

Are Americans losing faith in democracy?

By Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk | Dec 18, 2015, 10:50am EST



Donald Trump in front of the American flag. | Andrew Cline/Shutterstock.com

*This post is part of **Polyarchy**, an independent blog produced by the political reform program at **New America**, a Washington think tank devoted to developing new ideas and new voices.*

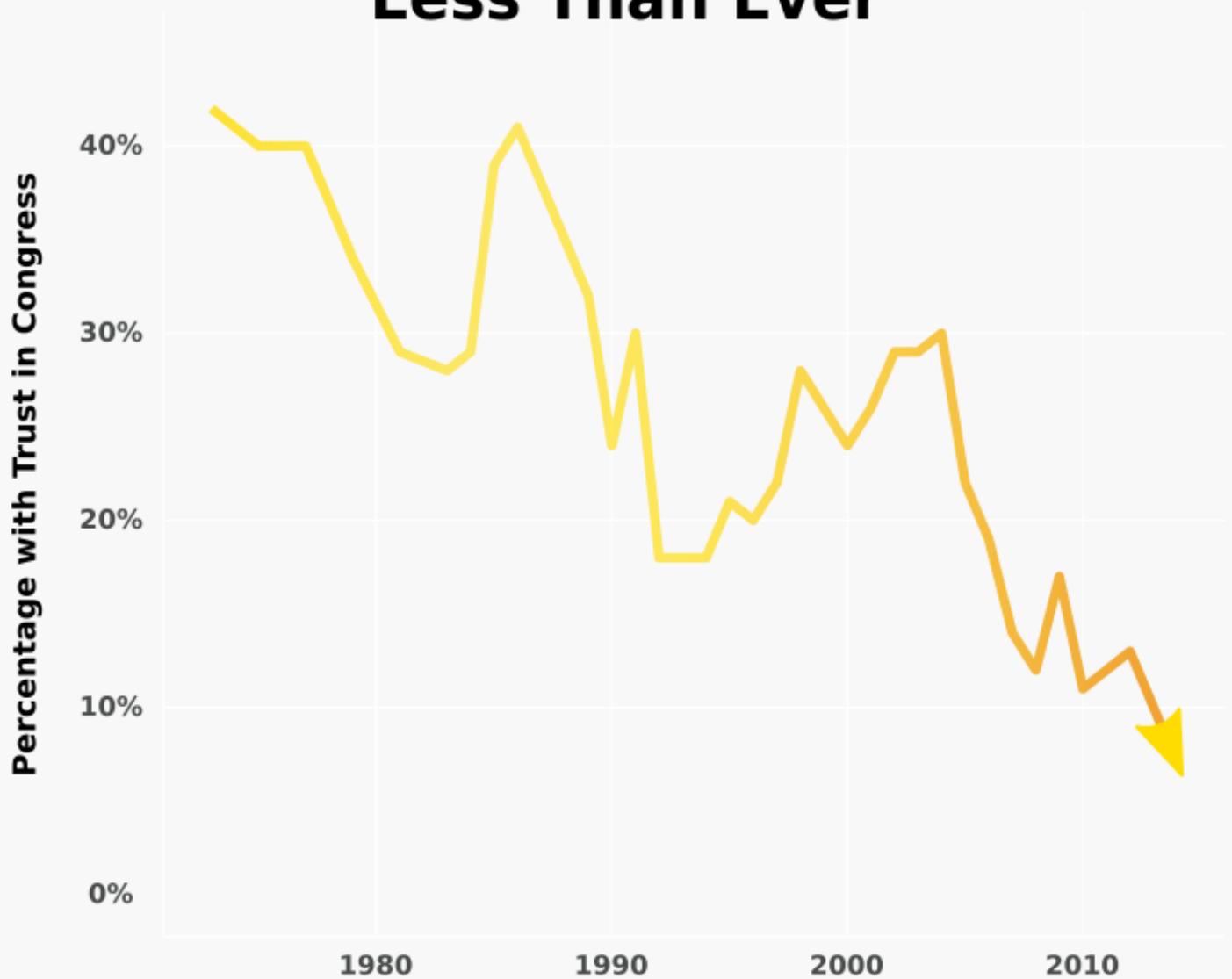
A lot of Americans are viscerally angry at the political system. They hate Washington, they don't trust politicians, and they are increasingly willing to vote for populist outsiders—like Donald Trump. But we usually assume that for all of their disgust with political reality, they remain as loyal to the ideal of democracy as previous generations of Americans. According to recent polling data, that is simply not the case.

In our research we have found that citizens give less and less importance to living in a democracy. They have increasingly negative views about key democratic institutions.

Most worryingly of all, they are more and more open to illiberal alternatives. Americans aren't just souring on particular institutions or particular politicians. To a surprising degree, they have begun to sour on liberal democracy itself.

1) Americans trust their political institutions less

Americans Trust Congress Less Than Ever



Source: Gallup, 1972-2014; Foa and Mounk (2015)
"The Democratic Disconnect".
Respondents asked how much confidence they
have in Congress. Percentage "a great deal" or
"quite a lot".

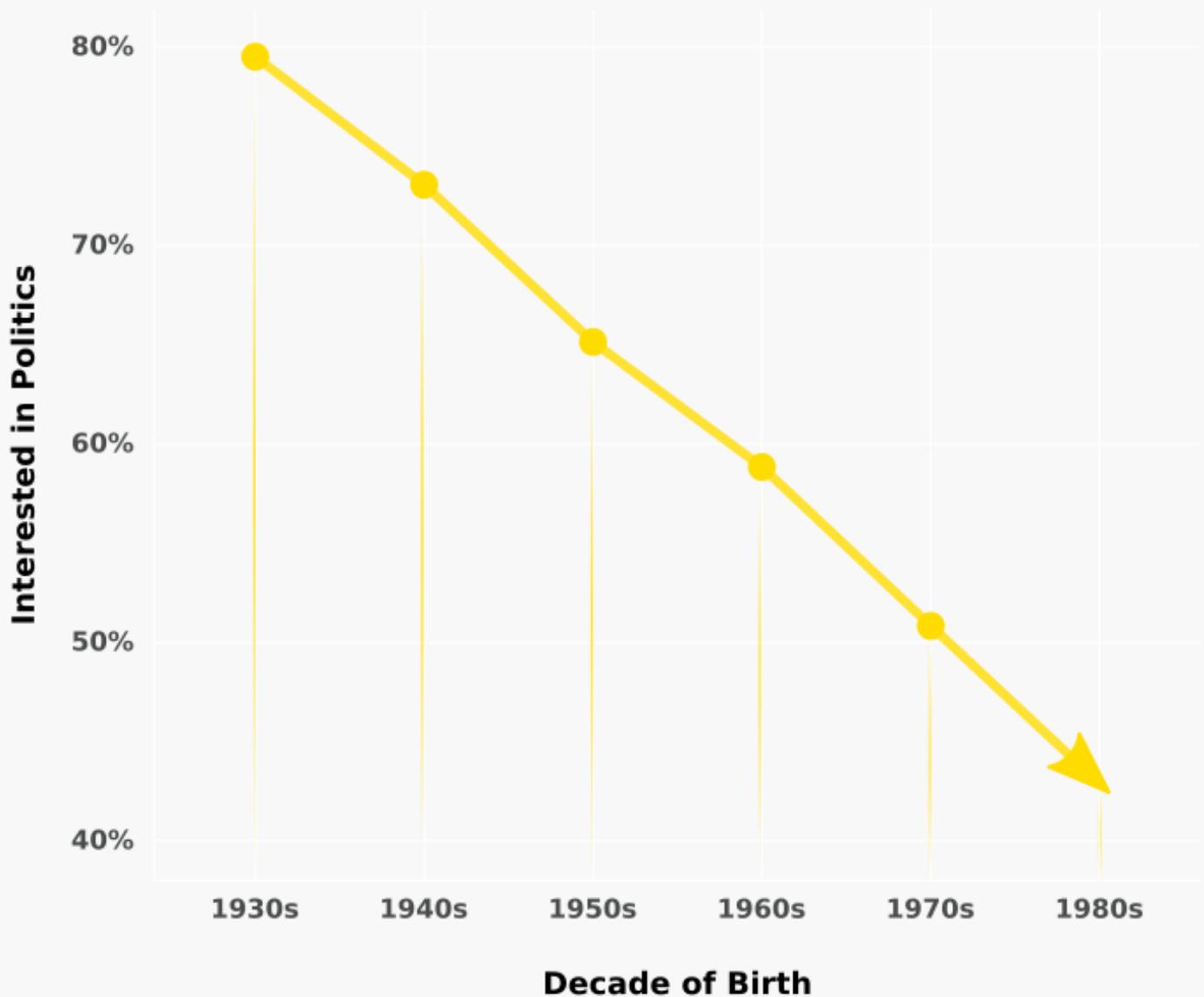
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Voters have always feared that their political leaders might be in it for themselves. But

over the past decades, the mood has turned from healthy skepticism to outright distrust. Confidence in the US Congress has fallen precipitously. But voters also put less trust in other branches of government, like the Supreme Court and the presidency. More broadly, fewer than one in five Americans now believe that "you can trust government in Washington to do what is right."

2) Young Americans are giving up on politics

Engagement With Politics Among Younger Americans



Source: World Values Survey, 2011, and Foa and Mounk (2015) "The Democratic Disconnect". Respondents asked how much interest they have in politics. Percentage "very interested" or "somewhat interested".

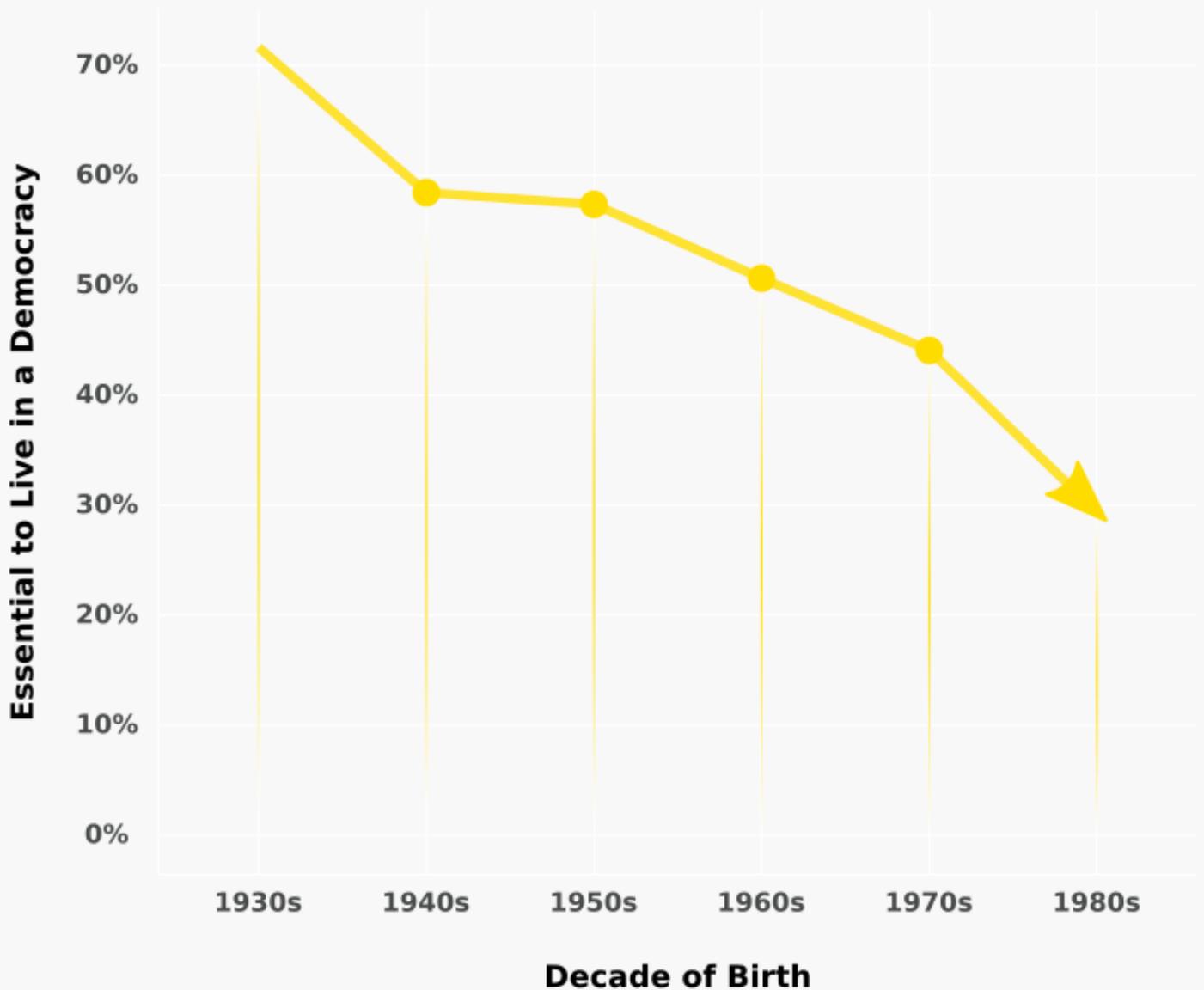
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As Americans have ceased to trust in politicians and political institutions, they are also losing hope that they might actually accomplish something by taking part in politics.

They have opted out of the political system—and in many cases have stopped taking any interest in politics at all. While a clear majority of older Americans say they have quite a lot of interest in politics, for example, most millennials openly admit that they have tuned out.

3) Most millennials don't think it's essential to live in a democracy

Young Americans Are Open To Non-Democratic Rule



Source: World Values Survey, 2005-2011, and Foa and Mounk (2015) "The Democratic Disconnect". Respondents asked how essential it is to live in a democracy from 1-10. Percentage responding 10, "essential" to live in a democracy.

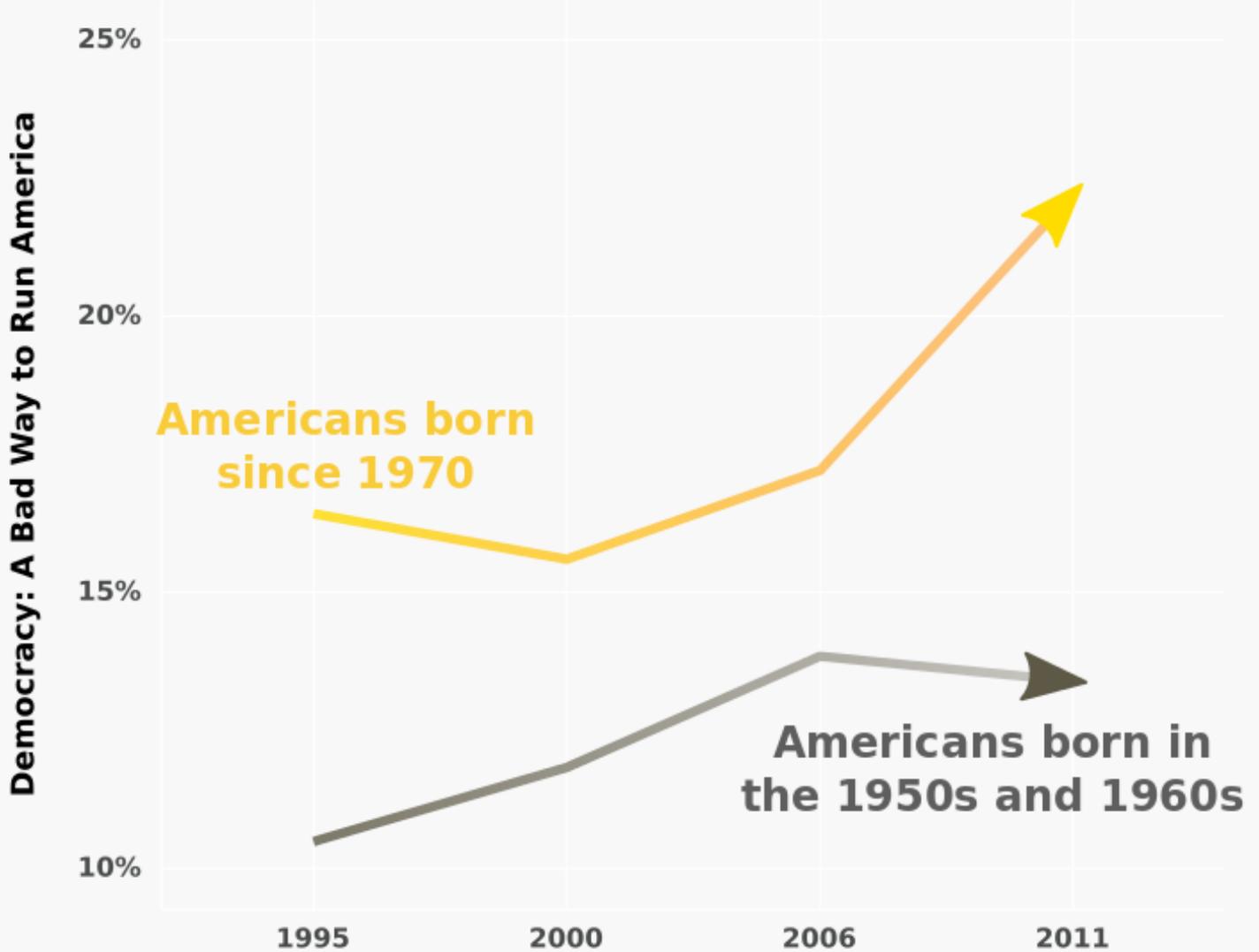
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Political scientists have long known that "government legitimacy," or the popularity of particular administrations, is going down. But many of them have argued that "regime

legitimacy," or citizens' attachment to democracy as a political system, is as strong as ever. Our research shows that this is just not true: Attachment to democracy has fallen over time, and from one generation to the next. Take this worrying graph, which shows how much less important it is to young Americans to live in a democracy. For Americans born in the 1930s, living in a democracy holds virtually sacred importance. Asked on a scale of 1 to 10 how important it is to them to live in a democracy, more than 70 percent give the highest answer. But many of their children and grandchildren are lukewarm. Among millennials — those born since the 1980s — fewer than 30 percent say that living in a democracy is essential.

4) A growing number of young Americans think democracy is a bad way to run the country

Young Americans: Losing Faith in Democracy



Source: World Values Survey, 1995-2011, and Foa and Mounk (2015) "The Democratic Disconnect". Respondents asked to assess "having a democratic political system" as a way to run the United States; Percentage "bad" or "very bad".

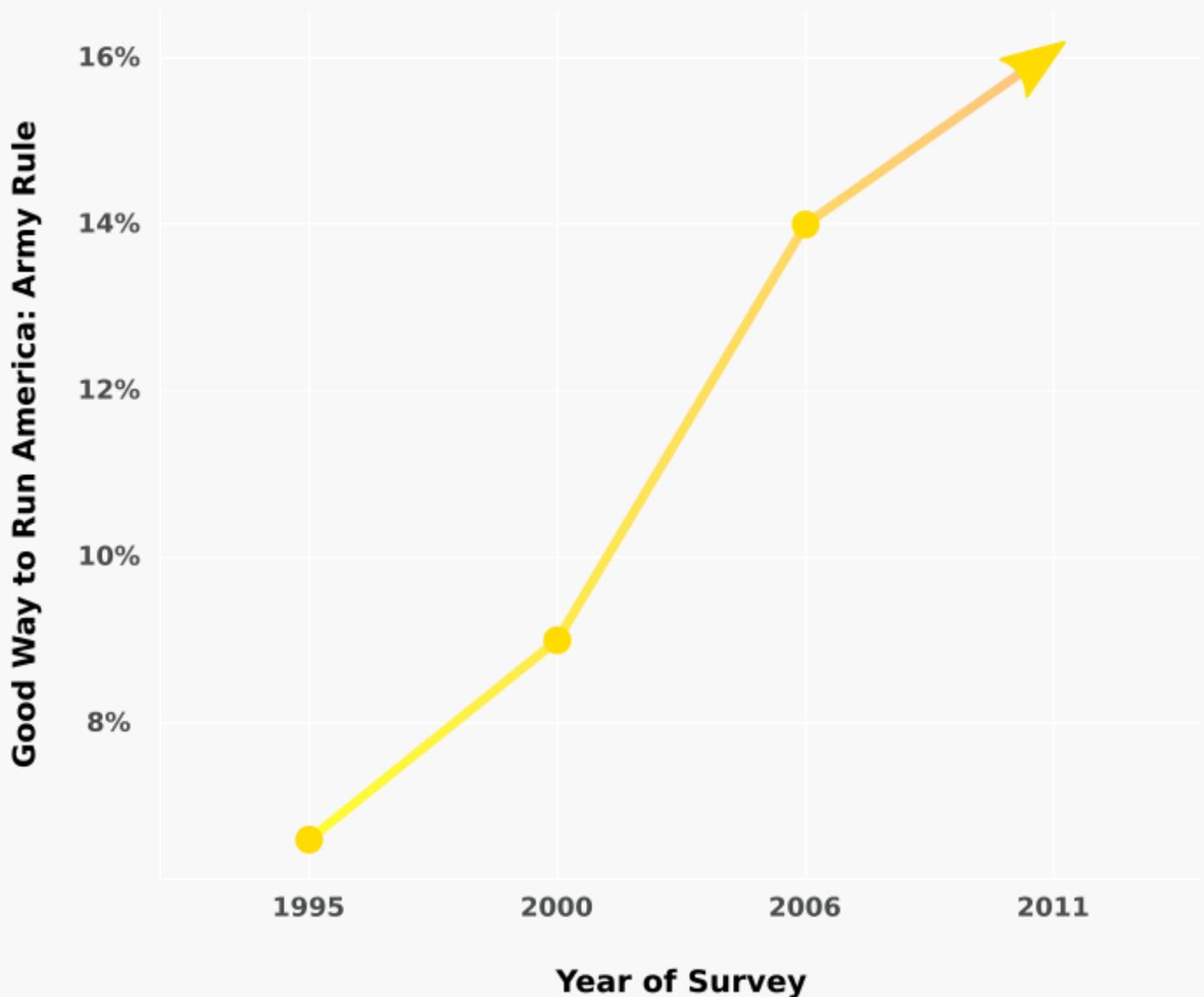
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It isn't just that the number of people who think it's very important to live in a democracy is going down. The number of people who think that "having a democratic

political system" is a "bad" or "very bad" way to run America is also going up. This trend is especially clear among young Americans.

5) More Americans want the Pentagon to take over

Americans Increasingly Open to Non-Democratic Alternatives



Source: World Values Surveys, 1995-2011, and Foa and Mounk (2015) "The Democratic Disconnect". Respondents asked whether it would be a good way to run America: "Have the army rule". Percentage replying that this would be "good" or "very good".

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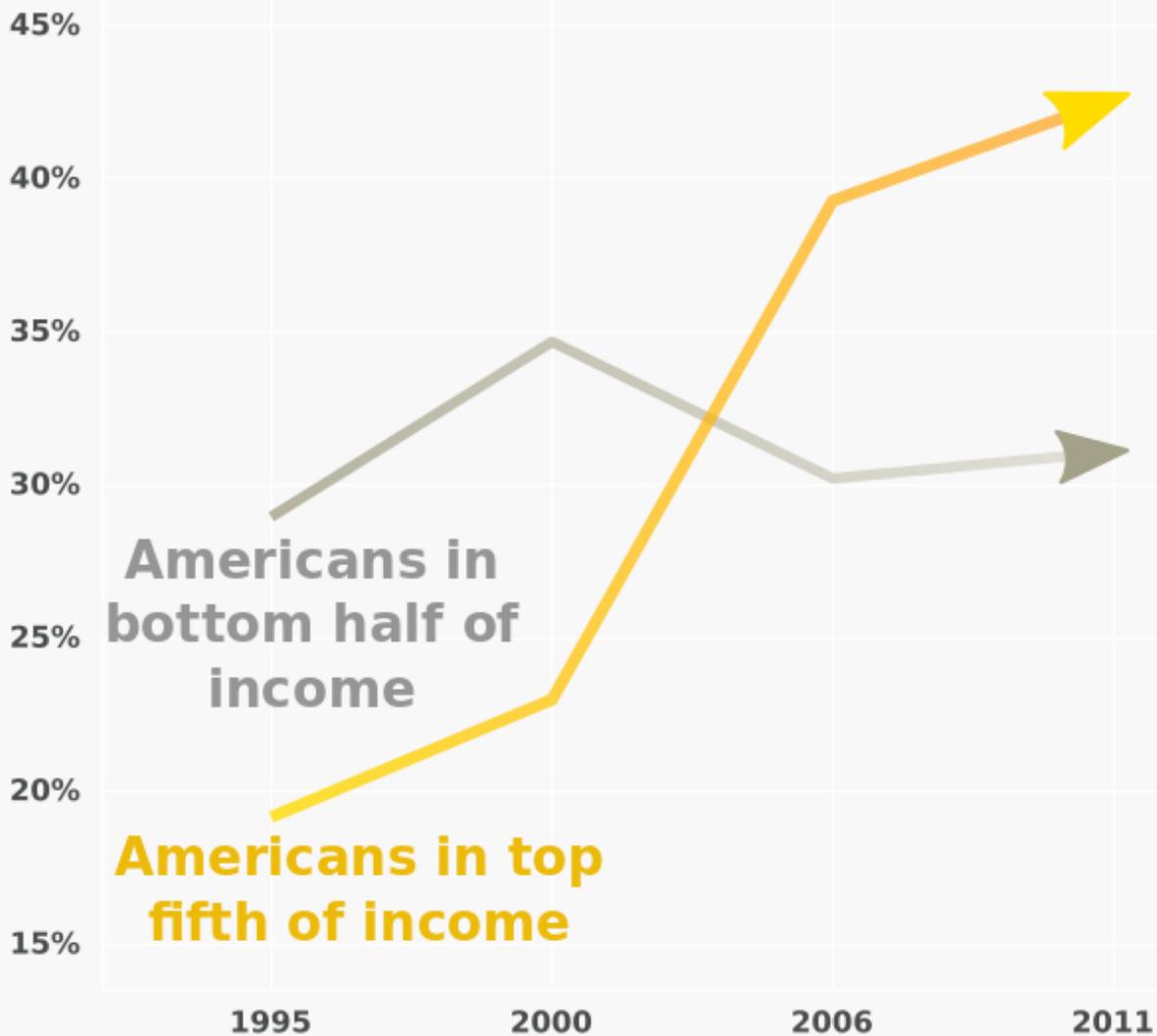
When citizens lose faith in liberal democracy, they will eventually start to consider illiberal forms of government. This is beginning to happen. Most Americans are still

horrified by the idea of living in an authoritarian regime, but the number of citizens who are open to some form of illiberal rule is going up. One of the most striking shifts we have seen concerns the number of Americans who think it would be a "good" or "very good" thing to "have the army rule." Twenty years ago, when the World Values Survey first asked this question, one in 15 Americans agreed with this sentiment. Today it's one in six.

6) Support for illiberal alternatives to democracy is growing especially fast among wealthy Americans

Rich Americans: Increasingly Authoritarian

Good Way to Run America: Strong Leader, Not Elections



Source: World Values Survey, 1995-2011, and Foa and Mounk (2015) "The Democratic Disconnect". Respondents asked whether having a "strong leader, not parliament and elections" would be a good way to run America. Percentage "good" or "very good".

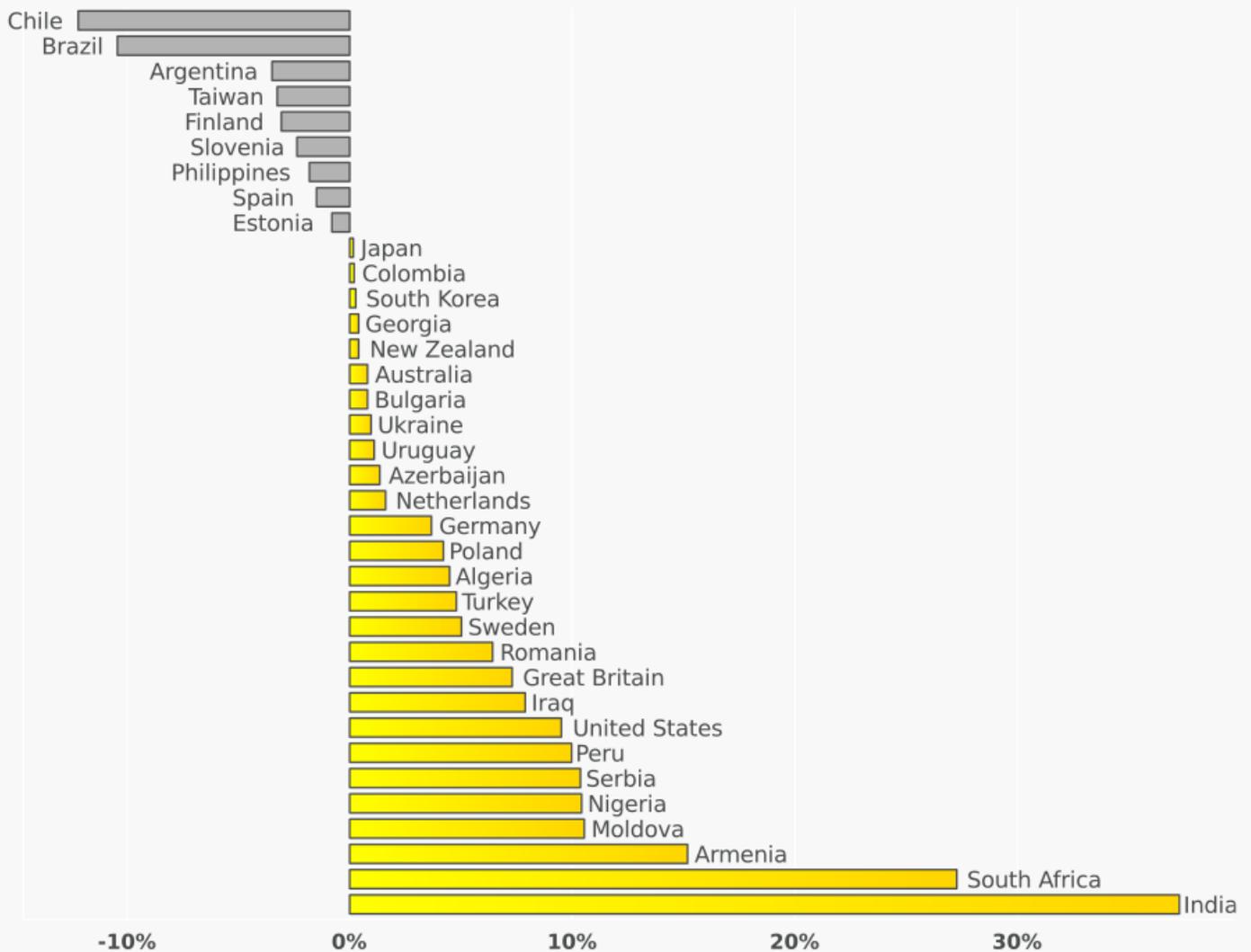
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For decades, poorer and less-educated Americans were most likely to oppose democracy. This, too, is starting to change. As inequality is rising, and the wealthy have

more to lose from economic policies that would favor the bulk of the population, they are growing increasingly impatient with democratic institutions. The number of wealthy Americans who want a strong leader who doesn't have to bother with Congress or elections, for example, has sharply increased since 1995. While opposition to democracy used to be confined to people who felt marginalized and had little influence, it is now spreading even among the economic elite.

7) Public opinion is shifting away from democracy in many countries around the globe

A Worldwide Shift: Away From Democracy



**"Army Rule" a Good Way to Run this Country.
Shift from First to Most Recent Survey, 1995-2014**

Source: World Values Survey, 1995-2014, and Foa and Mounk (2015) "The Democratic Disconnect". Respondents asked whether it would be a good way to run the country by having "army rule". Shift in the percentage replying "good" or "very good", from first to most recent survey, since 1995.



The United States is not the only country in which the population has grown fiercely critical of democracy — and surprisingly open to autocracy — in recent years. In fact, over the past two decades, the number of citizens who desire army rule has gone up in

most democracies around the world. Other questions elicit similarly scary answers.

Americans sometimes explain the troubles of democracy by pointing to features that are special to the United States, like the **difficulty of passing legislation**. But our findings suggest we need to look beyond America's borders to understand America's troubles. If citizens around the globe are dissatisfied with democracy, the reason for growing anger at the system is likely to be global as well.

(To read more about our view of the reasons for democracy's global crisis, **read our recent op-ed in the New York Times**. A paper of ours that explores the global shift in opinion about liberal democracy more fully will be published by the ***Journal of Democracy*** in 2016.)