

Delivering Democracy: Why Results Matter

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Abstract

The global wave of democratic backsliding has questioned the ascendancy of democracy in the 21st century. A purported decline in political trust and satisfaction with democracy, alongside the rise of high-performing autocracies, has sparked conjectures that popular support for the democratic project is eroding in favor of new, more authoritarian alternatives. Part of this discussion concerns the extent to which service delivery and outcomes matter for the legitimacy and stability of democracy. We argue that delivery for citizens is crucial to rebuilding the social contract and hence support for democracy alongside thwarting backsliding. We reflect on infrastructure as a public good for exposition.

1 Delivery, Democracy, and Backsliding

The wave of democratic backsliding that has reached several corners of the globe has questioned the ascendancy of democracy. Canonical cases include the Fidesz Party under Victor Orbán in Hungary, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Erdoğan in Turkey, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, alongside ex-Presidents Jair Bolsonaro and Rodrigo Duterte in Brazil and the Philippines, respectively. Large interest has subsequently focused on trying to understand why exactly this phenomenon has surfaced, in addition to addressing concerns stressed by policymakers on how to enhance democracy assistance efforts abroad (Bermeo, 2016).

Two general approaches have emerged. On the one hand, “supply-side” explanations tend to focus on elite behavior and how democracies die from “within”. The piecemeal dismantling of democratic institutions, using those very institutions to do so once an illiberal leader is elected, characterizes this line of inquiry (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). On the other hand, “demand-side” theories seek to emphasize whether and how citizens’ lack of support for democracy precipitates backsliding. Here, the notion of performance and *service delivery* have taken center stage. When democracies are perceived as unable to deliver for their citizens, to what extent does this fuel demand for alternative political projects that appear to provide better results, such as more authoritarian systems of governance?

A recent article in the *Journal of Democracy*, *Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding*, probes this very question. Focusing on a sample of twelve countries where democracy has weakened, Carothers and Hartnett (2024) claim delivery, as proxied for with GDP growth and inequality via national Gini coefficients, has limited explanatory power in explaining the onset of backsliding.¹ For example, India and Poland were outstanding economic performers even before their quality of democracy declined.

At a time when there is reported growing dissatisfaction with democracy, Carothers and Hartnett (2024) do well to appraise the oft-claimed nexus between delivery and backsliding. This also helps go beyond debates on backsliding that center on measurement, where scholars have unpacked “trends” across indices of institutions to verify whether democracy has genuinely eroded in certain contexts (Little and Meng, 2024a,b).

However, the broad conclusion that delivery has limited relevance in explaining why some countries have democratically weakened requires nuance. At its core, by only focusing on cases where backsliding has occurred, there is clear bias that arises by “select-

¹These countries are Bangladesh, Brazil, El Salvador, Hungary, India, Mexico, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Poland, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United States.

ing upon the dependent variable” (Geddes, 1990). Ideally, one would have to broaden the aperture of case selection by also including countries where no backsliding has occurred to understand if performance is an antecedent condition with a genuine null effect.

This consequently invites a broader analysis of the extent to which delivery does matter for the stability and legitimacy of democracy. It remains contested as to what is the exact linkage between delivery and backsliding. Moreover, there is growing anxiety that even strong democracies are under-performing relative to some autocracies, especially in the provision of large-scale public goods such as infrastructure, and also their capacity to deliver economic growth and opportunities, reduce poverty and unemployment, and improve security (Dunst, 2023).

Evidence from the Pew Research Center documents increased dissatisfaction with democracy globally, especially amongst younger cohorts, with this largely being connected to economic discontent (Wike et al., 2019). And as reported by various organizations like the Edelman Trust Barometer, although trust in government is meager in countries like France, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom, it retains its height in more authoritarian environments that are growing and investing rapidly, such as China, Rwanda, Singapore, and Vietnam.

The above trends suggest there are strong perceptions that democracies are becoming anemic in their ability to deliver for citizens. Hence, the connection between delivery and the social contract has plausible, broader implications for how and why citizen support for democracy has waned, opening further debates on what can be done to rebuild this.

2 Why Delivery Matters

2.1 Delivery and the Social Contract

Delivery from government relates to much older ideas in political science and political theory concerning the social contract. Since the writings of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, citizens in the polity acquiesce to being ruled by a sovereign under the premise the sovereign, in turn, uses political power towards the benefit of the citizenry (Hobbes, 1651; Locke, 1690).² Several hundred years after Hobbes and Locke outlined a logic of

²We acknowledge Mills (1997) insightful critique that argues that the social contract in Western political philosophy has historically excluded people of color and operated as a “racial contract” instead. Reflecting on how the “racial contract” or threats to it might be working to undermine the legitimacy of democracy in the contemporary period goes beyond the scope of this paper.

the social contract, political scientists have discussed at length the importance of building trust in government for effective policymaking (Braithwaite and Levi, 1998; Fukuyama, 1996; Hardin, 2002; Levi, 2022).³

Public service delivery is by no means the only method by which governments can bolster their trustworthiness amongst citizens. Having an honest political class that is at least perceived as dedicated to the common good is fundamental. Yet, the policy decisions of governments can have large, tangible, and direct impacts on individuals' livelihoods. When poor economic management leads to major crises, this provides strong grounds to lose faith in incumbents and the political system at large, as manifested in widespread protest and unrest or in voting for anti-institutional outsiders promising to distance themselves from an sclerotic political class.

Building trust in government hence further connects to notions of *legitimacy*. Seymour Martin Lipset (1993) famously titled this as the “moral title to rule”, and Levi et al. (2009) also claim that legitimacy “denotes popular acceptance of government officials’ right to govern” (p. 354). Delivery undoubtedly plays a large role in this process to generate beliefs that the system upholds the flourishing of its citizens. As Diamond (2024) notes “[a] long record of effective performance – in delivering economic growth and opportunity, reducing poverty and inequality, providing social services, controlling corruption, and maintaining political order and security – fills a reservoir of legitimacy” (p. 13).

But it is important to recognize that trust in government and legitimacy through performance are not exclusive phenomena to democratic systems. Various empirical studies have thus connected service delivery to winning the “hearts and minds” of citizens across contexts. In forthcoming work, using a dataset covering 2.8 million individuals globally, Besley et al. (2024) show a strong nexus between trust in government and experiences with economic growth. As a stylized fact, the most politically trusting societies of the world have some of the highest GDP growth rates, with many of these environments being autocratic, such as China, Qatar, Rwanda, and Vietnam.

At the other end of the distribution, countries with meager economic performance are some of the least trusting of their governments, such as the democracies of Greece, Italy, Japan, and Spain. Over the past decade, Latin American democracies have experienced a significant decline in public trust in government and support for democratic governance, largely due to poor performance. The end of the commodity boom in the mid-2010s

³As claimed by Levi (2022), “[e]stablishing credibility requires that government uphold its side of its implicit contract with citizens and subjects, that is: the provision of goods and services, fair processes in policy-determination and implementation (given the norms of place and time), and a demonstrable administrative capacity” (p. 215).

marked the beginning of a “lost decade” of economic stagnation for many commodity-exporting nations. This downturn reversed the progress made during the boom years in reducing poverty and income inequality. Additionally, persistently high murder rates and widespread insecurity in the region have further undermined public confidence in government institutions and the democratic system as a whole.

To probe these trends further, we collect data on support for democracy by harmonizing waves of the Afrobarometer, Arabarometer, Asiabarometer, European Social Survey, European Values Survey, Gallup World Poll, Life in Transition Survey, Latinobarometer, South Asia Barometer and World Values Survey. This covers approximately 650,000 respondents across countries that have always been democratic or have experienced regime shifts since 1990. We use questions related to “satisfaction with democracy”, which is typically measured by asking respondents whether they are satisfied with democracy along a Likert scale from very dissatisfied to very satisfied.

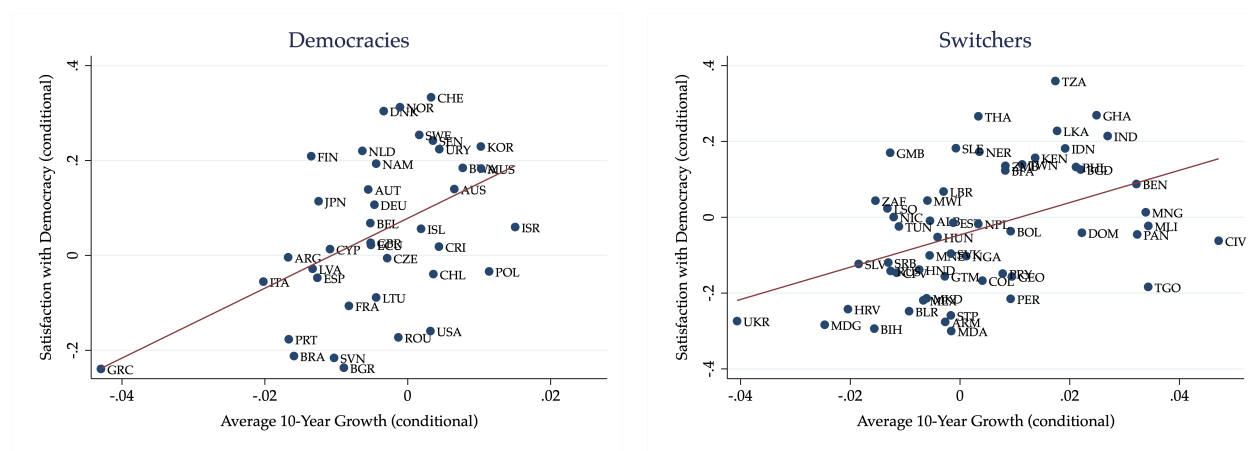


Figure 1: Satisfaction with Democracy and Growth Performance

Note: survey data comes from the Afrobarometer, Arabarometer, Asiabarometer, European Social Survey, European Values Survey, Gallup World Poll, Life in Transition Survey, Latinobarometer, South Asia Barometer and World Values Survey. Data for GDP growth rates comes from the Penn World Tables (PWT). For satisfaction with democracy, we create a dummy variable for each respondent as to whether they are satisfied or very satisfied with democracy, and then take country-level averages. Averages are taken over all available years with non-missing data between 2009 to 2019 (given 2019 is the last available year of growth data from PWT). Both satisfaction with democracy and average 10-year growth are purged of log GDP per capita in 2008. Ireland is removed as an outlier amongst democracies, although trendline is robust to its inclusion. Trendline for democracies is also robust to omitting GRC. Venezuela is removed as an outlier amongst switchers, although trendline is robust to its inclusion. We use the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset for classification using the variable *v2x_regime*. A country that has always been democratic since 1990 is defined as a “democracy”. A country that has changed from democracy to autocracy or vice versa since 1990 is defined as a “switcher”.

Taking ten-year national averages of survey responses and aggregate economic performance over a similar time period, Figure 1 reveals a striking positive relationship.⁴ We purge both variables of initial log GDP per capita to ensure results are not driven by differential income levels that co-determine satisfaction with democracy and growth performance; the axes thus plot fitted residuals.

Clearly, societies with greater economic performance have stronger expressed citizen satisfaction with democracy, on average. This holds in a sample of countries that have always been democracies since the end of the Cold War (left figure), whilst also holding amongst what we call “switchers”, or countries that have experienced institutional heterogeneity since 1990 (right figure). As with all cross-national correlations, there is noise in the data. Yet, albeit purely descriptive evidence, a clear nexus between democratic support and delivery is present, as proxied for with economic growth.

Beyond cross-national variation, certain developing democracies also exhibit a cointegrated relationship between satisfaction with democracy and growth performance. Using Argentina and Brazil as two prominent cases in Latin America that have realized major economic slowdowns, we clearly see in Figure 2 that the series for satisfaction with democracy and the national growth rate trend in a similar fashion over time.

In Argentina, satisfaction with democracy plummeted during the 2001 crisis, a catastrophic economic and political collapse characterized by a debt default, banking freeze, and widespread unrest. Recovery began under Néstor Kirchner in 2003, aided by high commodity prices, but the crisis left deep scars on the nation’s confidence in institutions and signaled a chronic incapacity to deliver welfare and development for its citizens. More recently, Javier Milei’s 2023 presidency has polarized opinions, with critics warning of democratic backsliding but supporters defending his efforts to combat corruption and fiscal mismanagement from previous administrations.

In Brazil, there was a systematic increase in satisfaction with democracy during the first Lula administration (2003 to 2010) when, due to the commodity boom, the country was also experiencing sustained economic growth and reduced poverty due to widely successful social policies. Particularly noteworthy is the sharp drop in satisfaction with democracy following the economic recession of 2013-2015, one of the most severe in modern history. Shortly after this, Brazil experienced a period of democratic backsliding during the far-right Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency (2019–2022), although the country’s institutions ultimately were resilient.

⁴These figures mirror findings in Besley et al. (2024), also using a similar harmonized dataset albeit for satisfaction with democracy and not trust in government.

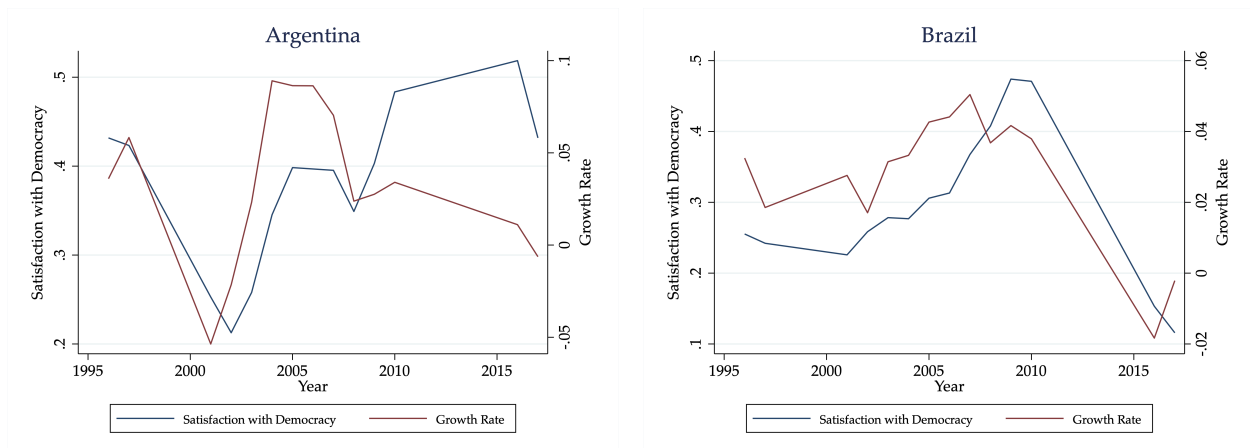


Figure 2: Satisfaction with Democracy and Growth Performance Over Time (Argentina and Brazil)

Note: survey data comes from the Afrobarometer, Arabarometer, Asiabarometer, European Social Survey, European Values Survey, Gallup World Poll, Life in Transition Survey, Latinobarometer, South Asia Barometer and World Values Survey. Data for GDP growth rates comes from the Penn World Tables (PWT). For satisfaction with democracy, we create a dummy variable for each respondent as to whether they are satisfied or very satisfied with democracy, then taking country-level averages. We plot three-year moving averages.

The dynamic correlation between satisfaction with democracy and economic performance also holds across more developed democracies that have experienced crises, as conveyed in Figure 3 for Greece and Spain. In Greece, democratic satisfaction sharply declined by the late 2000s during the global financial and sovereign debt crises, marked by severe economic contraction, high unemployment, and strict austerity measures. While growth began recovering by 2015, satisfaction with democracy has not recovered. Similarly, in Spain, the financial crisis triggered a housing market collapse, soaring unemployment, and stagnant growth. Despite a moderate economic recovery, democratic satisfaction remains persistently low.

Poor economic performance and declining satisfaction with democracy across advanced democracies links to an emerging literature that connects limited service delivery and hardship to voting for far-right parties, especially in Europe (Baccini and Sattler, 2024; Dickson et al., 2024; Cremaschi et al., 2024). Evidence also suggests that individuals experiencing a decline in their standard of living supported radical far-right parties either through anti-austerity rhetoric or by blaming immigrants for the economic downturn (Bedock and Vasilopoulos, 2015).

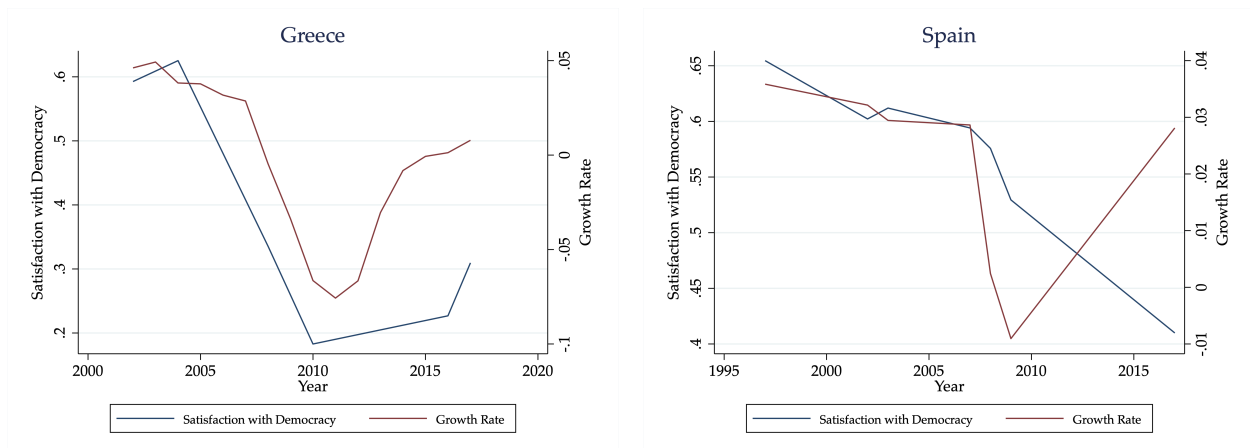


Figure 3: Satisfaction with Democracy and Growth Performance Over Time (Greece and Spain)

Note: survey data comes from the Afrobarometer, Arabarometer, Asiabarometer, European Social Survey, European Values Survey, Gallup World Poll, Life in Transition Survey, Latinobarometer, South Asia Barometer and World Values Survey. Data for GDP growth rates comes from the Penn World Tables (PWT). For satisfaction with democracy, we create a dummy variable for each respondent as to whether they are satisfied or very satisfied with democracy, then taking country-level averages. Three-year moving averages are plotted, although for Greece the full non-missing series for satisfaction with democracy is used as data points were only available for the years 2002, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2016 and 2017.

These are, again, purely descriptive patterns in the raw data. Yet, the results suggest a strong correlation between performance and support for democracy. It remains an open area of research as to how political dissatisfaction manifests and shifts from specific actors and outputs to the entire system. When does dissatisfaction with policy performance or specific incumbents spread into skepticism of the entire democratic project, in favor, potentially, of more authoritarian alternatives? This itself motivates further research into what is the exact connection between service delivery and democratic support.

2.2 Process versus Performance Legitimacy

In contrast to autocracies, the legitimacy of democracy is said to rest both on performance and the presence of *procedural fairness*. Even if outcomes are deemed far from welfare-enhancing, the democratic process is said to validate those decisions as a means of both aggregating diverse preferences and expanding citizen voice through opportunities for participation (Tyler, 2006). The 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK is arguably a case in point of a suboptimal outcome justified by a legitimating procedure.

But the claims for democracy’s ascendancy, by appealing solely to its procedural merits, potentially lack the resonance they once had. Although previous “waves” of democrati-

zation may have tapped into citizen's hearts and minds through enfranchisement and the unprecedented acquisition of new rights, this vehicle of legitimacy might have reached its limit across several democracies (Huntington, 1991). In poor-performing democracies, citizens increasingly show dissatisfaction with the political system by turning out infrequently at elections, protesting, and supporting anti-institutional or even openly anti-democratic candidates at the polls.

The 2024 re-election of Donald Trump to the presidency is a fundamental case in point. Despite the chorus of warnings that Trump was a "threat to democracy" or a "fascist", echoed by both President Biden and Vice-President Harris, such messaging on the campaign trail arguably had limited relevance to voters amidst a post-Covid inflationary environment with a mounting cost of living burden. As CNN commentator David Urban claimed after the election, "democracy is a luxury when you can't pay your bills". Although the outcome is still too fresh to fully unpack psephologically, the state of the economy was ultimately a greater individual concern that motivated voters at the polling booth. As reported by Gallup, concerns over the economy by the election had not reached similar levels since the 2008 Great Recession (Brenan, 2024).

To generalize beyond the context of the 2024 US presidential election, a recent article by Nobel-prize winning economist Daron Açemoglu and co-authors finds evidence that support for democracy is strongly predicted not necessarily by one's overall lifetime experience with democracy, but a citizen's experience of *successful* episodes of democracy (Acemoglu et al., 2024). Success here is measured in the context of strong economic growth, political stability, low-income inequality, and the provision of public goods (as measured by government expenditures as a share of GDP).

And notwithstanding media manipulation, one still cannot question the performance of some autocracies and backsliders in recent history, such as China's consistent economic growth, lifting millions out of poverty. Despite controversies in silencing the opposition, Rwanda under Paul Kagame is one of the fastest growing nations globally and has been hailed for using "homegrown solutions" to rebuild trust in a once fragile state.

The above examples are by no means a defense of authoritarianism; there are no substitutes between delivery and abuses of democratic ideals, such as the protection of individual rights and liberties. Moreover, autocracies demonstrate wide variance with respect to economic performance. While some autocratic regimes achieve notable economic success, many others persist in power despite poor economic outcomes and the impoverishment of their citizens. Their survival often hinges on systematic repression and tactics such as intimidation, surveillance, and selective co-optation. Leaders like Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and Mobutu Sese Seko in Congo (Zaire) exem-

plify this, maintaining power by exploiting resources, enriching inner circles, and suppressing opposition, even amid societal suffering and economic decline.

However, democracy cannot rest on its laurels. As [Diamond \(2024\)](#) highlights, “[b]elief in the legitimacy of democracy may be shaped by culture and history, but it is also driven by economic development and the performance of present versus past regimes” (p. 13). This is especially pressing when several non-democracies and backsliders are proving themselves through performance or are at least appearing to do so, irrespective of imperfect political processes.

3 Why Delivery in Democracies is Hard: The Case of Infrastructure

With performance legitimacy in mind, several autocracies or backsliders in recent times have used *infrastructure* to signal competence, given these are highly visible, growth-inducing, and tangible public goods for citizens to internalize ([Dunst, 2023](#)). Although China is a notable example, especially with its Belt and Road Initiative, several other countries have followed suit, such as Kazakhstan’s *Nurly Zhol* (Bright Path) program for road investments. Amongst democratic backsliders themselves, evidence suggests transport and social infrastructure investments in Turkey have increased support for the ruling AKP party ([Akbulut-Yuksel et al., 2024](#); [Marschall et al., 2016](#)).

Within major democracies, President Biden’s Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act has been a positive development. Yet, the US has garnered a reputation over the years for crumbling infrastructure or conceiving projects deemed white elephants. The Francis Scott Key Bridge collapse in Baltimore back in March 2024 epitomized this very perception, alongside investments such as the California High-Speed Rail (CAHSR) that have not seen much progress since a ballot initiative in 2008.

Moreover, the US is not the only democracy that has appeared to struggle with its infrastructure investments. The recent cancellation of High Speed 2 (HS2) by the UK government in 2023, a major national transport investment conceived in 2010, dedicated to connecting major cities across the country with London and reinvigorating growth in the north, has left many frustrated with failed delivery. Continued delays and overcrowding on Germany’s Deutsche Bahn trains, often attributed to underinvestment in maintenance of infrastructure, have left voters frustrated with service delivery. However, the bigger scandals have been the prolonged delays of the Stuttgart 21 rail project, still incomplete after more than three decades of planning, and the years-long postponements in opening

the Berlin Brandenburg Airport, which only became operational in 2020 after nearly a decade of delays.

There are some obvious reasons why democracies cannot move as quickly to deliver on various state-led projects for citizen welfare, such as infrastructure alongside other major public investments, relative to some autocracies. First and foremost, most democracies built their infrastructure decades ago, so investments are more maintenance flows versus new stocks. Considerations for property rights and eminent domain prevent the state from simply building large projects through communities without due process. In building Saudi Arabia's smart city mega project, 'The Line,' evidence suggests the government is permitting a "shoot on sight" policy against tribes who refuse to vacate their villages, standing in the way of progress (Thomas and Gibaly, 2024). Due diligence necessary for environmental, social, and governance (ESG) arrangements can also dampen the pace of projects, albeit with the good intention of preventing harm to the natural world.

However, beyond considerations related to existing stocks, planning, and due process, it is worth recognizing that service delivery is arguably just a harder maneuver in democratic political environments. These have both formal and informal institutional roots concerning the number of veto players from checks and balances, excessive mechanisms for public participation in project life-cycles, the changing role of the media, time horizons, and citizen skepticism of benevolent government.

Veto Players A system constructed on managing competing interests and preferences, and ideally achieving some harmony that tends towards tedium, most frequently makes progress on policy outputs a far slower, piecemeal phenomenon. Enhancing voice across several constituents and branches of government can also yield forms of "vetocracy". Delivery on infrastructure is a near impossible task in the United States due to the number of veto players at different levels of government, both vertically and horizontally (Fukuyama, 2016). Especially when highly concentrated amongst groups of voters, visible costs can lead to NIMBYism, delaying construction and driving up unit costs (Glaeser and Ponzetto, 2018).

Excessive Mechanisms for Public Participation One of the frequently exploited solutions to allay the ills of democratic delivery has been through layering policy-making processes with even more procedural coatings. If citizens are unable to get the policy outputs they demand via the current crop of representatives, then further citizen input and reasserting popular sovereignty is necessary. In the context of administrative law in the United States, Bagley (2019) has appositely referred to this as the "procedure fetish". However, the notion of maximalist democracy and further democratizing policy procedures is precisely one of the channels that is impeding delivery in the first instance.

Transparency is one such channel where excessive mechanisms exist for public participation in projects. Enhanced transparency within the political system is typically deemed a positive, democratic incident to further legitimate a decision-making process, such as Freedom of Information Acts. With respect to service delivery, quelling corruption is frequently placed front and center in these efforts. Yet, transparency can also be exploited in highly combative ways by self-interested groups to impede progress *ex parte*. Rarely do voters engage in public hearings on projects to raise concerns, as opposed to highly vested interest groups. Connected to veto players, the ability of governments to achieve closure on policy is heavily impeded by lengthening political battles (Cain, 2015). This remains a key question going forward as to what is the right level and approach towards transparency, and types of public participation more broadly, to bypass efforts that undermine delivery (Cain, 2018).

Social Media Related to transparency concerns the shifting role of the media in democratic politics. A free media environment is undoubtedly a fundamental source of accountability in democratic societies to ensure responsiveness to citizen needs and to punish poorly performing incumbents (Besley and Burgess, 2002). Yet, as with all checks and balances on power, there are trade-offs in the ability to deliver effectively when government actions are now sharply scrutinized under a microscope. As Martin Gurri (2018) argues, a former CIA analyst, the rise of technologies such as social media “places governments on a razor’s edge, where any mistake, any untoward event, can draw networked public into the streets” (p. 90). Empirical evidence suggests the rollout of 3G networks globally has decreased confidence in government (Guriev et al., 2021).

Although technology such as social media can similarly constrain the decision-making abilities of authoritarian rulers as a platform for increased transparency, control and suppression of the media in various autocracies ensures incumbents do not suffer certain setbacks originating from noisy information environments. In recent work by Sergei Guriev and Daniel Tresiman (2019), authoritarian incumbents are not necessarily the highly repressive, cult of personality regimes of the 20th century. Rather, autocrats today are “informational”, using manipulation of the media itself to convince citizens of the government’s competence versus deriving legitimacy through broad ideological appeals.

Time Horizons Another key issue in democratic political systems for delivery concerns distortions from electoral cycles. As studied in an older line of work in political economy, time-inconsistent preferences in policymaking can often lead to severe commitment issues, inhibiting necessary policies from being implemented today to tackle long-term problems, from investments in infrastructure to climate action (Besley and Persson, 2023; Kydland and Prescott, 1977). For projects that outlast the tenure of a given incumbent,

no policymaker wants credit claimed by others for investments they initiated but only materialized once they were replaced in office.

Skepticism The fault with delivery lies not only with the institutional architecture of democratic governments. Dating back to David Hume (1758), democracies often socialize citizens to be skeptical of benevolent government. Although some accounts have claimed such distrust is “healthy” in keeping sources of accountability strong and not having blind confidence in all state directives, this has some antithetical implications for delivery (Mishler and Rose, 1997). If government policy requires an underlying threshold of trust to deliver public goods, such as through increasing taxes to expand revenues, but citizens are unwilling to provide reasonable levels of compliance, then the ability to deliver remains heavily constrained. This consequently feeds back into mistrust of government, creating a vicious cycle between unsuccessful delivery and pessimism on democracy’s ability to perform.

In a recent interview on the Ezra Klein show, US Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg recognized this very equilibrium: “[o]ne of the reasons why [political trust] has declined is kind of a feedback loop between public institutions letting people down, and then people hesitating to empower those public institutions to solve their problems”. With respect to infrastructure specifically, Buttigieg states “[if] you’re looking around and you’re seeing crumbling infrastructure... , you might think well the government sucks at fixing these problems. And then the next time you’re being asked, for example, in the course of an election to vote for a candidate whose going to make sure there’s enough funding going to the government, you’re gonna say well I’m not gonna put tax money into the government, government sucks”.

4 How Democracies Can (Re-)Deliver

There is no doubt that a perception currently exists on democracy’s inability to deliver for citizens (Carothers and Hartnett, 2024). Yet, democracy has not always had this reputation. The London Underground in the UK was the world’s first metro-railway system ever built. During the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Golden Gate Bridge, Oakland Bay Bridge and Hoover Dam were all built within the space of five years during the 1930s. The Interstate Highway System, following President Eisenhower’s passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, is one of the 20th century’s greatest public works accomplishments. These achievements cannot possibly be achieved today in the United States due to permitting requirements. How, then, can democracies re-deliver effectively?

The feedback loop between distrust of government and delivering public services is somewhat of a chicken-and-egg scenario. Fundamentally, to rebuild confidence in democracy, government has to be the first-mover in providing the political will necessary to pursue ambitious projects. For long-term investments, such as infrastructure or climate change solutions, there is always fear the opposition will credit claim for policies pursued by the incumbent today if removed from office at a later date. In this sense, some broad consensus across the aisle inevitably has to be achieved to overcome commitment issues.

Of course, infrastructure is by no means the only component of delivery for democracies. Going back to the 20th century United States, evidence suggests social spending from Roosevelt's New Deal bolstered patriotism amongst recipients, as realized in the purchase of more war bonds and increased volunteerism during WWII (Caprettini and Voth, 2023). The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a federal work relief program from 1933-1942 as part of the New Deal, also increased lifetime earnings and improvements in health (Aizer et al., 2024).

In less developed democracies, various policies have proven effective in alleviating poverty while also gaining widespread popularity, making them politically advantageous for incumbents. Examples include Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs like Brazil's Bolsa Família, which provide financial assistance to low-income households in exchange for meeting health and education requirements. Investments in basic infrastructure, such as clean water, sanitation, and reliable electricity, significantly improve health and quality of life. Similarly, initiatives like Thailand's Universal Health Coverage have improved access to healthcare for millions, enhancing public well-being. These measures not only reduce poverty but also strengthen public support for governments implementing them.

Good economic management in providing opportunities to citizens is also key. This is especially important for the youth who are reported as exhibiting the most dissatisfaction from democracy (Wike et al., 2019). As further shown by Besley et al. (2024), younger cohorts maturing into the labor force in countries experiencing "lost decades" types of crises are also highly distrusting of government, such as young adults in Japan, Greece, and Spain.

But it is worth recognizing that infrastructure still remains one of the most visible signals of government delivery to citizens. This is especially relevant to several democratic countries, where new investments are necessary as old projects reach the end of their life-cycles. When roads have unrepaired potholes, bridges are collapsing and major investment plans to revitalize local economies become white elephants, these are outcomes that allow citizens to question, naturally, what is the true value of democracy.

To re-deliver, this by no means implies that democracies must imitate more authoritarian environments to increase the speed of progress. Critics of democracy must acknowledge a fundamental and defining distinction between political regimes: the power of voters in democracies to hold leaders accountable. In stark contrast, autocratic regimes are defined by their lack of such accountability. In these systems, citizens are not the determining factor in who ascends to power or who is removed from office. This fundamental difference underscores the unique advantage of democracies: the ability to course-correct and adapt to the needs and demands of society through the peaceful transition of power, when upheld.

Ultimately, across the aforementioned virtues and vices of democracy, there arguably reside internal contradictions within democratic systems to achieve progress on policy agendas, which some high-performing autocracies can more effectively overcome. Although executive constraints and accountability structures through competitive elections are necessary as checks and balances on power, there is the potential trade-off whereby these very processes inhibit progress on the things citizens want from their governments. The commitment issues that plague delivery in democratic systems can thus make it difficult to convey to citizens that democratic governments can credibly commit to their flourishing, providing grounds for skepticism versus trustworthiness (Levi, 2022).

Delivery fundamentally requires addressing these internal tensions within democratic systems if confidence is to be restored. Much of this relates to finding the right balance on the domains where process can be best optimized to achieve both delivery and accountability where relevant. Institutionalizing a maximalist approach to democracy via excessive proceduralism on major projects will continue to delay movement on necessary public directives.

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