

Revolting voters

Democracy is under threat, warns **Philip Coggan**.
Time to reform it

A huge year for democracy lies ahead: in 2014 voters will go to the polls in some of the biggest countries of the developing world, including India, Indonesia and Brazil, as well as in the United States (for mid-terms) and across the 28 countries of the European Union (to elect the European Parliament). But voter turnout in the rich world has been falling slowly since the 1970s, from more than 80% to less than 70% by 2011 (see chart). And around the world disillusionment with politicians and elections is running deep. In the coming year alarming numbers of voters will flirt with political extremes.

The financial crisis has eroded the deal that underpinned democracy: that voters support politicians in return for greater prosperity. It is not the first time. European democracy faltered in the 1930s in the face of the Great Depression. South America slipped back into autocracy in the 1970s and 1980s.

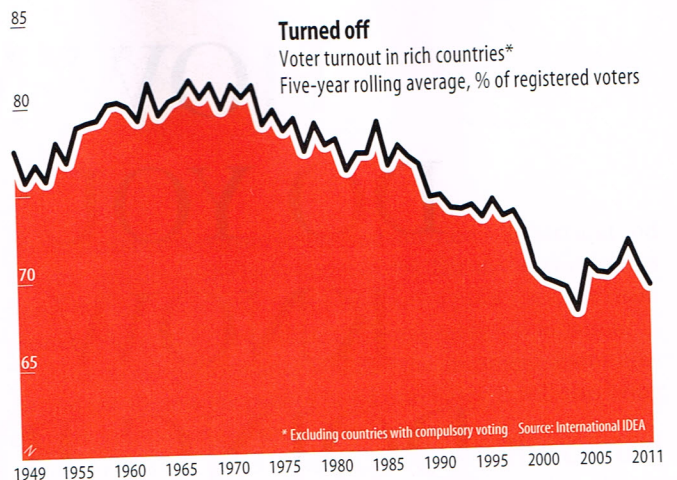
The parties that were in charge at the start of the crisis have mostly been turfed out and replaced by the mainstream opposition. But policy has hardly changed: voters are still being fed a diet of austerity, are still suffering from high unemployment and can see little prospect of a dramatic improvement. Politicians have no goodies to promise electors; indeed they are cutting the services and benefits on which they depended.

So voters have been turning away from the mainstream—to Syriza and Golden Dawn in Greece, to Beppe Grillo in Italy and to the UK Independence Party in Britain. Even in America, where the two big parties still dominate, there has been a decline of bipartisanship and political debate is increasingly rancorous, making it harder to do the kind of deals on which democracy depends. The mid-terms in November will only add to the anger.

If that is a “bottom-up” problem for democracy, there are “top-down” issues as well. First, it has become distant. When democracy started in Athens, it was based on all (male) citizens taking decisions in the *agora*, or forum. Modern democracy, as it emerged in America and Britain, was based on the representative principle: voters delegate decisions to those they elect and can replace. But increasingly their representatives pass decisions on to technocrats.

Monetary policy is in the hands of unelected central bank-

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ers, whose every word seems to move the markets and who are more important economic figures than many prime ministers. In the euro area, fiscal policy may have to be approved in Brussels before it can be implemented at the national level. National laws are now deemed to be subservient to international courts, whether at the European Court of Justice or at the European Court of Human Rights. The IMF and the World Trade Organisation can determine economic policy. Many voters must think that their voice counts for little in the face of all this outside control; that helps explain the rise of anti-EU sentiment across Europe, which will be reflected in a rise in support for Eurosceptic parties at the European elections in May.

Second, many modern problems, such as tax evasion or climate change, are global and it has proved difficult to reconcile democracy with international decisions. The EU tries to combine efficiency with the rights of individual countries. The UN displays its post-1945 origins with some decisions subject to the veto of the five permanent members of the Security Council.

Third, the right to vote is only a small part of liberal democracy: citizens have also cherished the right to free speech, to a fair trial and to go about their lives with the minimum of government interference. But the “war on terror” has limited these rights, as governments have imprisoned people without trial, monitored citizens’ calls and e-mails and even resorted to torture.

We hold these truths to be self-evident

What could restore faith in democracy? Reform of party financing so that the names of all donors are declared might reduce the power of special interests. In America the drift towards extremism could perhaps be countered by ending the gerrymandering of districts so that politicians had to appeal to the centre rather than just to their core supporters. Second chambers, like Britain’s House of Lords, could be given the right to put issues to the people in a referendum when they thought the lower chamber, or unelected bodies, were overstepping their powers.

Unfortunately, none of this will happen in 2014. The best quick remedy for democracy’s ills would be growth strong enough to bring down unemployment and boost real incomes, making voters more content. Don’t hold your breath. ■