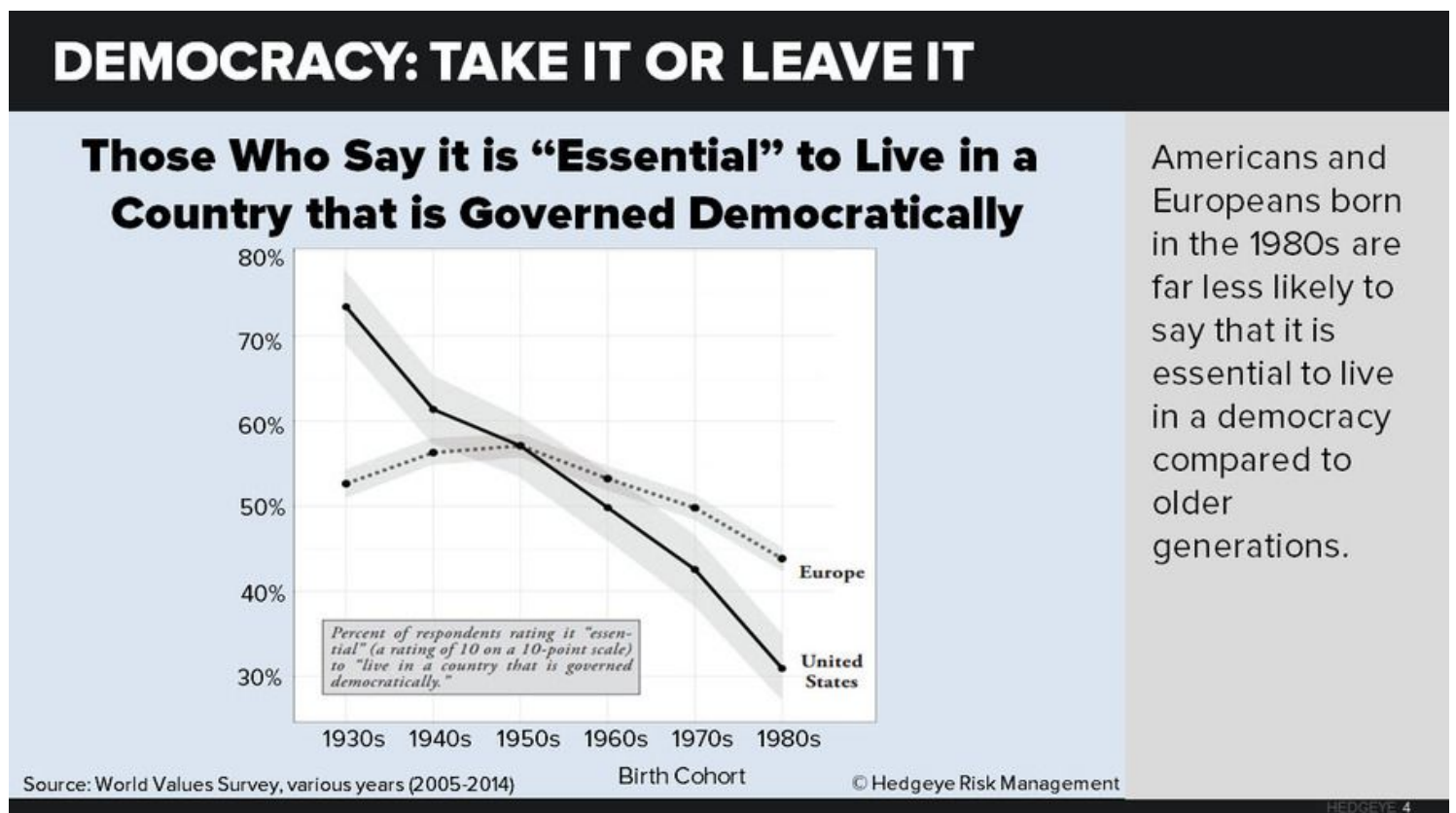
What's more, in a reversal from other nationalist movements in recent decades, the most vocal supporters of this popular new nationalism are young Asians. In China, ultra-nationalist Millennials nicknamed "little pinks" have gotten Taiwanese actors cut from films and swamped celebrities with anti-government views with negative comments. In Japan, voters under 30 were more likely to vote for Abe in his big 2016 victory than older voters; they also are much more likely to favor changing the constitution to give Abe greater war powers. Ditto for the recent 2016 election in the Philippines: "The younger the voter, the more the appeal of Duterte," announced Mahar Hangahas, head of the national exit poll.

Closer to home, events like Brexit and President Trump's win left many Americans with the impression that populism is a right-wing phenomenon fueled by older generations that will fade with time. But this is off the mark. Populism is both right-wing *and* left-wing. Like their

counterparts across the pond, American Millennials in the 2016 primary flocked to a fringe candidate promising revolution: Bernie Sanders. Today, British Millennials are flocking—hopelessly, given Theresa May’s huge lead—to the ambitious nationalizing “manifesto” of the Labour Party.

THE UNDERLYING SHIFT IN ATTITUDES

The rise of extreme candidates at home and abroad—and their popularity among young voters—conforms to several studies indicating that youth in democracies around the world are losing faith in the system. According to research from political scientists Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa, only about 30% of Americans born in the 1980s think it’s “essential” to live in a democracy. That’s compared to 75% of Americans born in the 1930s. Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, and Britain reported similar gaps.

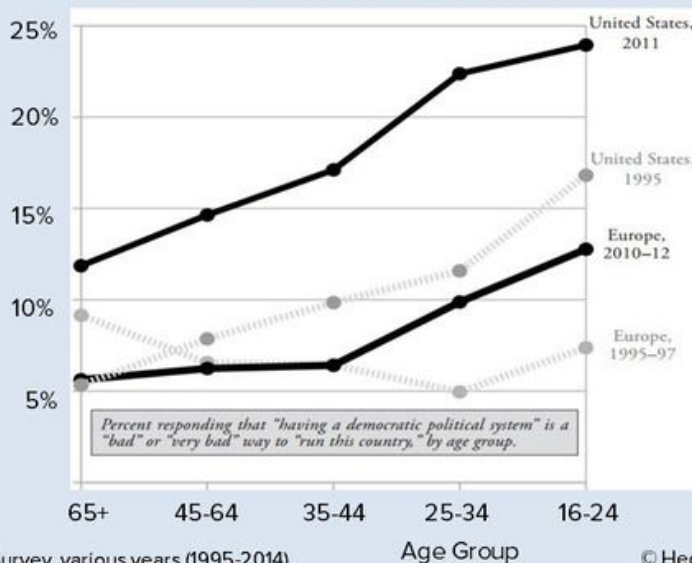


Americans and Europeans born in the 1980s are far less likely to say that it is essential to live in a democracy compared to older generations.

In another study of European Millennials by the TUI Foundation, only 32% selected democracy as one of their top five most important social values. And the share of young people who consider democracy a “bad” or “very bad” way to run their country is growing, according to the World Values Survey (which includes over 100 countries). Nearly 25% of 16- to 24-year-old Americans feel this way, double the share of their 65+ counterparts.

DEMOCRACY: TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT

Those Who Say a Democratic System is a “Bad” or “Very Bad” Way to Run Their Country



The share of Americans and Europeans who say democracy is bad for their country is highest—and rising the fastest—among the young.

Source: World Values Survey, various years (1995-2014)

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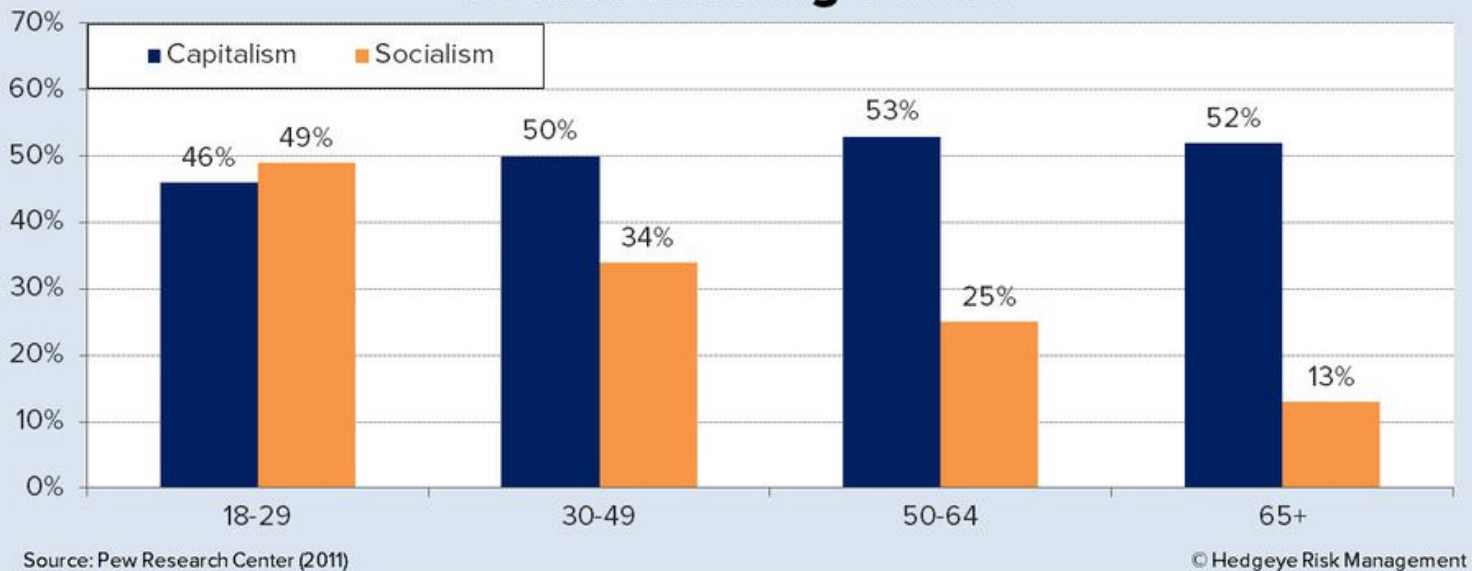
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Millennials are also increasingly open to non-democratic forms of government. Many even identify with ideals commonly associated with authoritarianism. They're the generation most likely to agree that it would be a good idea to have "a strong leader" as opposed to "parliament and elections." World Values Survey data shows that in 2011, nearly half of young Americans supported this view, compared to less than 30% of Boomers and Silent.

Similarly, 81% of U.S. Millennials think a military takeover would be justified if the government were failing. Among older Americans, this figure plunges to 57%. (There is a similar generational gap in Europe.) Young Americans are also far more likely than older Americans to view socialism favorably, according to Gallup and the Pew Research Center.

MILLENNIALS AMBIVALENT TOWARD CAPITALISM

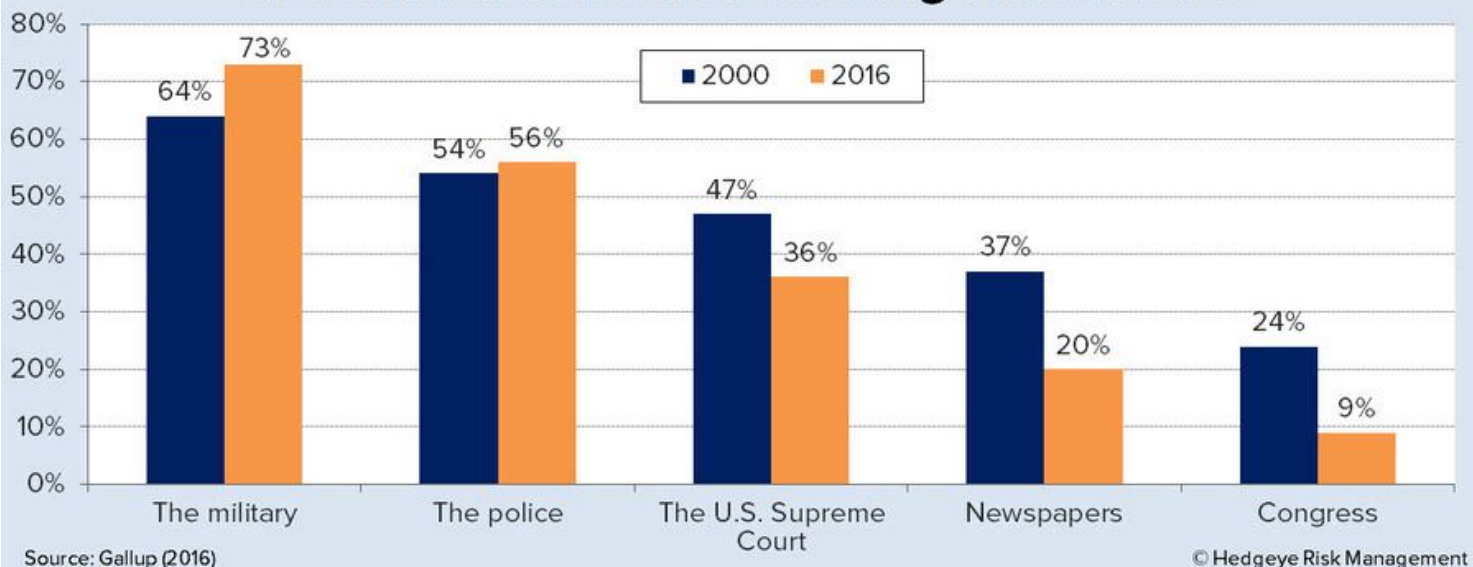
Share of Respondents Who React Positively to the Following Terms:



It's not just government that is suffering from low popular appeal. Trust in public institutions has also fallen to record lows. Those experiencing the biggest declines in recent years are hallmarks of U.S. democracy—for example, Congress, the Supreme Court, and mass media. By contrast, trust in institutions associated with order—namely, the military and the police—has remained steady or even climbed. Considering that young adults today trust individuals less than their elders, but institutions more (see: [“Millennials in Search of Belonging”](#)), it's not surprising that they would welcome the idea of a strong, even autocratic, government.

AMERICANS LOSING CONFIDENCE

Share of Americans with “A Great Deal/Quite a Lot” of Confidence in the Following Institutions:



Of course, Millennials aren't the only ones frustrated with the status quo. Political dissatisfaction has risen among all age groups. But young people's skepticism of democracy itself sets them apart from their elders.

GENERATIONAL DRIVERS

Why are young people so disillusioned with democracy?

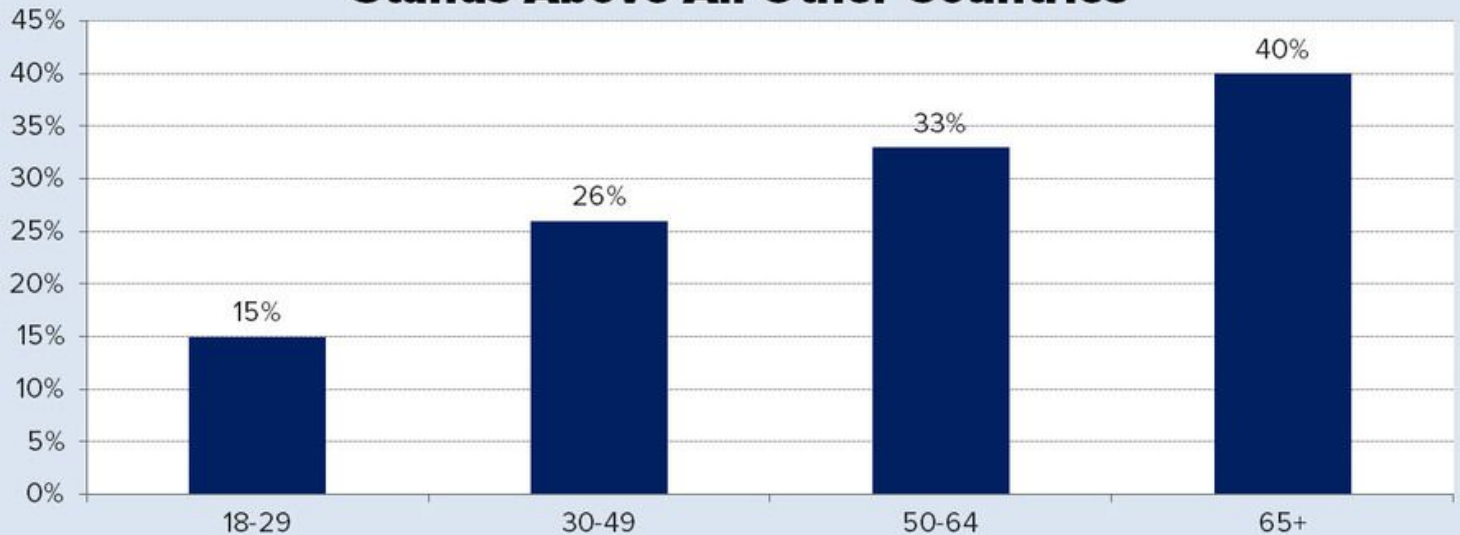
Bleak economic prospects. Many Millennials justly believe that the status quo isn't working for them. Across Europe in particular, high youth unemployment rates (nearing 50% in places like Greece) and dismal economic prospects have convinced many that the system is broken, and that new blood is needed to upend the establishment.

Far-right and left-wing parties have taken hold most strongly among youth in insecure countries whose citizens feel betrayed by the EU. (We've covered this theme before in "[A Rising Generation of Eurosceptics](#).") Meanwhile, American Millennials are fed up with a government they see as gridlocked, corrupt, and unable to solve problems.

America the ordinary? Among U.S. Millennials, another contributing factor is their weak sense of American exceptionalism. According to Pew, only 15% believe America "stands above all other countries," versus 26% of Xers, 33% of Boomers, and 40% of the Silent.

AMERICA THE ORDINARY?

Share of Americans Who Say United States “Stands Above All Other Countries”



Source: Pew Research Center (2014)

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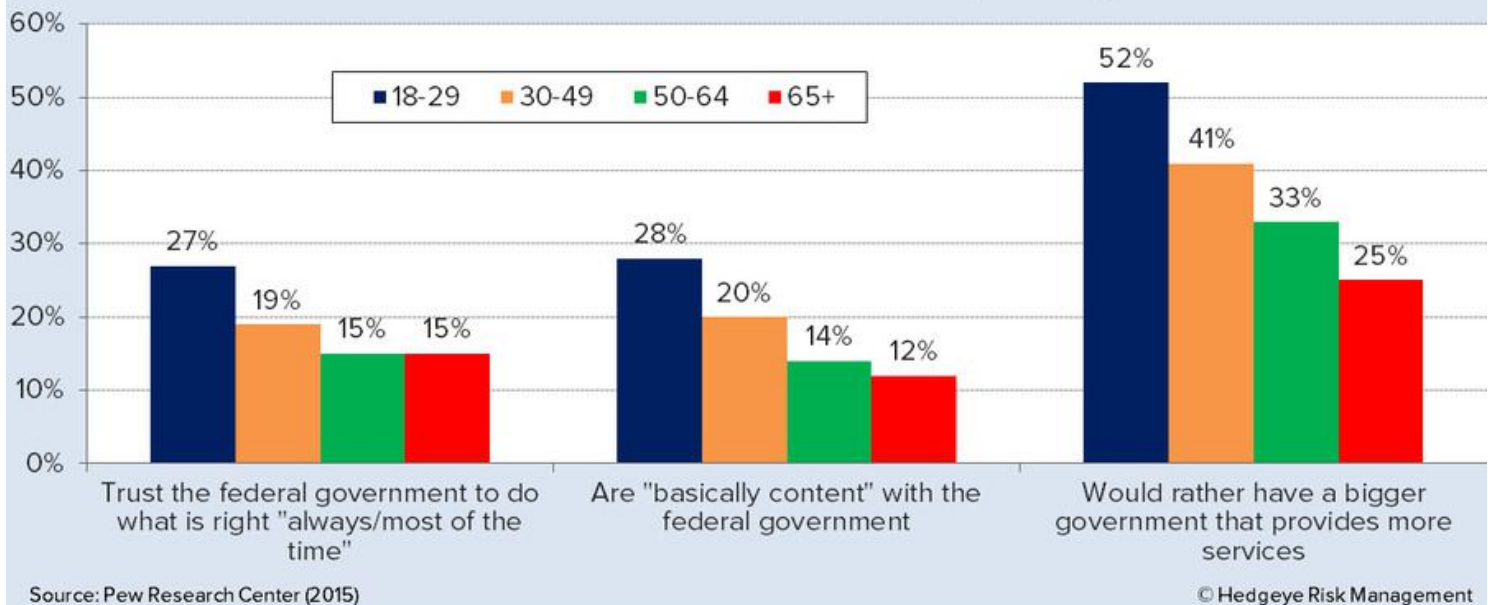
By contrast, Millennials everywhere are much more positive about China than older generations. The young seem less concerned that China can in no sense be described as a "democracy." What excites them is that China is an extremely future-oriented society that's investing heavily in infrastructure and riding an economic boom—in stark contrast to leaders at home who struggle to focus on any long-term policy priorities. Pew finds that 47% of U.S. Millennials express a positive view of China, compared to just 30% of the 50+. And it finds a similar age gap in most other Western societies.

The Millennial openness to authoritarian alternatives is shaped by their location in history. All their lives, they have seen older generations argue rather than act, guarantee a process rather than a result. This may not bother the old. But for the young, with their longer time horizons, dithering, gridlocked institutions that cannot make priorities or choices are a dire threat to their future. In addition, as Mounk and Foa point out in *The Washington Post*, Millennials' apparent indifference to democracy may reflect the fact that they "lack the direct experience of living under, or fighting against, authoritarian regimes like fascism or communism."

Though Millennials' trust in government is low, they report higher levels of trust, higher expectations for services, and less anger than their elders as measured by Pew—and that higher regard for government as an ideal makes them more inclined to look for answers in other political systems.

MILLENNIALS HAVE HOPE FOR GOVERNMENT

Share of Americans Who Say They...



Keep it simple. Young people's aversion to democracy is also motivated by a greater desire for simplicity. Faced with an abundance of choices (see: "[When Less is More](#)") and a lack of economic security and stability, they are looking for employers who take care of them, all-inclusive packages and pricing that make life easy, and brands that take out the guesswork. An authoritative decision maker—whether it's a person or a brand or a "single payer" health care system—is seen as more admirable than one that offers dozens of confusing options.

IS IT GAME OVER FOR DEMOCRACY?

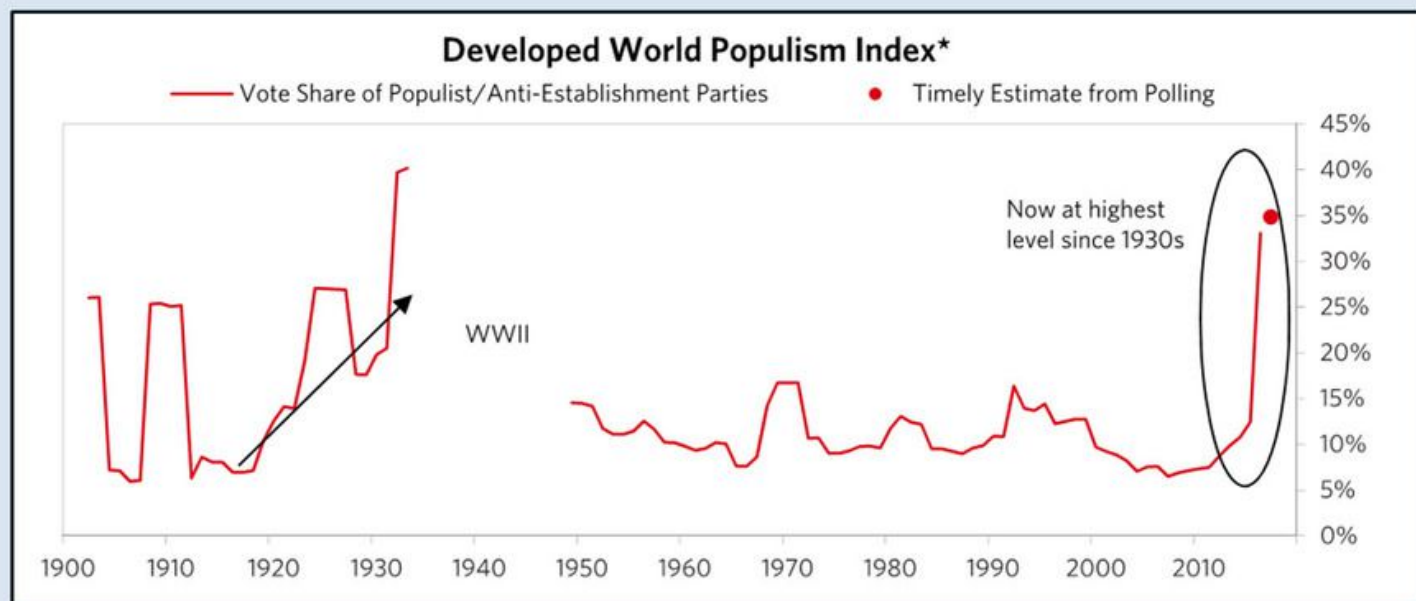
The culmination of all these trends is that populism, once a bit player in global politics, has been vaulted into the mainstream. Populist sentiment appears to be here to stay: Global consulting firm Edelman reports that people worldwide are now just as likely to trust "a person like you" for information about a company as they are experts.

What's unclear, however, is what *kind* of populism will prevail going forward. The populism of the 1960s and 1970s was that of the left: anti-corporate, pro-global, and aspiring to humanistic principles. Today's populism tilts to the right: anti-global, anti-intellectual, and led by strongmen who want to build walls up rather than tear them down. Millennials' social values tend to tilt leftwards—but the desire for a decisive leader with a future-oriented agenda might ultimately override them.

The last time a great wave of populism and authoritarianism swept over Europe was in the 1930s, a decade in which fascists and communists both gained strength at the expense of powerless centrist elites. According to Ray Dalio at Bridgewater, the rise of populist parties in the 1930s (after

the Crash of '29) provides an illuminating parallel to the rise of populist parties in the 2010s (after the GFC of '08).

POPULISM RISING



Source: *Populism: The Phenomenon*, Ray Dalio, et al., Bridgewater Associates (2017)

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Of course, this parallel may be regarded as a worst-case scenario. There is no need to exaggerate the trend. Millennials don't represent the end of democracy as we know it. Although fewer consider democracy "essential" (i.e., a 10 on a 10-point scale), young people in most countries still, on average, assign it a positive value (around 7 or 8). But their increased willingness to entertain other forms of government and their attraction to anti-establishment rhetoric reveals deep trouble for the moderate center in the United States and abroad. Young people's disillusionment alone might not trigger a revolution, but it lays the groundwork for older leaders—left or right—who want one.

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