In the last two or three decades, global political changes have affected old and new democracies in different manners. All over the world, comparative research on democratization has showed that political distrust is a common variable affecting the whole of the State and the relationship between citizens and the democratic regime. Nevertheless, while political discontent in old democracies has stimulated citizens to adopt new political attitudes and modes of political participation, and sometimes to defend political reform, in many newly democratized countries citizens tend to withdraw from politics as a consequence of institutional distrust. In fact, in different new democracies, although the majority of the public adheres to the normative meaning of the democratic regime, distrust of democratic institutions is associated with citizens’ negative feelings about political efficacy, low levels of political interest and political participation, and even preference for democratic models which exclude political parties and/or parliaments. This monographic section evaluates then the meanings and consequences of the contemporary phenomenon of political discontent in different countries of the world and discusses its implications for the empirical theory of democracy.

Scholars have been engaged in the debate about the meanings of public attitudes towards governments and the political regime for a long time. One of the most common questions of this debate is related to the available indicators concerning trust and confidence in political institutions. Do they reflect a healthy reaction about the critical performance of politicians, political parties and governments or, quite on the contrary, do they signal a loss of citizens’ faith in the main institutions of representative democracy? As some students of the democratic process have pointed out recently, another important issue that remains analytically unclear is related to the distinction between support for democratic principles and support for practical results of the political process (Norris 2011). As the adherence to democratic values is a general characteristic of political regimes in a majority of cases at the present time, is it reasonable to expect that values and principles will gradually spread and generate trust and confidence in the democratic institutions? Or alternatively will the political distrust of politicians and governments and the lack of faith in the public institutions of the regime undermine and corrode not only public expectations, but also the legitimacy of the democratic regime?

Legitimacy and the legitimation process lie at the core of the possibilities mentioned above. And in fact, when the analytical models focus on those aspects of...
many contemporary democratic regimes, a discrepancy becomes evident: the delegitimation of old established, but specific kinds of democracies in some areas of the world coexists with the general legitimation of democracy in other areas, and this is mainly due to the failure of authoritarian models of political regime. This implies that the notion of legitimacy as a set of positive societal attitudes toward democratic institutions, inasmuch as they are considered to be the most appropriate form of government by a given society in a given time, should be maintained (Morlino 2010). The four contributions presented in this monographic section involve clear attempts to test this theoretical hypothesis, but their points of departure are interestingly quite different.

Moisés examines the phenomenon of political discontent in Brazil and other Latin American countries and tests both institutional and cultural hypotheses of the implications of distrust. The analysis is based on data from a national survey undertaken in Brazil in 2006 and a series of surveys undertaken by the Latinobarometro between 1995 and 2002; it takes into consideration different dimensions of the phenomenon in a comparative perspective. Surveys undertaken in Brazil in the last 17 years reveal that the negative perception of the democratic institutions crosses all sectors of the public independently of wealth, education and ecological distribution; this strongly influences citizens’ evaluation of representative institutions and may affect the quality of democracy. The text deals with methodological implications of the problem and presents an alternative model to treat the determinants of political distrust and of dissatisfaction with democracy; it describes and analyzes the impact of these phenomena for the adherence to democracy and whether those factors affect the democratic legitimacy.

Piquet Carneiro studies the emergence of neopopulism in several countries in Latin America. The picture has been described as the success of a political strategy in which a leader, generally bearing a strong personality and charismatic appeal, seeks popular support in an almost direct form, and overshadows political parties and the external mechanisms of control which define the democratic regime. This article proposes to analyze this strategy as a relation between supply and demand for populism. The supply refers to the political process by which leaders make use of features such as charisma and anti-political and polarizing speech to obtain the support of the public based on non-programmatic but their personal qualities. The demand is defined as the presence of political preferences within the public which increase the chance of success of the neopopulist strategy. The analysis shows that amidst that relationship fragile intermediate institutions are placed, mainly political parties, which limit themselves to working as vehicles centered on the figure of the leader in order to allow his success among voters. The impact for the functioning and the legitimation process of the new Latin American democracies is then asserted as a consequence of neopopulism.

Park turns to the nature and sources of political discontent in South Korea in his article. The analysis focuses on a national survey whose results indicate that ordinary people in the country can distinguish among regime principles, regime performance, and regime institutions, all of which, he argues, constitute separate targets of political discontent. The analysis indicates that the sources of political discontent vary depending on its targets. Political corruption is strongly related to the disbelief in democratic principles, to democratic dissatisfaction, and institutional distrust in South Korea – one of the most successful third-wave democracies in East Asia.
At the same time, popular perception of less free and fair elections seems to be related to more democratic dissatisfaction and institutional distrust. The results suggest that democracy in South Korea confronts not only critical citizens, but also disloyal citizens who are suspicious of the regime. But the author argues: the fact that institutional trust declined in the country, democratic satisfaction ceased to grow, the view of democracy as a universal value weakened while desire for democracy remained high – all this suggests that democracy in South Korea faces considerable difficulties to be accepted as legitimate.

Finally, in the fourth contribution Huang is concerned with the fact that political discontent has been a preeminent feature in Taiwanese politics since 2000. In his article, he discusses potential explanations which include economic downfall, the deterioration of the quality of democratic governance, and what he designates as electoral over-competition. The analysis shows that public perceptions about political accountability in Taiwan vary widely, and may result in a cognitive polarization toward the legitimacy of the democratic regime. While popular discontent with various political agencies might convey different meanings, the author argues that the synthetic outcome is partisan-laden perception of political accountability, and that it might lead to serious political gridlock and ingrained partisan rivalry that could jeopardize Taiwan’s emerging democracy. More importantly, he maintains that polarized politics in Taiwan under recent administrations illustrate how the process of democratic consolidation can be possibly reversed in an emerging democracy.

The four contributions offer a new and persuasive analysis of the phenomenon of political discontent in different areas of the world and discuss its implications for both the legitimacy and the quality of democracy.

References