Are people really turning away from democracy?

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In an important and already influential 2016 article in the *Journal of Democracy*, Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk argue that citizens in consolidated democracies in Europe and the United States have "become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system" and "more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives" (Foa and Mounk 2016, p.7). Moreover, millennials are especially culpable.

These are important and broad claims that are worthy of a systematic follow-up analysis. My purpose is not to replicate Foa and Mounk's findings but to examine the veracity of their substantive claims more systematically. I show that there is no evidence for the first claim. Trends in overall support for democracy and its non-democratic alternatives have been flat for the past two decades. This finding is very robust to different ways of defining the countries of interest.

There is some support for the second claim. Millennials are somewhat more favorably inclined towards non-democratic ways of ruling their countries even after we account for age. Nevertheless these effects primarily come from the United States. Moreover, when we look at confidence in actual democratic institutions, then the opposite pattern emerges: older people have lost faith in U.S. Congress and the Executive to a greater extent than younger people.

The take-away is not that there is no threat to consolidated democracies but rather that this does not come from abstract procedural preferences among (some part of) the populace for

alternative regime types. A preference for strong leaders or army rule typically follow economic and security threats (Miller 2016; Miller 2015). It is these threats and democratic responses to them that we should worry about if we care about the future of liberal democracy.

A brief detour into concepts and data

Before we can examine whether public opinion shows warning signs of deconsolidation, we must first define what a consolidated democracy is. Foa and Munk are interested in Europe and the United States. In their first figure, Foa and Mounk present an aggregate line for all European Union (EU) member states. This presents a problem if we're interested in trends. Survey coverage varies over time and we'd like to know if trends represent real changes within countries rather than variation in what country is surveyed. Moreover, it's not clear why being an EU member state signifies consolidation. Their second figure is based on a stable set of countries that were included in two surveys: Germany, Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands, Romania, Poland, and the United Kingdom.

By most definitions Romania and Poland were not consolidated democracies in 1995 or even now. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan define a consolidated democracy as a country where democracy is "the only game in town"(Linz and Stepan 1996). We should not examine countries that have already experienced democratic backsliding if we are interested in the erosion of public confidence in consolidated democracies as a warning sign for deconsolidation.[1] Others use development as a defining characteristic (Przeworski and Limongi 1997). Milan Slovik estimates

[1] A particularly bad way of doing this would be to only include countries that were democratic in 1995, as that would include countries that experienced breakdown but not countries that became more democratic. A different way to conceptualize such a study would be to look if public perceptions change before or after a breakdown. That would probably be asking too much of the data.

empirically that the probability of democratic breakdown sharply reduces after a country has been a democracy for about twenty years. There is, unfortunately, no consensus definition.

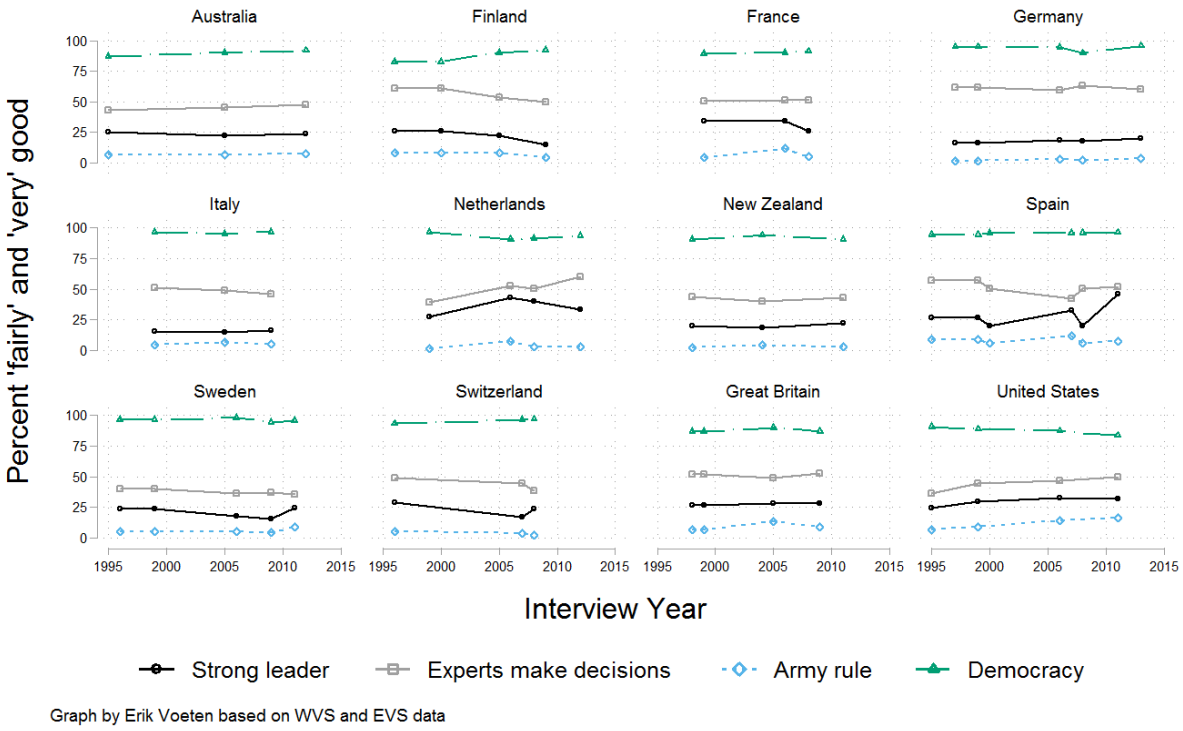
I analyze three groups of countries. The first, labeled "Western consolidated democracies," includes the EU15 members as well as Canada, the United States, Norway, Switzerland, Australia, and New Zealand. The second grouping, "consolidated democracies," includes states that had a continuous Polity rating of 10 over the 1995-2014 period, which covers the time span of this analysis.[2] This adds Costa Rica, Cyprus, Japan, Lithuania, Mauritius, Slovenia, and Uruguay. The third grouping, "developed democracies," adds to this the remaining EU and OECD (Chile, Israel, Mexico, South Korea, and Turkey) members. This latter group thus includes countries where consolidation is more questionable. Yet they are all developed democracies. Moreover, I consistently plot individual country trends rather than grouped averages so we can see what countries are driving the results.

Like Foa and Mounk, I use the World Values Survey (WVS). I combine this with the European Values Survey (EVS) to increase data coverage. I focus on a battery of questions that has the broadest spatial and temporal coverage and that ask people directly whether alternative types of political systems are good or bad ways of governing their country? The alternatives are "a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections," "experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country," "army rule," and "a democratic political system." This allows us to get at preferences for democracy and its alternatives.

[2] Polity identifies 10 as a consolidated democracy.

Are people really getting tired of democracy?

If we want to get an accurate sense of how perceptions are evolving, then we must look at trends in a pre-defined group of countries rather that cherry-pick findings from individual countries on individual survey items. Figure one shows all countries from the group of Western consolidated democracies for which we have at least three measurements. A warning sign for deconsolidation would be if the line for democracy trends down while the other three move up.

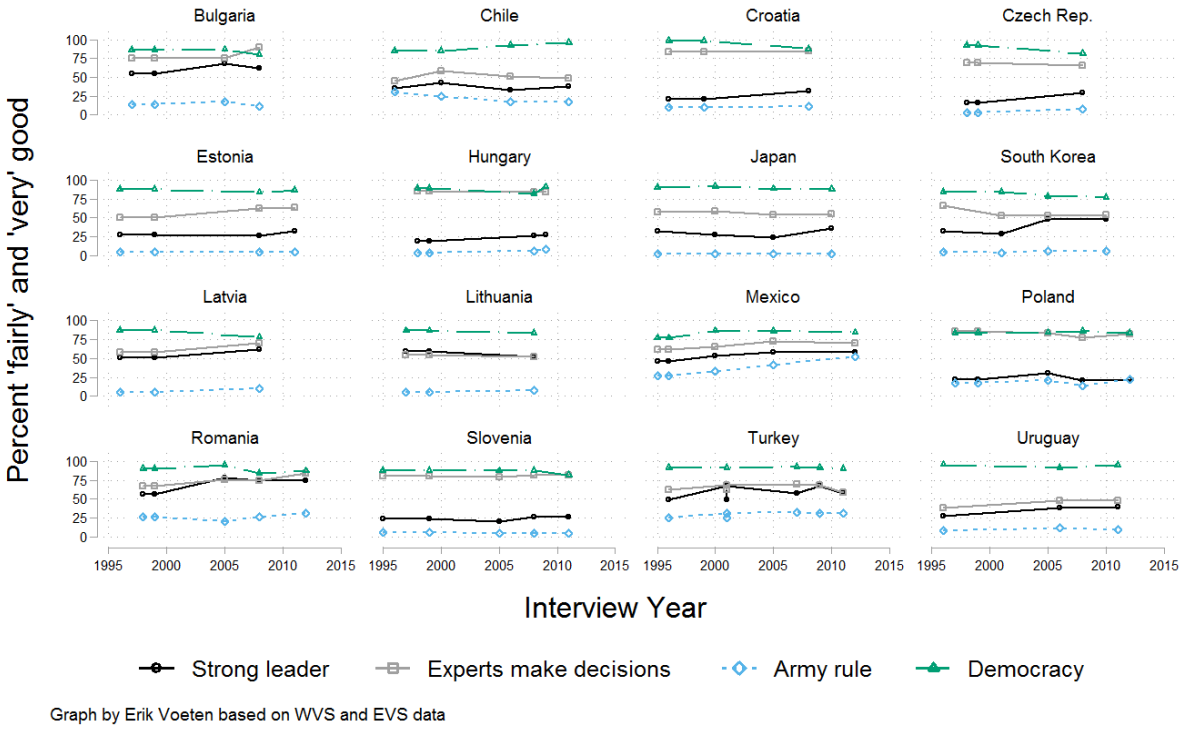


Graph by Erik Voeten based on WVS and EVS data

The data do not reveal such a pattern. In each country, democracy is most popular by some distance and has remained so over the past two decades. In most countries, positive assessments of democracy top 90 percent. Expert rule is next. Army rule has almost no support. There is little systematic movement over time. In some countries support for democracy has grown a bit. In others, it seems to have declined slightly. The United States is an example of a

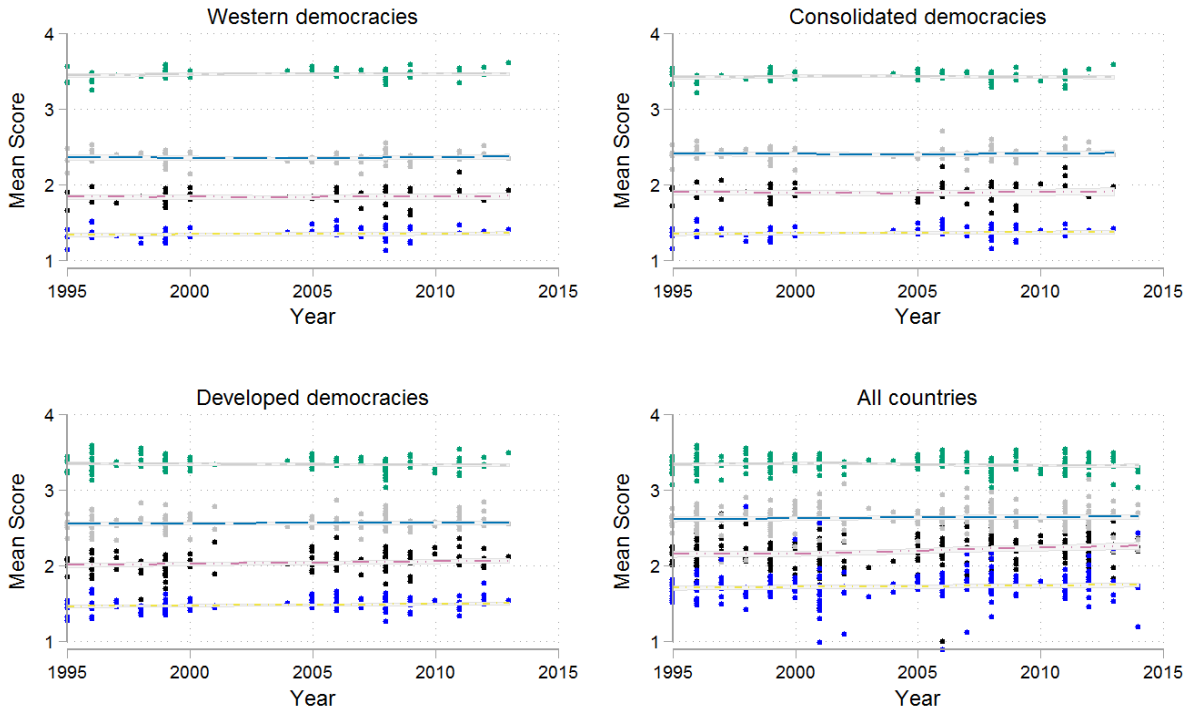
country where support for democracy has gone down while alternatives have become more acceptable. But there is no clear overall trend that jumps out for either indicator.

Figure two plots the same data for the other democracies that had at least three measurements. This picture is more mixed. Mexico has the most worrying pattern. This fits the research that alternatives to democracy become more acceptable amidst severe security threats (Miller 2015). There are also some countries, like Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary, where non-democratic alternatives, especially technocracy, have long been popular. Other than Mexico, Turkey is the only other country where army rule has significant support. But there is no systematic narrowing of the gap between support for democracy and its alternatives.



While there are no obvious trends from simply eyeballing the data, our eyes are not particularly well trained to see patterns in complex data. I therefore used statistical models to examine the data more closely. Figure three presents estimated trend lines for all four question items for the

three pre-defined groups of countries. It also plots trends for all countries covered by the WVS. The figure is based on country-survey-level means on the four-point scales. I first de-meaned the data to focus on within country changes over time.[3] The reason for doing this is that we could find trends simply because different countries are included in different WVS waves rather than because there are actual changes in support for democracy. The on-line appendix shows that the figure looks the same (but noisier) if you do not do this. The on-line appendix also has estimates from regression models. The fitted lines in the graphs are local polynomial fit lines to allow for the possibility of non-linear trends.



From top to bottom, local polynomial fit lines for Democracy, Experts, Strong leaders, Army rule

The results are easy to interpret. There is no trend in the data. All lines are flat. The one exception is that there is a very small but significant increase in acceptance in the group of non-

[3] That is: I subtracted the country mean and added the overall mean to each data-point. This means that countries with only one measurement drop out. These countries provide no information about trends.

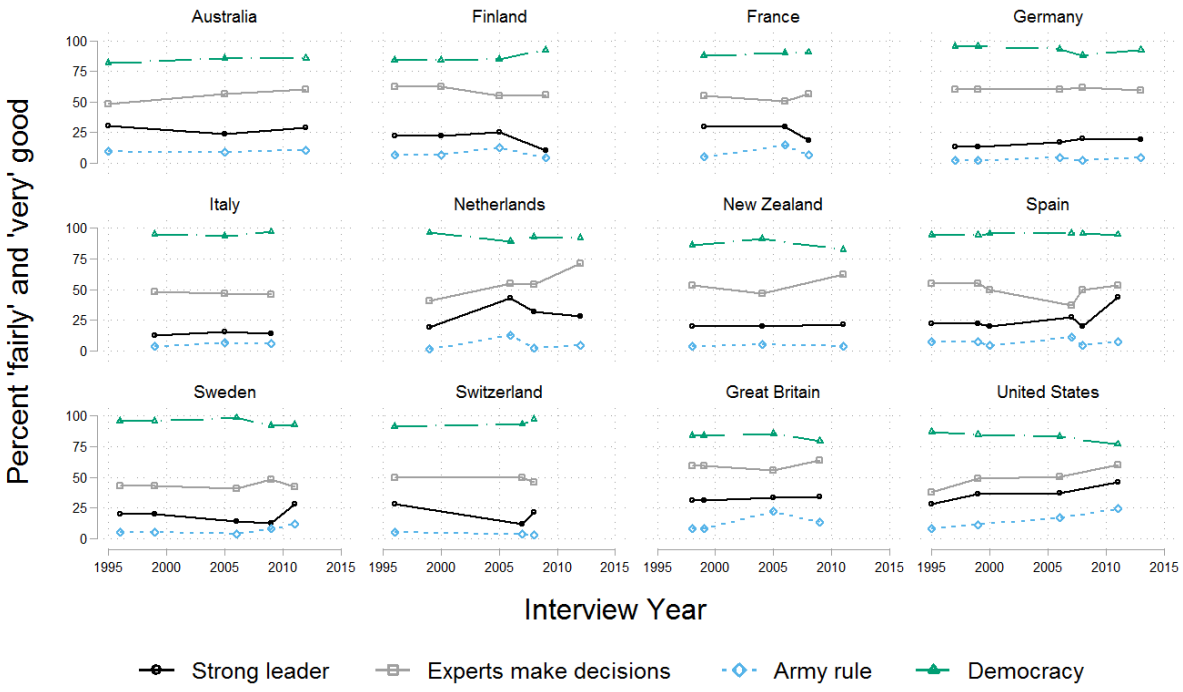
consolidated developed democracies in the preference for a strong leader and army rule (annual increase of .01 on the four-point scale). The publics in consolidated democracies have not over time become less favorable towards democracy and more acceptant of alternatives.

Is there a generational problem?

Even if there is no overall trend, we may still have a problem with a younger generation. It could simply be that there aren't enough millennials in these samples to move the country averages. Deviating millennial attitudes could well spell trouble for the future.

One issue is that we may confuse cohort and age effects. If we just look at one point in time, we can't be sure that there is a problem with a specific generation or that young people are just different. Indeed, complaints about new generations appear to be a timeless feature of public debates.

Figure 4 replicates figure 1 but just for people who were thirty-five and younger at the time each survey was held. If there is a particular problem with the current generation we would expect to see support for democracy drop over time while enthusiasm for non-democratic alternatives increases.



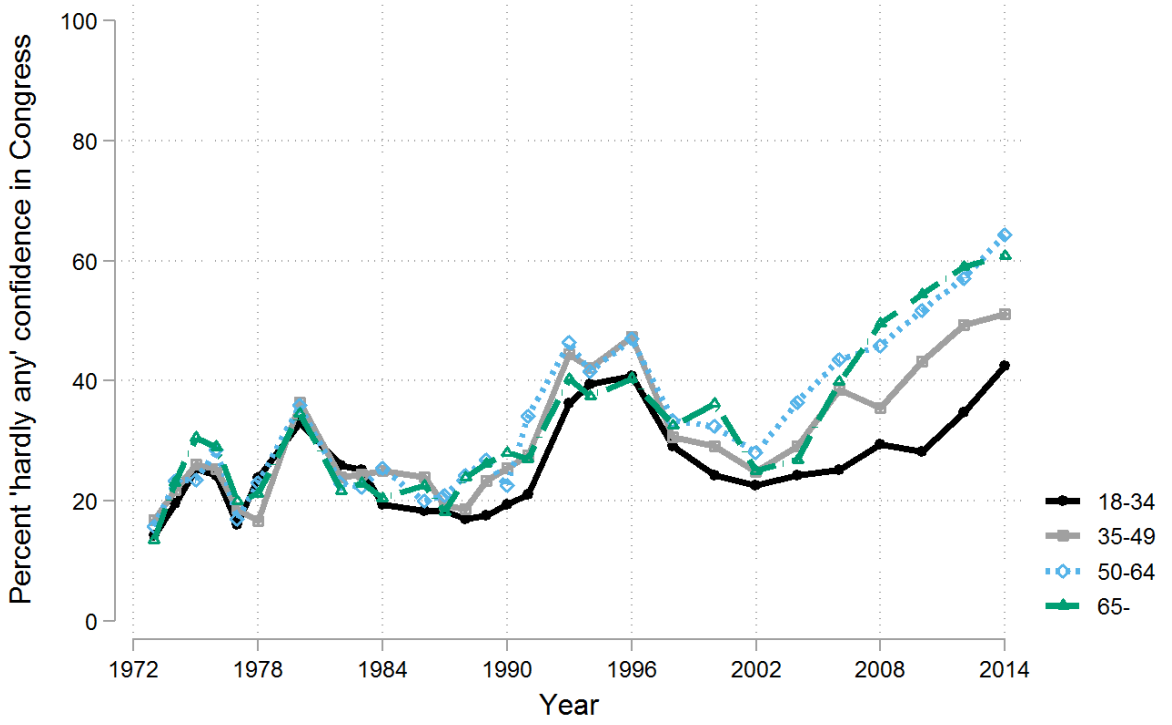
People under the age of 35. Graph by Erik Voeten based on WVS and EVS data

In most countries, support for democracy is a little lower among younger people than among older generations. But there is not much change over time. Millennials are not very different in their views of political systems than were young people in the mid-1990s.

The big exception is the United States. In the 2011 survey, Americans under the age of 35 had become relatively less favorable towards democracy and more favorable towards army rule and a strong leader (but also expert decision making!). This can be significant. The United States is an important country that is often credited for spreading democracy around the globe. If its younger generation is less enthusiastic about democracy, then this matters a great deal.

On the other hand, it could be just be a fluke of a single survey. It is hard to pick up small effects in subpopulations with surveys. For example, there are only 19 people (3.5%) under the age of 35 in this survey who say that army rule is “very good.” Still, the U.S. finding is worthy of more research and potential cause for concern.

Very few surveys in the United States ask similar abstract questions about the value of democracy. But we have a lot of high quality data going back a long time on confidence in actual democratic institutions. Figure 4 examines patterns since the early 1970s in whether Americans have "a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all" in the United States Congress. The data come from the General Social Survey.



Graph by Erik Voeten based on GSS cumulative file, 1972-2014.

The percentage of Americans who have "hardly any" confidence in Congress has increased sharply since 2003. But older people have become much more cynical than the younger generation. There were barely any age differentials for most of the past four decades. Now there is almost a twenty percentage point gap between the youngest and the oldest generations. And it's the older generations that have become more cynical. The on-line appendix shows similar trends in confidence in the executive and a trust in national government scale from the National Election Survey.

Actual unhappiness about the functioning of the U.S. government is not the same thing as abstract preferences for democracy over its alternatives. Perhaps young people just haven't been paying attention. Maybe good democrats *should* be upset about the way the U.S. government is functioning. So, millennials' relative lack of cynicism about US political institution could reflect their apathy.

Maybe. But confidence in actual institutions is much more concrete and easier to make sense of than public opinion over imaginary alternatives (Kiewiet-De Jonge 2016). Older people are more upset about how U.S. institutions actually work. According to the New York Times exit poll, only 35% of people under the age of thirty voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. That number was 53% for people 45 and older. If we take Trump to be an example of a potential strong leader, then it just may be that millennials are not the problem.

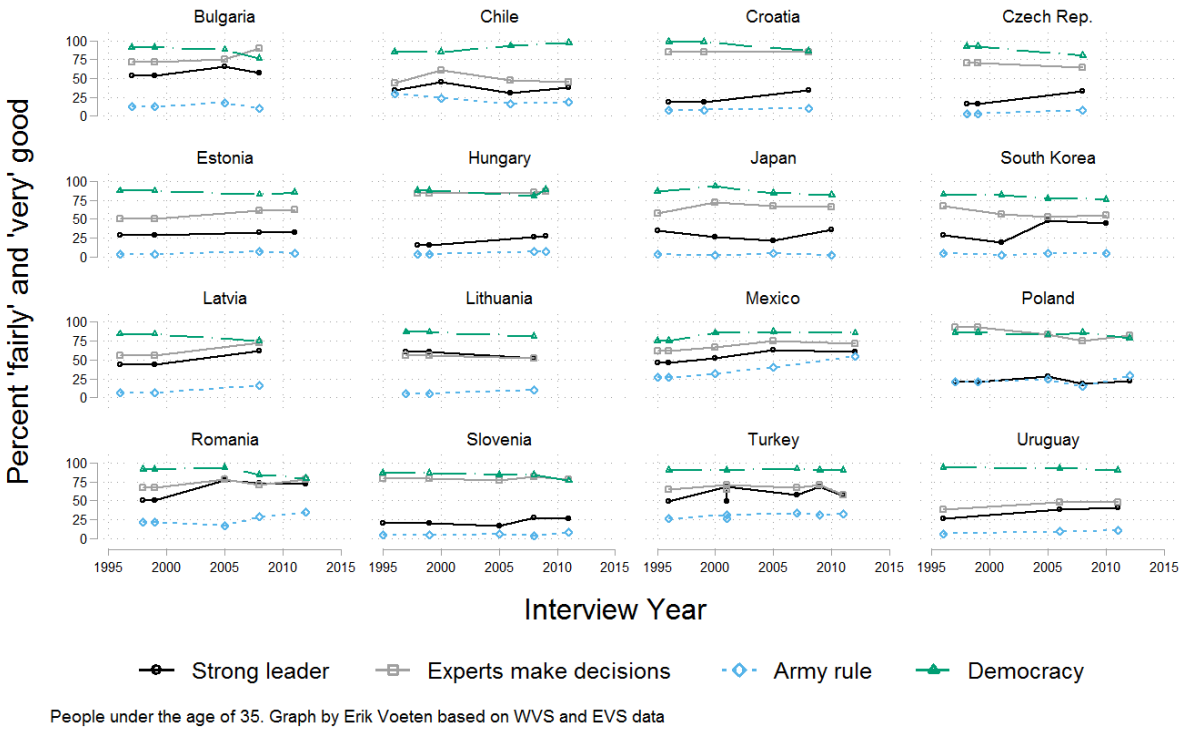


Figure 5 examines age patters for the other democracies. Some Eastern European countries display drops in support for democracy among the youngest generation. But there is no strong overall pattern.

Conclusion

A closer look reveals no evidence that people in consolidated democracies have soured on democracy and have become more likely to accept authoritarian institutions as a way to run their countries. There is some evidence that millennials have grown somewhat more acceptant of non-democratic alternatives, most notably in the United States. However, when we examine more extensive data about confidence in actual democratic institutions, then we see the opposite pattern: older people have grown more skeptical in recent years.

It is possible that the next wave of WVS and EVS studies will find larger shifts. But there is simply no evidence in the current set of studies that the public in consolidated democracies is turning against democracy.

This should not make us complacent about democracy. Democratic beliefs may erode if governments fail to deal with perceived security and economic threats (Miller 2015; Miller 2015). The phenomenon of illiberal democracy (Zakaria 1997) is real and so are the international threats to liberalism (Haggard 2014). Populist regimes could do real harm to liberal democracy after they gain power (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). There is plenty to worry about. Abstract procedural preferences among younger people in consolidated democracies for alternative regime types should not be high on that list.

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