

## Theme Statement for the 2018 Annual Meeting

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### Democracy and Its Discontents

The theme for this year's meeting of the American Political Science Association is Democracy and Its Discontents. These are challenging times for democracy. In many established democracies, the aftermath of the 2008 and the 2011 economic crises is opening up new spaces for new challengers and popular grievances. The complex relationship between national systems of rule and a global economy is leading to greater tensions both within democracies and between them. Existing rules and party systems are under strain as new cleavages emerge, with populism, nativism, and illiberalism all jostling for popular support, as well as new experiments in representation. Developed democratic systems are experiencing greater discontent among voters. Global flows of people, capital, and investment undermine national identities and institutional arrangements. At the same time, there are challenges to the legitimacy of international institutions that are seen as limiting economic and democratic choices.

The United States faces particular questions, as economic inequality, identity politics, and polarization dominate political debates. The presidential victor, for the second time in sixteen years, won office without a majority of the popular vote. Emerging and relatively new democracies too are undergoing upheaval, as some leaders turn away from traditional norms of liberal democracy based on contestation between plural forces towards an illiberal model, in which leaders and ruling party are entitled to reshape domestic rules to their own benefit. Informal norms of democratic behavior, such as opposition rights, accountability, and transparency are being violated across several democracies. Non-democratic countries too are being affected, both because there is no longer much of an expectation that they will become democratic over time, and because their own policies and options are affected by the changes in democratic states elsewhere. All this poses political theoretic questions as well as empirical ones.

The current dilemmas of democracy provoke scholars to work across different sub-disciplines and specializations to understand these changes. For example, how do we understand the impact of international factors such as migration, automation, and changes in economy on domestic political party systems? The recent turn in several countries towards illiberalism is in part a product of parallel evolution under similar pressures, but is also plausibly the consequence of cross-national influence, as actors in one context learn from another. How do security arrangements, predicated on coordination among democratic nations, survive the erosion of liberal norms? What are the *consequences* of regime shifts for social policy, welfare, courts, or the media?

Taking a page from scholars of competitive authoritarianism and illiberal democracies, can we fruitfully think about recent political developments in the United States as regime backsliding?

How are political parties, civil society, and interest groups responding? What is the role of the center-left and the center-right here? Which comparative and historical parallels provide the greatest insights in examining the discontents of democracy? How do informal norms depend on and interact with formal institutions such as courts, parliaments, and central banks?

Equally, understanding the dilemmas of national democracies requires an attention to theoretical issues as well as empirics. Is the legitimacy of democracy in crisis, or is this simply a transitory phase? Which institutional equilibria, regimes, and political configurations are especially likely to be fragile, and which are resilient? How ought we to think about the role of demagogues and anti-liberal rhetoric? Are there other plausible models for institutions of representation and decision making that might lead to better democratic outcomes?

As Chairs for the 2018 Conference, we welcome proposals that address the discontents of democracy from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives. We particularly welcome proposals that work across subfields and approaches to address the new questions that are emerging, and work that looks to bring disciplinary debates and public dialogue into closer alignment with each other.