

Resolving the Crisis of Democratic Responsiveness: Expanding Responsiveness Through Its Subjective Aspect

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Abstract. Responsiveness, the extent to which a government acts on the interests of its people, is widely treated as a central criterion of democratic health. Many empirical studies report that democracies respond far more to elites than to ordinary citizens, prompting some scholars to declare a crisis of responsiveness whose root cause lies in the political shortcomings of the people and so cannot be cured by institutional reform. This paper resists that conclusion. It argues that the apathy, irrationality, and tribalism blamed for the crisis are not fixed traits but products of the lack of responsiveness itself, so that crisis and cause form a feedback loop. Distinguishing objective responsiveness from subjective responsiveness, the individual's belief that government will respond, the paper argues that the subjective side is not wholly fixed by the objective side and can be raised on its own, through visible participation across the policy process and through institutions that help citizens understand policy. Because this can weaken the causes of the crisis, an expanded concept of responsiveness that joins the objective and subjective aspects is essential to a healthy democracy.

Keywords: political philosophy, democracy, democratic innovation, responsiveness

1. Introduction

Democracy enjoys near universal prestige, yet many observers now speak of a crisis at its core. A large body of work finds that democratic governments respond far more to affluent and organized interests than to ordinary citizens, so that democracies risk hardening into elite oligarchies [1]. The most systematic pessimists go further, holding that the deficiency is deep-rooted and beyond reform because its source is the political incapacity of the people themselves, who are said to be apathetic, irrational, and tribal [2, 3]. On this view the only remedies are to abandon the hope of a responsive government or to replace democracy with rule by the knowledgeable [3]. The crisis thus combines two claims, that the present system lacks responsiveness and that no democratic reform can restore it.

This paper grants the first claim but denies the second, defending two theses. First, the apathy, irrationality, and tribalism blamed for the crisis are not fixed human traits but strategies that citizens adopt in response to the lack of responsiveness, so that the crisis reproduces its own causes. Second, because the objective performance of government and citizens' beliefs about it do not always coincide, the subjective side of responsiveness can be strengthened on its own, which can in turn

weaken those causes. Realism about democracy therefore need not collapse into pessimism [4]. The next section reviews the concept of responsiveness and the evidence for its decline, before turning to the neglected subjective aspect and to two practical routes for strengthening it.

2. Background and literature review

2.1. Democracy and responsiveness

The reason for the popularity of democracy has been debated to some extent, but many people are willing to accept it if they believe that democracy can produce laws and policies that are more convenient for the people [5]. That capacity is what the literature calls responsiveness, that is, the modification of policy in response to changes in public opinion or the will of the people, which many consider to be a necessary condition for democracy rather than a moral quality [6]. Dahl proposed that "a prerequisite for democracy is the continuous response of the government to the wishes of the people, and these people are considered political equals" [7].

Responsiveness is therefore widely used as an index of the quality of democracy, and the values that are generally associated with democracy, such as freedom, equality and the rule of law, tend to strengthen it [8]. It works by a chain that starts with the interests of the people, leads to their votes, selects policies, and finally results in outcomes, and it can fail at any link [8]. Where the chain holds, the government protects the people's interests; where it breaks, only democracy exists in name. Since many of the hopes for democracy are based on this single ability, a government that repeatedly fails to respond will lose a great deal of the people's support, even if its processes are free and legal.

2.2. The lack of responsiveness and its causes

A growing body of evidence suggests that the chain is broken. Studies of policy responsiveness find that the preferences of the affluent shape policy while those of middle- and lower-income citizens have little independent effect, so that the occasional victories of ordinary voters tend to coincide with elite interests rather than to constrain them [1]. For the most systematic pessimists, this deficiency is neither recent nor reformable [2, 3].

Their explanation places the fault in the citizens. Brennan classifies most voters as either apathetic and ignorant or biased and stubborn, and argues that cheaper access to information has not improved matters [3]. Achen and Bartels likewise find that most citizens pay little attention, cannot easily separate fact from rumour, and vote on the basis of group identity rather than policy, so that even well designed institutions cannot turn such inputs into responsive government [2]. In one striking case, voters using direct democracy cut spending on a fire service while demanding better fire protection, a contradiction that no mechanism could reconcile [2]. The reasoning is captured in a familiar image, that however good a calculator is, it cannot return correct results from incorrect inputs [2]. The retrospective accountability that voters are supposed to exercise is, on this view, equally unreliable, since they reward and punish incumbents for outcomes such as natural disasters or economic swings that lie largely beyond any government's control [2]. Because the limits are treated as inherent, the pessimists conclude that institutional reform is pointless and that ordinary people should leave politics aside [2, 3].

Yet this inference is too quick. Realists about democracy need not be pessimists [4], and the following sections argue that the very traits blamed for the crisis are in large part produced by it.

2.3. The neglected subjective aspect

Pessimist accounts rarely separate two things that the concept of responsiveness runs together. Objective responsiveness is the government's actual response to people's interests, of the kind measured by large-scale studies. Subjective responsiveness is an individual's belief about how far government will respond, formed through information, experience, and circumstance. The two are related but not identical, much as the perceived colour of an object need not match its measured colour.

Research on political efficacy supports the distinction. A standard line separates internal efficacy, the sense that one can understand and take part in politics, from external efficacy, the belief that government will respond to participation [9]. Recent work extends this to perceptions of policy responsiveness, citizens' judgments of how far government answers their interests, and shows that such perceptions, and not only objective outcomes, shape political behaviour [10].

This matters because beliefs drive action. On standard accounts of rational choice, individuals act on their expectations of probability and value, so what they believe about responsiveness, and not only its measured level, governs how they participate [11]. Once the subjective side is in view, two possibilities open that the pessimists miss. The lack of subjective responsiveness can itself feed the crisis, and the crisis can be eased by raising subjective responsiveness even where the objective level is hard to move.

3. The main argument

3.1. Responsiveness deficiency as a cause of the crisis

In current conditions, with no mechanism in place to raise subjective responsiveness on its own, citizens' beliefs largely track the perceived objective level. A deficiency in objective responsiveness therefore lowers subjective responsiveness, and that belief, in turn, shapes the strategies that constitute the crisis. The point can be seen in the three traits the pessimists emphasise.

3.1.1. Political apathy

Apathy is usually treated as a cause of low responsiveness, and it surely is one, since a system represents only those who take part. But a lack of responsiveness also produces apathy. Acquiring political knowledge is costly while a single vote has minimal effect, so abstention and ignorance can be rational [12]. As the electorate grows the weight of any single vote shrinks further, so the expected return on becoming informed falls toward nothing, and the rational citizen is left with little reason to pay the cost of attention.

This alone would not break the trust; a vote is still a vote. The harm to the people is worse because of the crisis. As the results do not change and the government is out of touch with the people, people feel that participation is futile; voting thus becomes an exercise in futility. Those who are confident in their influence are generally the already privileged; thus, they feel that the response is uneven and their sense of subjective responsiveness decreases further.

3.1.2. Irrationality in politics

The pessimists believe that the voters are not simply unaware, but also irrational; they are therefore easily swayed by incorrect information and biases [3]. On the one hand, the human mind did not develop to seek unbiased truth but rather to defend pre-existing conclusions; thus, citizens

selectively gather evidence to rationalize an ideal system, and even experts are not immune, as when scholars once employed science to justify the racial doctrines of their own regime [2]. The usual list of mechanisms is confirmation bias, framing effects and peer pressure [3]. However, the more severe problem is not the cause of the bias but its persistence. People are not always rational or unreasonable in everyday life, and false beliefs that incur actual costs are generally corrected. Political beliefs are preserved precisely because they are free from the consequences, and this situation has been called epistemic closure [13].

The insulation is due to a low-response state. If a person believes that their vote will have little impact, they may not feel the need to change their political ideas; thus, they can support a particular position that they would never be willing to live with themselves. Good responsiveness, on the other hand, is associated with both rewards and penalties; therefore, the chain from preferences to outcomes that results from irrational choices will produce visibly bad results and be corrected later [8]. If there is no response, then the correction is absent; thus, rational and irrational votes will have the same small effect, and irrationality will be a costless, and even satisfying, choice [2].

3.1.3. Political tribalism

Tribalism is often read as a further form of irrationality. Group bias is real and runs deep, and people favour in-groups even when groups are formed at random [14]. But choosing to act on that bias is not inevitable, and where responsiveness is lacking it becomes rational. A political tribe offers belonging, respect, and meaning, goods that are valuable in themselves [13]. The shared emotion and recognition that a political community supplies can matter more to a person's daily life than the remote chance of swaying an election. When a vote changes little, its worth as an expression of identity outweighs its negligible effect on policy, so identity crowds out interest. Tribalism is not inherently destructive, since it can also sustain pluralism and engagement; it turns destructive when people vote on identity without regard to consequences, and that, once again, is what the lack of responsiveness encourages.

3.2. The feasibility of enhancing subjective responsiveness

If these traits are produced by the lack of responsiveness, the crisis and its causes form a vicious cycle. The cycle looks unbreakable only if subjective responsiveness is wholly fixed by the objective level, for then raising it would require first removing the causes it produces. But belief and reality often diverge, and beliefs depend on how things are perceived as well as on the facts. Subjective responsiveness can therefore be raised on its own, through mechanisms that strengthen citizens' confidence that government attends to them. Two such mechanisms stand out.

3.2.1. Responsiveness in all processes of democratic politics

Citizens judge responsiveness mainly by outcomes, yet few policies satisfy everyone, so outcomes alone will always disappoint. Formal political equality does not solve this on its own [5], since inclusion has expanded for two centuries without dispelling the sense of unresponsiveness, and people form their beliefs from concrete experience rather than from abstract guarantees [2].

Responsiveness must therefore be made visible and experienceable across the whole policy process, from the gathering of opinions through deliberation to implementation and revision. Where government justifies its decisions with reasons and opens inclusive discussion, citizens can see for themselves whether it intends to respond [10]. Visibility is essential here, because abstract

commitments become real only through public practice [15]. What is needed is not merely transparency, in which citizens passively receive information, nor private channels that yield a thin reply months later, but a shared public space in which exchanges between officials and citizens are open to all. There a citizen can see what others propose and how government answers, and so come to trust in responsiveness even without taking part directly, and modern communication technologies make such spaces practical. In such a space a citizen who never files a proposal can still watch the government answer others, and so build confidence in its responsiveness from what is seen rather than from what is promised.

3.2.2. Policy understanding and responsiveness

Citizens also struggle to judge responsiveness because policies and their effects are hard to understand, especially when outcomes are slow or shaped by many causes. Judging government by experience is natural, and not in itself mistaken, but experience cannot by itself reveal which outcomes follow from which policies, so citizens cannot tell how far an outcome should be credited to government [2].

The remedy is not to demand that citizens become analysts. In most domains, complex matters are made usable because specialists carry the analytical burden in advance, leaving people to act only on the link between choice and result. People drive cars without understanding their mechanics and follow navigation tools without grasping the science behind them, and early computers that demanded expert knowledge gave way to systems that ordinary users operate with ease, because an interface now hides the complexity and renders the connection between action and outcome intuitive. Government could play the same role for policy, serving as an interface between citizens and the machinery of the state, through a publicly engaged body that interprets policies and their likely effects. This differs sharply from rule by the knowledgeable. Epistocracy hands both the analysis and the decision to the highly educated, whose interests need not match those of the excluded, and so weakens responsiveness rather than serving it [3]. The proposal here keeps the decision with the public and offers it only help in understanding, and to avoid capture the interpreting body must itself be open and answerable within the public space described above.

3.3. The foundational role of objective responsiveness

Strengthening belief in responsiveness is not without danger, since it is not unique to democracies. Authoritarian regimes have long manufactured the conviction that the state serves the people, propaganda raised subjective responsiveness in Nazi Germany while objective responsiveness was wholly absent, and charismatic leaders have dismantled democratic institutions with genuine popular support, sometimes after reaching power by democratic means [2]. Subjective responsiveness without an objective basis is therefore a deception, and a dangerous one, since the manufactured confidence it produces can be turned against the very institutions that make genuine responsiveness possible. A complete concept of responsiveness must include both, and the enhancement of the subjective side must rest on, and never substitute for, a government that genuinely answers to its people.

4. Objections and responses

One might object that emphasising subjective responsiveness threatens other democratic values. If citizens come to treat responsiveness as democracy's foremost demand, a government eager to

satisfy them may override the rule of law or the rights of minorities, and history offers ample warning of majorities that did exactly this in the name of the popular will. During the most radical phase of the French Revolution, for instance, the overriding demand that the will of the people be enacted was used to suspend ordinary legal protections and to sustain a period of terror that its supporters defended as a genuine expression of democracy.

The worry is real but misdirected. The danger arises from stressing responsiveness while leaving other values invisible, and the remedy is to make those values experienceable too, not to abandon responsiveness. Much political hostility in fact grows out of the frustration that the lack of responsiveness breeds, so that a state with consistently strong objective and subjective responsiveness is less, not more, prone to such excesses. Responsiveness also builds the trust a government needs on the occasions when it must, for good reasons, decline to give people what they want.

5. Conclusion

The crisis of democratic responsiveness has been read as proof that the people are unfit for self government. This paper has argued instead that the apathy, irrationality, and tribalism behind the crisis are largely its products, sustained by a feedback loop between low responsiveness and the strategies it provokes.

Breaking that loop requires attention to the subjective side of responsiveness, the citizen's belief that government will respond, which is related to but not fixed by the objective record. That belief can be strengthened by making responsiveness visible across the policy process and by helping citizens understand policy, provided always that it rests on genuine objective responsiveness rather than replacing it.

The argument is conceptual, and the institutions it gestures toward, a shared democratic public space and a publicly answerable body for interpreting policy, would need empirical design and testing. Within those limits, an expanded concept of responsiveness that joins its objective and subjective aspects offers a way through the crisis, and is essential to a healthy democracy. The lesson is not that the people are unfit for democracy, but that democracy must be made visible enough for them to believe in it.

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