

*Abundance
and
American Democracy:
A Test of
Dire Predictions*

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THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM was severely tested in the 1970s and it is not yet obvious that the system's response to those tests was adequate. Some scholars have argued that the confusion we witnessed in energy, environmental and economic policies was symptomatic of even worse situations to come. Their consensus is that our style of democratic politics is incapable of dealing with the problems we increasingly face. Consequently, they predict that democracy's days are numbered. Furthermore, many Americans sense that the "joy ride" may be over, and that our economy may be hard pressed to maintain standards, much less continue its historic growth. One poll showed a 34 percent increase, since 1977, in respondents who believe, "The United States is in deep and serious trouble,"¹ and a well-known economist, employing the terminology of game theory, has suggested that ours has become a "Zero-Sum Society."²

The starting point for most of these pessimistic assessments is the

* The authors wish to thank Northern Arizona University for research support and several anonymous reviewers for their cogent observations.

¹ Yankelovich, Skelly, and White, Inc., *Time Magazine* (February 11, 1980).

² Lester Thurow, *The Zero-Sum Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

growing body of literature discussing our dwindling natural resources. The environmentalist era produced numerous challenges to the assumption that a growing human population can experience the levels of material welfare currently enjoyed by a few societies.³ This reckoning has led to a second question: can the United States maintain its relative level of wealth as bitterness and resource pressures deepen elsewhere? Such neo-Malthusian accountings have been disputed,⁴ and the jury is still out: it is not easy to determine whether there are impending or actual shortages of basic resources. And even if there prove to be enough resources to go around, there is still the question of whether international political conditions, including the possible formation of cartels, will allow us access to them.⁵

One result of these sometimes conflicting messages about the material basis for modern societies is a revival of the century old debate about the relationship between economic wealth and democracy. We again find ourselves questioning democracy's ability to detach itself (as a political system) from the economic surroundings in which it customarily thrives. The concern of many is that declining resources will mean declining democracy. To explore this question, we must first examine whether any causal relationship between economic conditions and democracy has actually been established.

American historians have asked a closely related question: to what extent is economic abundance responsible for the foundations and maintenance of democracy? Alexis de Tocqueville first noted the relationship between the Americans' bountiful continent and their

³ Beyond the voluminous general "environmentalist" literature, such as Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne Ehrlich, *The End of Affluence* (New York: Ballantine, 1974), there are a few works that attempt "proof," such as Dennis L. Meadows et al, *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe, 1972); and Jay W. Forrester, *World Dynamics* (Cambridge, Mass: Wright-Allen, 1971).

⁴ For "disproofs," see the Sussex University team's work in H.S.D. Cole et al, *Models of Doom: A Critique of the Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe, 1973); and Thomas J. Boyle, "Hope for the Technological Solution," *Nature* (September 21, 1973), 127-128.

⁵ See Fred Bergsten, "The Response to the Third World," *Foreign Policy*, 11 (Summer 1973), 102-124; "The Threat is Real," *Foreign Policy*, 14 (Spring 1974), 84-90; and Stephen D. Krasner, "Oil is the Exception," *Foreign Policy*, 14 (Spring 1974), 68-83. Also, supporting Krasner, Philip Trezise, "How Many OPEC's in our Future?" *New York Times* (February 10, 1974).

impressive degree of social, economic, and political mobility.⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb, the "frontier" theorists, described the relationship more fully: in Turner's view, our ancestors constantly left the institutional barriers and social biases of established societies for the democratizing frontier, and their experience in new settlements reinforced democratic national traditions. The results were egalitarianism, practicality, optimism, and an irrepressible exuberance of spirit. Turner speculated that the end of the frontier might reduce these characteristics, thereby eroding American democracy.⁷

Sixty years later, historian David Potter explained why Turner's worries were unfounded. Turner ". . . did not recognize that . . . the frontier was simply . . . the most accessible form of abundance." Furthermore, from Potter's optimistic 1954 perspective, it seemed that economic abundance would never end. In fact, Potter's main concern was that we stop moralizing to the rest of the world about the virtues of democracy and start to export our technological and economic know-how so that they could develop their own abundance, and thence, democracy. Potter's economic determinism was clear. "In every country, the system of government is a by-product of the general conditions of life . . . democracy is clearly most appropriate for the countries which enjoy an economic surplus."⁸

Political scientists also have been concerned with the relationship between economic wealth and democracy. Lipset, Dahl, and Cutright each posited a close empirical relationship;⁹ Neubauer's critique, on the other hand, illustrates that while underdeveloped

⁶ David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 466.

⁷ For this thesis, see Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," and other essays, in George Rogers Taylor, ed. *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History* (Boston: Heath, 1971). Also, Turner's *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1920); Richard Hofstadter and S.M. Lipset, eds., *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); and Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1952).

⁸ Potter, 158, 112.

⁹ Robert A. Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis*, 2nd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 68; Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), Chs. 2, 3; and Phillips Cutright, "National Political Development: Its Measurement and Social Correlates," in Nelson Polsby, R.A. Dentler, and P.A. Smith, eds. *Politics and Social Life* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1963), 569-582.

societies have trouble establishing democracy, it is hard to prove that the richer countries are "the more likely they are to become democratic." He asserts that a "full range of factors" beyond socio-economic development will have to be taken into account, and that "above the 'developmental threshold' there is no significant relationship between democratic political development and socio-economic development."¹⁰ Almond and Powell support this cautious view, pointing out that differentiation of political structures is bound to follow high levels of economic development. Consequent structural autonomy must not, however, be automatically assumed. In other words, relatively high levels of socio-economic modernity bring only the potential for "modern" political systems: they may be democratic, or they may develop authoritarianism to a degree not conceivable in the past.¹¹

These general considerations provide a backdrop to the specific question of what effects scarcity may have on American political life. The "Decade of the Environment" began with laws, and analyses soon followed. Some popular texts are skeptical of our political system's ability to face the challenges. Walter Rosenbaum calls for greater national government regulation to overcome the centrifugal effects of federalism and pluralism.¹² Cynthia Enloe's comparative study argues the same point: controlling environment, natural resources, population, land use, and related problems requires the capacity to plan and co-ordinate. Of the countries she examined, the United States is "perhaps the most severely underdeveloped" in these capabilities. Nonetheless, she argues that planning will inevitably have to come, and "such imperatives usually curtail Nader-like citizen participation."¹³ At the least, such evaluations call for the end of what Lowi has termed "distributive" politics—the style which essentially expresses what is unique about the American political approach.¹⁴

¹⁰ Deane E. Neubauer, "Some Conditions of Democracy," *American Political Science Review*, 61 (December 1967), 1002-1009.

¹¹ *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), 217, 308.

¹² *The Politics of Environmental Concern*, 2nd Edition (New York: Praeger, 1977), 48, 89, 110-111, 194, 210-211, 247, 251.

¹³ *The Politics of Pollution in a Comparative Perspective* (New York: David McKay, 1975), 236-237.

¹⁴ Theodore Lowi, "American Business, Public Policy, Case Studies and Political Theory," *World Politics*, 16 (1964), 689-690.

Despite their critiques, Enloe and Rosenbaum have not given up hope that we can retain democracy. Their solutions can be likened to that major school in American political science which sees no contradiction between centralized political power and democracy and even envisions some political good resulting from apparent economic constraints. McConnell, Kariel, and Lowi, for example, argue that pluralistic federalism leads to localized systems of prejudice, interest group dominance, and non-resolution of issues.¹⁵ For these scholars, greater centralization and planning would enhance democracy because increased emphasis on national power can only reduce the significance of local elites and "veto groups," leaving a stronger defense of the public interest. They may be right, but their definition of democracy differs from more traditional, liberty-emphasizing, American ideals.

Other social scientists identify deeper dilemmas for democracy, however defined. In separate studies Miles, Ophuls, and Heilbroner have painted dismal pictures of a society either brought virtually to its knees by its technological vulnerability to growing numbers of dissidents and saboteurs,¹⁶ or dominated by a "technocratic priesthood" brought to power through our attempt to maintain high material living standards by emphasizing nuclear technology.¹⁷ To Ophuls, "growth," America's "secular religion," will have to go, along with capitalism, since that system's practice is to ignore external (social and environmental) costs. It is no wonder, he concludes, that, "Democracy as we know it cannot conceivably survive."¹⁸ Heilbroner agrees: no modern governmental systems, democratic or other, will overcome the problems of governing in an era without economic hope.¹⁹

Thus, there has been a major debate over the likelihood and sig-

¹⁵ For example, Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1966), and Henry S. Kariel, *The Decline of American Pluralism* (Stanford, Cal: Stanford University Press, 1961).

¹⁶ Rufus E. Miles, Jr., *Awakening from the American Dream: The Social and Political Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe, 1976), 198.

¹⁷ *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1977), 158-160, 167, 176, 185.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 152. Ophuls's book has been highly acclaimed, receiving awards in 1977 as the best publication of the year on United States national policy from the American Political Science Association, and the best book of the year in international relations from the International Studies Association.

¹⁹ Robert L. Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect: Updated for the 1980s* (New York: Norton, 1980), 17, 101, 105-106, 159-160.

nificance of these dire predictions for democracy. Two recent journal articles have reviewed the "democracy and abundance" literature. Susan Leeson has tied these theories to traditional political ideas about the limits of authoritarian systems. She disputes the wisdom of succumbing to Leviathan: better to practice a politics of persuasion to commit the masses willingly to make the sacrifices necessary for the new era. For Leeson, mankind's choices are either (1) to give in to "the lowest components in our nature," by which she presumably means authoritarianism; or (2) ". . . to aspire to realize our highest faculties by reaffirming our capacity to reason and seek justice based on faith in an objective, intelligible order."²⁰ Leeson's contribution hardly advances the discussion: it can be argued that using our "God-like faculties" rather than our "animality" is precisely what got us into our present fix.

David Orr and Stuart Hill have also disputed the gloomy prognostications that democracy will face inexorable pressure from declining material abundance. Their basic premise is that if the American technological response to the crisis were to take a "soft path," emphasizing demographic decentralization and renewable energy sources, traditional political liberties and structures would be quite maintainable. Along with Leeson, Orr and Hill are wary of extremist deductions: two tragedies are ". . . to be avoided. One is the very real possibility that we will wantonly destroy our life support system. The other is the almost equally grim prospect that we will jettison the open society and much of our western heritage in the name of survival."²¹ As stated, these options are surely undesirable. But Orr and Hill do not offer a convincing alternative. The "soft energy path" they advocate might actually allow social decentralization, which would preserve localism and the liberties we know. But as they admit, "Decentralization does not as yet constitute a clear policy option. . . . Proponents of small-is-beautiful are often vulnerable to criticisms made of utopian thought generally."²²

Most of these scholarly discussions have involved broad theorizing about the relationship between economic abundance and democracy. Extant empirical work has employed comparative ag-

²⁰ Susan M. Leeson, "Philosophic Implications of the Ecological Crisis: The Authoritarian Challenge to Liberalism," *Polity*, 11 (Winter 1978), 303-318.

²¹ David W. Orr and Stuart Hill, "Leviathan, the Open Society, and the Crisis of Ecology," *Western Political Quarterly*, 31 (December 1978), 457-469.

²² *Ibid.*, 466.

gregate data using nation-states as the basic units of analysis. But, as Abraham Miller and his colleagues have argued, one cannot make inferences about individual perceptions from theoretically remote aggregate indicators.²³ To examine the impact of scarcity on a given society, one must explore the attitudes of its individual members, which is what we propose to do.

No study has looked specifically at the impact of declining material abundance on democratic attitudes at the individual level. Ted Bartell, using a sample drawn from Los Angeles County, found that, "Persons of lower political trust and lower generalized system support were less likely to perceive the energy crisis as real or serious. . . ."²⁴ Although he argued that widespread unemployment due to energy shortages would depress levels of political trust, this is not apparent in his data analysis because he employed "seriousness of the energy crisis" as his dependent variable and political trust as the independent variable.

Other studies have examined the relationship between a particular group's sense of economic well-being and its willingness to engage in violent acts. Miller and his colleagues argued, for example, that "relative deprivation theory" did not explain the black urban riots of the late 1960s.²⁵ Edward Muller also found the theory unable directly to explain what he terms "aggressive political participation."²⁶

Yet another relevant body of literature explores the impact of general economic conditions on partisan voting behavior. The findings are not consistent. Tufte, Klorman, and Weatherford suggest in separate studies that changes in aggregate economic conditions have some impact on individual voting behavior.²⁷ On the other

²³ Abraham Miller, Louis H. Bolce and Mark Halligan, "The J-Curve Theory and the Black Urban Riots," *American Political Science Review*, 71 (September 1977), 968.

²⁴ Ted Bartell, "Political Orientations and Public Response to the Energy Crisis," *Social Science Quarterly*, 57 (September 1976), 435. See also David O. Sears, Tom R. Tyler, Jack Citrin, and Donald Kinder, "Political System Support and Public Response to the Energy Crisis," *American Journal of Political Science*, 22 (February 1978), 56-81; and Paul Allen Beck, "The Correlates of Energy Conservation," *Public Policy*, 28 (Fall 1980), 451-472.

²⁵ Miller, "The J-Curve Theory . . .," 981.

²⁶ Edward Miller, *Aggressive Political Participation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 182.

²⁷ Edward Tufte, *Political Control of the Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Richard Klorman, "Trends in Personal Finance and the Vote," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 42 (Spring 1978), 31-48; and Stephen Weatherford,

hand, after a study of elections from 1956 to 1972, Fiorina concluded that economic conditions sometimes do influence voting behavior and political participation—and sometimes they do not.²⁸

Kinder and Kiewiet were more definite. They found for 1956-76 that, "Congressional voting is seldom motivated by perception of declining personal financial wellbeing or unemployment experiences. . . ."²⁹ Their conclusion was confirmed by a study of the 1974 and 1976 elections. Political judgments, they argued, were much more likely to be influenced by partisan considerations. "Under ordinary circumstances, voters evidently do not make connections between their own personal economic experiences—however vivid, immediate, and otherwise significant—and their political attitudes and preferences."³⁰ They explain this conclusion by arguing that the American people prefer to accept responsibility for their own economic misfortunes rather than politicize their grievances.

This theme receives support from Sniderman and Brody, who argue that "Americans as a rule do not believe that government ought to help them. . . ."³¹ and is confirmed in a comprehensive study of the relationship between unemployment and political behavior and attitudes which concludes,

There appeared to be little connection between personal economic conditions and social ideology. This was seen most strikingly in the absence of a link between the severe personal strain of unemployment and cynicism about the American Dream, or heightened class consciousness.³²

Furthermore, while the authors found that the unemployed did vote less, they attributed this to demographic characteristics, rather than to unemployment-induced withdrawal. Supporting this contention, Rosenstone and Wolfinger found that short-term

"Economic Conditions and Electoral Outcomes: Class Differences in the Political Response to Recession," *American Journal of Political Science*, 22 (November 1978), 916-938.

²⁸ Morris Fiorina, "Economic Retrospective Voting in American National Elections," *American Journal of Political Science*, 22 (May 1978), 426-443.

²⁹ Donald Kinder and D.R. Kiewiet, "Economic Discontent and Political Behavior: The Role of Personal Grievances and Collective Economic Judgments in Congressional Voting," *American Journal of Political Science*, 23 (August 1979), 522.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Paul Sniderman and Richard Brody, "Coping: The Ethic of Self-Reliance," *American Journal of Political Science*, 21 (August 1977), 517.

³² Kay Lehman Schlozman and Sidney Verba, *Injury to Insult: Unemployment, Class and Political Response* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 347.

unemployed were less likely to vote than those unemployed for a longer period.³³ Finally, James Barber discovered no relationship between downward social mobility and political extremism.³⁴

In summary, the relationship between general economic conditions on the one hand, and political attitudes and behavior on the other, is not as obvious as it appears to be. Nevertheless, there continues to be much speculation about this relationship, and much of it quite clearly asserts that an era of scarcity poses a grave threat to American Democracy.³⁵ It is the purpose of this paper to see if this is so.

METHODOLOGY

Any significant relationship between economic prospects and democracy ought to be reflected in measurable individual behavior and attitudes. We hypothesize that those Americans who perceive personally worsening economic conditions will be the first to react, even during relatively prosperous times such as the 1970s. Their attitudes should show declining commitment to democratic principles and activities.

We further hypothesize that changing individual economic status will be more directly related to such political attitudes than will absolute levels: according to Margaret Mead, the American way of life is geared to the individual's striving for success over time. The American measures accomplishment by how far he has progressed from the point of departure rather than by the present niche he oc-

³³ Stephen Rosenstone and Raymond Wolfinger, *Voting Turnout in Midterm Elections* (Berkeley: Institute of Government Studies, 1978), 47.

³⁴ James Barber, *Social Mobility and Voting Behavior* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), 259.

³⁵ William Stevens, "Fuel Crisis Reaches Deep into National Psychology," *New York Times* (July 1, 1979), 81; James C. Hyatt, "Maturing in 'Era of Scarcity' is Seen Altering Views on Money, Middle Class Life," *Wall Street Journal* (August 6, 1979); "Pessimism about State of Nation Increases as Economic Expectations Plummet," *Gallup Opinion Index* (August, 1979), 23-28. See also S. M. Lipset, "Predicting the Future of Post-Industrial Society," in S. M. Lipset, ed. *The Third Century: America as a Post-Industrial Society* (Stanford, Cal: Hoover Institution Press, 1979), 24-35, and "Life in 1985 looks Bleak, but Stick Around, Futurists Say 2050 Will be Better," *Arizona Republic* (November 10, 1980), 1; Paul Blumberg, *Inequality in an Age of Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); and Richard J. Barnet, *The Lean Years: Politics in the Age of Scarcity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980).

copies. Thus, current income, relative to past, is more important than longstanding, perhaps inherited, wealth.³⁶

Measuring Scarcity

We have no direct indicator for measuring whether a citizen perceives the United States as entering an era of scarcity. We therefore employed a proxy to evaluate individual reactions if resources were to become scarce: if the American economic pie were to shrink. In other words, we are examining the consequences of scarcity, a severe decline in the overall standard of living.

To operationalize this variable, we chose the following question from the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey. "During the last few years has your financial situation been getting better, getting worse, or has it stayed the same?" "Losers," those who perceive their economic situation to be deteriorating, should be less supportive of democratic values, less confident in the government, and more cynical about the operation of the political system than should "non-losers," those whose economic situation has improved or stayed the same.

Preliminary analysis showed that while self-perceived financial status was not related to region or sex, it did vary with levels of income, education, age, and race. (See Table 1) Therefore, it was necessary to control for these four factors in order to explore their independent effects on the attitudinal and behavioral variables.

Measuring Democratic Behavior and Values

Actual democratic behavior was measured in several ways. First, we explored the question of voter turnout to see if economic attitudes were related to political participation. Our hypothesis suggested that refusal to vote is an indication that an important democratic value is being rejected. Measures of "extreme" ideological self-perception (liberal or conservative) were included on the practical grounds that radical ideology indicates a rejection of mainstream political philosophies. Closely associated with this idea was the notion that those whose financial situation was getting worse would be less likely to identify with the Democratic or Republican parties and more inclined toward political in-

³⁶ Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (New York: Morrow, 1942), and the discussion of Mead's theories in Potter, 47-50.

TABLE I

SELF-PERCEIVED FINANCIAL SITUATION BY DEMOGRAPHIC CATEGORIES
(PERCENTAGES)^a

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES	N	SELF-PERCEIVED FINANCIAL STATUS				Chi Square ^b
		Getting better or staying the same: "Non-losers"	Getting Worse: "Losers"	Gamma	Chi Square ^b	
Age						
under 30	(2699)	81	19			
30-54 years	(4586)	78	22	.06	**	
55 and older	(3219)	78	22			
Race						
white	(9242)	80	20			
black	(1232)	73	27	.18	***	
Income						
under \$8,000	(2787)	70	30			
\$8,000-14,999	(2605)	79	21			
\$15,000-24,999	(2032)	85	15	.31	***	
\$25,000 or more	(895)	90	11			
Education						
less than high school	(3739)	75	25			
high school	(5155)	81	19	.17	***	
some college	(1595)	84	16			

Source for all tables: National Opinion Research Center, *General Social Survey: 1972-1978*.

^a The row percentages from SPSS crosstables are reported. Read across to 100 percent; e.g., "Among the youngest respondents, 81 percent see their financial situation over the past few years as improving or staying the same, while 19 percent see theirs as getting worse."

^b Chi Square significance levels for all tables are

* = $P < .05$

** = $P < .01$

*** = $P < .001$

ns = not significant

dependence. Finally, we explored the respondents' organizational memberships. Drawing on the arguments of Almond and Verba, we suspected that active membership in organizations should foster democratic values.³⁷

We are aware that these measures of democratic behavior are subject to question. Like many of the tools of behavioral political science, they were devised during a more "peaceful" era. It may well be that extremist ideology and mainstream party non-identification are less tenable evidences of decaying democracy than they once seemed to be. But that conclusion makes for a separate debate, beyond the scope of the present paper. We have chosen to apply the traditional yardsticks rather than attempt to resolve that debate.

Support for civil liberties, confidence in governmental institutions, and personal and political cynicism were measured by a number of different questions. Those concerning the first amendment rights of atheists, communists, and homosexuals were derived from Samuel Stouffer's work on political tolerance.³⁸ These questions deal theoretically with the fundamental democratic rules of the game and go directly to the heart of a democratic political system.

There is controversy over the accuracy of these questions as measures of support for civil liberties. Some researchers have argued that Stouffer's work is timebound, and that his indicators of tolerance are influenced by the feeling a respondent has toward the target-group. As such, they are better measures of policy preferences than abstract support for civil liberties.³⁹

Others contend that the Stouffer scale is still useful and that it relates well to other current measures of tolerance.⁴⁰ Our intent is not to compare the willingness to tolerate non-conformists over time

³⁷ Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) 265.

³⁸ Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 262-266.

³⁹ John L. Sullivan, James Pierson and George E. Marcus, "An Alternative Conceptualization of Political Tolerance," *American Political Science Review*, 73 (September 1979), 781-794.

⁴⁰ Clyde Z. Nunn, Harry J. Crockett, Jr. and J. Allen Williams, Jr., *Tolerance for Nonconformity* (San Francisco, Cal.: Jossey-Bass, 1978), 50; Michael Corbett, "Education and Contextual Tolerance," *American Politics Quarterly*, 8 (July 1980), 345-359. See also responses to the Sullivan article contained in the correspondence section, *American Political Science Review*, 74 (September 1980), 780-784.

as most of Stouffer's critics have done, but to use his questions to differentiate one group, losers, from another, non-losers. Thus, these indicators suit our purpose well. Three-item scales were created to measure the tolerance of atheists, communists, and homosexuals. Inter-item correlations within each of the three scales were consistently high ($\text{Gamma} > .82$). For each scale, the questions used were whether a non-conformist should be allowed to (1) teach in a college; (2) give a speech in the respondent's community; and (3) have a book he wrote in the public library.

Beliefs about the larger political system were examined in a number of ways. The respondents' attitudes toward particular government institutions were measured by their confidence in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. A scale composed of these three items was attempted, but inter-item correlations were weak ($\text{Gamma} > .47, < .70$), and the items were therefore kept separate.

Affect for the political system was explored through an alienation scale. Some scholars suggest that negative system affect threatens the stability of the political system.⁴¹ Thus, a government which purports to be sensitive to political demands but which is perceived as unresponsive to a large segment of the population might be subjected to severe attacks on its legitimacy. NORC's six alienation questions were treated as a simple additive scale because the inter-item correlations did not meet minimal Guttman criteria ($G > .47, < .74$). We reported this scale in our tables for the sake of simplicity, because the results for each item were similar to those for the entire scale when run against the dependent variable.

Political cynicism was operationalized through the most politically oriented of the General Social Survey's anomia items: "Most public officials are not really interested in the problems of the average man." Cynicism in interpersonal relations was measured by three questions on whether people are fair, helpful, and trustworthy. In addition, an interpersonal relations scale was derived from those three items to contrast optimists with pessimists. Again, the inter-item correlations were strong, though still short of the Guttman level, ($G > .60, < .70$). Both scale and separate item results are reported for this aspect of cynicism.

One of the problems in using these standard indicators of con-

⁴¹ See, e.g., Edward N. Muller, "Behavioral Correlates of Political Support," *American Political Science Review*, 71 (June 1977), 454.

confidence, alienation, and cynicism, is the confusion over whether the respondent is making a statement about his feelings toward the political system per se or a political statement about a particular incumbent administration.⁴² This is an important distinction because negative affect for an incumbent should not lead to within-system aggressive behavior, but negative affect toward the larger political system might.

Furthermore, the literature is even unclear as to the direct consequences of a decline in support for the political system. Perhaps it will lead to violence—perhaps not. We can assume, however, that the erosion of political values regarding the government is not healthy. And, more important, as Muller has argued, if such erosion is accompanied by an ideology which justifies political aggression, then political instability will surely follow.⁴³ This problem is endemic to all research employing survey indicators as proxies for presumed behavior, and we cannot settle the issue here.

Possible Period Effects

NORC's seven annual surveys since 1972 allowed trend analysis for self-perceived economic status during an economically unstable period. The first two surveys covered a period of some prosperity. Then came the 1973 energy crisis, and the 1974 and 1975 surveys were administered during a recession. The last three surveys, 1976-78, occurred during an economic upswing. We first examined the relationship between self-perceived financial status and the dependent variables to see if changing economic conditions had left any noticeable impact on our hypothesis. If the types of relationship between independent and dependent variables differed substantially among the three periods, we were prepared to analyze each time period separately.

Analysis through separate time-periods did not prove to be necessary. Although there was some "period effect," the relationships between variables were highly uniform across the three time periods.⁴⁴ In other words, support for democratic values dipped during the mid-70s, but the relationships between economic status perception and the dependent variables remained constant: there

⁴² Edward N. Muller and Thomas O. Jukam, "On the Meaning of Political Support," *American Political Science Review*, 71 (December 1977), 1561-1563.

⁴³ Muller, "Behavioral Correlates," 467.

⁴⁴ Table available from the authors.

was no secular trend toward an erosion of democratic attitudes and behavior from 1972-78 even though many commentators have indicated that conditions were worsening. Consequently, our analyses were based upon the combined 1972-78 sample of 10,652 respondents.

FINDINGS

Turning first to the question of political behavior, we found few indications that the losers in our sample were more likely to isolate themselves from the world of democratic politics than the non-losers. Those few tendencies toward isolation which did show up disappeared when controls for education, income, age and race were applied. The one exception to this overall finding was organizational membership. Even when controls for race, education and age were invoked, loser status led to more introverted behavior. Because this finding is contrary to the results in each of our other behavioral areas, one is tempted to dismiss it as an artifact of the data. Yet it is an intriguing finding, because a number of scholars have posited a direct relationship between organizational membership and the American style of democracy.⁴⁵ Should this relationship turn out to be an actual result of declining economic abundance, it could portend a change in the support structure of democracy which would pave the way for extremist political movements.⁴⁶ Overall, however, our findings seem to confirm those of political scientists who have discovered no visible relationship between severe economic hardship and atypical political actions.

For our attitudinal categories, however, the hypothesis was strongly confirmed. Alienation, anomia, and interpersonal relations showed moderately strong gammas and high significance levels (Table 2). Not quite as strong, but still in the predicted direction and statistically significant, were the findings for confidence in governmental leadership.

The three tolerance scales, taken from Stouffer, do not show that non-losers are more tolerant than losers, which could be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it could suggest that severe

⁴⁵ Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*.

⁴⁶ William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 230-231.

TABLE 2

SELF-PERCEIVED FINANCIAL SITUATION BY SELECTED ATTITUDES
RELATED TO DEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR
(PERCENTAGES)^a

	N ^b	SELF-PERCEIVED FINANCIAL STATUS		Gamma	Chi Square
		Non-losers	Losers		
Alienation					
less alienated	(428)	37	23		
somewhat alienated	(194)	16	15	.27	***
more alienated	(611)	47	62		
Anomia					
not anomic	(2074)	38	28		
anomic	(3708)	62	72	.23	***
Interpersonal Relations					
3 item scale: optimists	(2097)	60	42		
pessimists	(1592)	39	57	.34	***
People try to be fair	(4957)	68	58		
People take advantage of you	(2524)	32	42	.22	***
People try to be helpful	(4213)	58	49		
They look out for themselves	(3283)	42	51	.17	***
People can be trusted	(3518)	49	39		
You can't be too careful	(3991)	51	61	.19	***

Confidence in Government Leaders

Federal Branch:

great deal
only some
hardly any

(1636)
(4774)
(2284)

14
51
35

.21

Legislative Branch:

great deal
only some
hardly any

(1475)
(5337)
(1857)

15
59
27

.14

Judicial Branch:

great deal
only some
hardly any

(2980)
(4305)
(1332)

30
51
19

.12

Tolerance toward non-conformists

Toward Communists:

tolerant
intolerant

(2251)
(2120)

51
49

.02

ns

Toward homosexuals:

tolerant
intolerant

(2356)
(1575)

59
41

.02

ns

Toward atheists:

tolerant
intolerant

(2520)
(1860)

56
44

.03

ns

^a Statistical Note: The Column Percentages from SPSS crosstables are reported. Read down to 100 percent e.g., "Among the non-losers, 37 percent were less alienated, 16 percent somewhat alienated, and 47 percent more alienated, while among the losers. . . ."

^b Data were obtained by NORC for all seven years (1972-8. $N = 10652$) except for the following independent variables: alienation (1978 only, $N = 1532$); Anomia (1973, 4, 6, 7, $N = 6017$); Interpersonal relations (1972, 3, 5, 6, 8, $N = 7638$); Confidence in Government leaders (1973-78, $N = 9039$); Communists' and Atheists' Civil Liberties (1972-4, 6, 7, $N = 7630$); Homosexuals' Civil Liberties (1973, 4, 6, 7, $N = 6017$).

economic decline does not dispose one toward rejecting the rules of the democratic game. As such, this result would be in line with our behavioral findings discussed above. On the other hand, it may simply be a confirmation of the argument that Stouffer's measures are not accurate indicators of political tolerance. Because the results do not conform to the other attitudinal indicators, we are inclined to accept this interpretation.

The independent variable related more directly to attitudinal than to behavioral differences. This fact points to the importance of attitudes as mediators between the economic environment and people's political behavior.⁴⁷ Assuming that resource scarcity would be the main cause of any mass deterioration in financial status, then we would not predict that scarcity, in and of itself, would directly affect political activity. Attitude change would have to precede changes in behavior. The attitudinal changes, however, could be a function of events other than a decline in access to abundant resources.

It is possible that the relationships discussed above are merely artifacts of basic demographic differences, for as Table 1 indicates, self-perceived economic status relates closely to a respondent's location in the social structure. Accordingly we controlled for the four significant demographic conditions that emerged in Table 1. The resulting Tables, 3 through 6, show that these demographic differences mask few substantial relationships.

There was some tendency for the non-loser and loser groups to become less polarized as income and education increased. This was particularly true for education. Furthermore, while blacks as a group were substantially more alienated than whites, the differences between white non-losers and losers were generally greater than those between black non-losers and losers: the impact of the financial status variable seemed less significant for blacks than for whites—which may be because many blacks have lived in an environment of relative scarcity for most of their lives and may be more immune to immediate economic impacts.⁴⁸

Furthermore, age did not seem consistently to reduce the

⁴⁷ For confirmation of this point, see Lawrence Santi, "Turnout and Trust in Government, 1964-1972," (paper delivered at the Western Political Science Association, San Francisco, March 27-29, 1980), 17.

⁴⁸ See John M. Ostheimer and Leonard G. Ritt, "Environment, Energy, and Black Americans," *Sage Research Papers in the Social Sciences: Human Ecology Series*, 90-125 (1976).

TABLE 3

SELF-PERCEIVED FINANCIAL SITUATION BY ATTITUDES . . . ,
 CONTROLLING FOR RACE
 (PERCENTAGES)^a

	RACIAL CATEGORIES							
	WHITES			BLACKS				
	Non-losers	Losers	Gamma	Chi Sq.	Non-losers	Losers	Gamma	Chi Sq.
Alienated	46	60	.26	***	55	71	.35	ns
Anomic	61	71	.22	***	75	81	.16	ns
Pessimists in Interpersonal Relations	34	50	.33	***	84	89	.24	ns
People are unfair	29	37	.20	***	56	66	.21	**
Look out for yourself	40	48	.16	***	58	67	.19	*
Can't trust others	48	57	.19	***	79	82	.11	ns
Lacking confidence in Executive	23	35	.24	***	29	34	.05	ns
Legislative	20	27	.15	***	20	25	.07	ns
Judicial	15	20	.12	***	15	16	.12	ns

^a Statistical Note: For tables 3-6, Row percentages are reported only for the category of each dependent variable that was hypothesized to relate to *declining* financial status. E.g., in Table 3, among whites, 46 percent of non-losers were highly alienated compared to 60 percent of losers. Thus, strong "predicted" results are those showing differences on the dependent variables between losers and non-losers.

The Gamma measures of co-variance and Chi Square significance levels therefore refer to original SPSS tables only parts of which are reproduced here. Using the example above, the remainder of the original table showed 16 percent of the non-losers to be moderately alienated compared to 15 percent of the losers, and 38 percent of the non-losers to be less alienated compared to 25 percent of the losers.

TABLE 4
SELF-PERCEIVED FINANCIAL SITUATION BY ATTITUDES RELATED
TO DEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR, CONTROLLING FOR AGE

	AGE CATEGORIES											
	18-29 YEARS				30-54				55 and OLDER			
	Non-losers	Losers	Gamma	Chi Sq.	Non-losers	Losers	Gamma	Chi Sq.	Non-losers	Losers	Gamma	Chi Sq.
Alienated	52	71	.36	*	44	59	.26	*	45	59	.27	*
Anomic	61	69	.17	*	61	73	.25	***	64	73	.22	***
Skeptical	52	68	.33	***	33	55	.41	***	36	51	.29	***
People are unfair	40	49	.17	**	29	42	.29	***	28	37	.20	***
Lookout for yourself	50	57	.13	*	38	49	.23	***	40	48	.15	**
Can't trust others	57	67	.21	***	47	58	.23	***	52	60	.16	**
Lacking Confidence in Executive	26	37	.22	***	23	34	.23	***	24	34	.20	***
Legislative	19	28	.19	***	19	25	.12	**	22	28	.14	**
Judicial	11	16	.20	***	14	20	.12	***	19	21	.07	**

TABLE 6
SELF-PERCEIVED FINANCIAL SITUATION BY ATTITUDES RELATED TO DEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR,
CONTROLLING FOR EDUCATION

	EDUCATION CATEGORIES											
	LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL				HIGH SCHOOL				SOME COLLEGE			
	Non-losers	Losers	Gamma	Chi Sq.	Non-Losers	Losers	Gamma	Chi Sq.	Non-Losers	Losers	Gamma	Chi Sq.
Alienated	61	79	.42	**	48	53	.08	ns	24	51	.53	***
Anomic	72	79	.21	***	61	69	.17	***	47	59	.24	**
Skeptical	57	75	.39	***	36	48	.26	***	18	24	.20	ns
People are unfair	40	50	.22	***	30	39	.20	***	19	22	.12	ns
Lookout for yourself	50	59	.20	***	41	46	.11	**	30	34	.09	ns
Can't trust others	64	73	.21	***	48	55	.14	***	32	33	.03	ns
Lacking Confidence in Executive	26	35	.18	***	24	35	.23	***	21	33	.24	***
Lacking Confidence in Legislative	21	28	.16	***	20	25	.11	**	18	26	.23	**
Lacking Confidence in Judicial	18	23	.14	***	15	18	.06	ns	8	13	.18	*

polarities found between losers and non-losers. This trend may be a function of the fact that there are substantial pockets of poverty among the very young and the very old and that, as we have shown, the polarity is intense at the lower end of the socio-economic scale.

CONCLUSION

This study has dealt with a question of central concern to the American political process: will a decline in abundance have a corrosive effect on American democracy? We must reluctantly conclude that the answer is "yes." Our data provide support for the proposition that self-perceived financial decline is related to a weakening of the attitudes most supportive of democracy. There does not, however, seem to be the same relationship between loser status and political behavior. It may be, as we have suggested, that democratic attitudes play an intervening role between economic conditions and political behavior. Thus, the assertion that declining abundance will adversely affect democracy may need to be refined to include the mediating effects of attitudes.

The attitudes that support the American form of democracy are a delicate balance between competition and individualism on the one hand, and expectations of interpersonal relations based on trust and fairness on the other. It is notable that regardless of socio-economic status, losers tend to have less faith in their fellow man than do non-losers, for it is a central democratic axiom that interpersonal trust is an essential condition for the maintenance of such a system. Competition in an ever-expanding economic system can be seen as a healthy contribution to the general welfare. But as the economic pie ceases to grow and even shrinks, such behavior is more likely to engender tensions and hostilities which have the potential to erode the foundations of the political order. If the resource pressures that some scholars believe will inevitably constrain our material prosperity are real ones, one consequence will be a weakening in our collective commitment to democracy, and we can expect an ever increasing bitterness to infect American politics.