

To cite text:

Nikišins, Jurijs. 2025. "The Quest for Democratic Bliss: Which Dimensions Hold the Key?" *Philosophy and Society* 36 (2): 337–356.

Jurijs Nikišins

THE QUEST FOR DEMOCRATIC BLISS: WHICH DIMENSIONS HOLD THE KEY?¹

ABSTRACT

The majority of Europeans value living in a country governed by democratic principles. It is argued that the evaluation of democracy and satisfaction with it are pivotal for ensuring its functioning and sustainability. When asked about the importance of specific indicators of democracy, such as free and fair elections, equality before the courts, and freedom of the press, most respondents assign a high and comparable level of importance to each. However, the overall significance of democracy and its dimensions does not necessarily reflect the perceived quality of democracy within a given nation. To explore the determinants of satisfaction with the state of democracy while accounting for cross-national variation, a multilevel regression analysis is conducted, examining the impact of various factors on four dimensions of democratic evaluation — electoral, liberal, social, and direct — using comparative data from the ESS Round 10 Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy module. The results reveal significant disparities across dimensions of democracy, with Nordic countries leading and some Western Balkan and Eastern European countries lagging. They also underscore complex relationships between political efficacy and evaluations of democracy, showing a positive association with external efficacy, particularly in countries with higher political rights, and a negative association with internal efficacy, which diminishes in contexts of greater civil liberties.

KEYWORDS

democracy, elections, courts, free press, European Social Survey

¹ The first draft of this article was presented at the Elections – Democracy – Crisis (EDC) Conference held on February 29 – March 1, 2024, in Warsaw, Poland, and organized by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (University of Belgrade) and the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies (University of Warsaw). The author extends special thanks to the conference organisers, participants, and two anonymous reviewers for valuable suggestions and comments.

This study has been conducted within the academic project *Innovative and inclusive management for the promotion of public involvement, trust, and communication*, the State Research Programme of the Republic of Latvia (VPP-LETONIKA-2021/3-0004).

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Introduction

Democracy, derived from the Greek words *demos* (i.e. people) and *kratos* (power), is commonly understood as a political system based on the principle of rule by the people. The concept has been celebrated, reconsidered, and evolved over centuries, but its core remains the same. Indeed, as noted by Parry et al. (1992:3), “government by the people’ is the fundamental definition of democracy, and one which implies participation by the people” in deciding on key decisions on how to run a polity and who to elect as its leaders. At the same time, democracy is not a monolith. It embraces an array of dimensions and meanings that have been interpreted and implemented in numerous ways across cultures, nations, and historical periods.

The importance of democracy extends beyond the mere mechanics of voting and governance. It reflects the collective aspirations of people for self-determination, dignity, and freedom. Democracies have been linked with a myriad of positive outcomes, including better protection of human rights (De Mesquita et al. 2005), more effective governance (Gisselquist 2012; however, see also Ishiyama 2019 for a more critical assessment) and higher levels of human development (Gerring et al. 2012; Liotti et al. 2018). Yet, the mere establishment of democratic institutions does not guarantee these outcomes. Their functionality and perceived legitimacy are important as well (Thomassen, 2007).

Studying the understandings and evaluations of democracy is crucial for several reasons. It allows for the evaluation of how core democratic principles are translated into practice – e.g. whether the public believes that elections are free and fair, or whether people are equal before the law. On the other hand, assessing public (dis)satisfaction with democracy and its various dimensions offers insights into potential disconnects between citizens’ expectations and political realities. This is critical for keeping democracy in good health, as dissatisfaction with it may lead to apathy (Mavee 2015), clientelism (Gherghina, 2022) or, conversely, to radicalisation and polarisation of society (Alenda, 2023).

The dimensions of democracy are multifaceted, and scholars propose various sets of democratic dimensions, often used as criteria for assessing whether and to what extent a certain polity may be described as democratic (e.g. Dahl, 1956; Diamond, 1999; Morlino, 2009; Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016). Typical examples include citizen participation in politics, free and fair elections, freedom of expression, and equality before the law. Some sets are more ‘minimalist’, i.e. more or mainly concerned with how elections are organised (Schumpeter, 1947; Lipset, 1963); others underscore the importance of civil liberties (Diamond, 1999); and the more recent and elaborate sets include features such as social justice and economic equality (Morlino, 2009), and direct democracy through referendums (Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016). It can be argued that each dimension serves as a pillar that upholds the structure of democratic governance, ensuring that the power derived from the people is exercised in a manner that

is fair, just, and accountable. The essence of democracy is not solely in the existence of these dimensions but in their effective functioning and the harmony between them (cf. Dahl, 1956).

This article adopts the theoretical framework proposed by researchers Mónica Ferrín and Hanspeter Kriesi (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016), which was first empirically tested in Round 6 of the European Social Survey in 2012. It presents a series of criteria that are categorised into four main aspects of democracy: electoral, liberal, social, and direct. The electoral dimension highlights the principles of freedom, fairness, and competitiveness in elections. The liberal dimension centres around an impartial judiciary, freedom of the press, and safeguarding minority rights. The social dimension encompasses ideas of social justice and economic equality. Lastly, the direct democracy dimension prioritises referendums and the supremacy of the popular will. The article's Data, methods, and variables section provides a comprehensive discussion of the questionnaire items related to each dimension.

The approach to measuring the understandings and evaluations of democracy developed and tested within the ESS framework has been acknowledged and followed by a number of studies. For example, Hernández (2019) investigated how well ordinary citizens can form structured opinions about democracy. His study adapts Converse's (1964) concept of political belief systems to analyse individuals' democracy belief systems (DBS) and finds that most Europeans have coherently structured attitudes about democracy. Hernández identifies three components of DBS—cognitive availability, horizontal constraint, and vertical constraint—and shows that these components are generally well-articulated among Europeans, despite some individual and country-level variations. The results challenge the view that mass publics lack political sophistication, revealing that citizens' belief systems about democracy are more organized than previously assumed.

Quaranta (2016) explored what citizens consider democracy to be and the factors influencing this understanding. He finds that citizens' views on democracy range along a continuum, with middle-aged, educated men interested in politics, holding extreme ideological positions, and engaged in civic organizations perceiving democracy in more comprehensive terms. Cross-country variation in these views is largely explained by the democratic performance of the respective countries. It was found that citizens with broader conceptions of democracy may push for deeper democratization, indicating that understanding the public's nuanced views on democracy is essential for assessing and promoting democratic quality.

In another study, Quaranta (2018) aimed to understand how citizens evaluate democracy by utilizing multiple indicators from the European Social Survey's special module. Applying Bayesian factor analysis with country random effects, the study identified a unidimensional underlying trait termed 'evaluation of democracy', with some attributes carrying more weight than others. Results showed significant variation in democracy evaluations across countries, with Nordic countries and Switzerland generally showing the highest evaluations,

while Ukraine and Kosovo had the lowest. However, these evaluations also came with some uncertainty, which was used to estimate the probabilities of countries having higher or lower levels than others.

Heyne (2018) explored the meaning of dissatisfaction with democracy by analysing the gap between citizens' democratic expectations and their evaluations of democratic reality. The study found that satisfaction with democracy is influenced by both the size and direction of this expectation-evaluation gap. Specifically, a lack of realization of liberal democratic criteria is the strongest predictor of dissatisfaction, while opinions on direct participation and social justice are more varied and contentious, contributing to dissatisfaction among those who desire more or less of these aspects.

Pickel et al. (2016) examined whether the quality of democracy can be better measured by incorporating individual-level survey data alongside macro-level indices. Using data from the European Social Survey and the Democracy Barometer, they found that while macro-level indices and individual evaluations align in some respects, they differ significantly in others. Citizens often emphasize aspects like social equality and welfare as integral to democratic quality, which are less considered in macro-level indices. The study concludes that integrating individual perspectives with macro-level measures enhances the validity of democratic quality assessments and offers valuable insights into improving democracy from a "bottom-up" approach.

Seyd (2023) studied the factors shaping democratic legitimacy by separating democratic expectations and evaluations using data from the European Social Survey (2012-13). The study found that individuals' socio-economic positions, perceived discrimination, ideological extremism, policy performance judgments, and political trust influence legitimacy differently across various dimensions of democracy. His key findings indicate that economic status influences legitimacy in democracy, with high-income individuals having higher expectations, particularly regarding the social dimension. Perceived discrimination, ideological extremism, and low political trust decrease legitimacy across various dimensions, while higher education correlates with heightened expectations, affecting legitimacy on the electoral and liberal dimensions. Additionally, liberal values and left-wing ideologies reduce legitimacy across multiple dimensions, while older cohorts exhibit lower legitimacy due to higher expectations and poorer performance evaluations, particularly regarding the social and electoral dimensions.

Donovan and Karp (2017) investigated the impact of electoral system features on citizens' evaluations of democracy. They found that multipartyism, proportionality, and preferential ballot structures were initially associated with positive evaluations of elections and parties, leading to greater satisfaction with democracy. However, these positive effects diminished when corruption and income inequality were considered. Their findings highlight the substantial limits of electoral reforms in enhancing democratic legitimacy and caution against overestimating the effects of electoral rules without accounting for broader social issues.

Kriesi (2017) studied whether European democracy was in turmoil in light of the euro crisis. The study finds that poor economic and governmental performance during the crisis leads to more critical evaluations of national democracy, particularly in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, as well as in authoritarian countries. However, this critical stance does not diminish citizens' support for democratic principles; instead, dissatisfaction with economic and political performance actually reinforces their commitment to democratic ideals.

Christmann (2018) focused on the relationships between economic performance, democratic quality, and satisfaction with democracy (SWD) using a dataset of 57 democracies from 1990 to 2014 and survey data from the European Social Survey. Both economic and democratic performance were found to significantly influence SWD, with economic performance explaining short-term fluctuations and democratic quality explaining persistent differences between countries. The findings suggest that improving both economic conditions and democratic quality can enhance citizens' satisfaction with democracy, although further research is needed to disentangle the specific aspects of democratic quality that most impact SWD.

Analysing data from multiple countries implies aggregation and comparison, as well as considering the features capturing the more general, country-level context of democratic conditions. Hence the need for robust measures that have been acknowledged for their utility and relevance. Therefore, Freedom House (2024) scores of political rights and civil liberties for each country should be considered as country-level variables to account for differences in the quality of democracy. Freedom House scores of political rights and civil liberties have been widely used in political science and sociology, particularly in the study of democracy. For example, Inglehart (2003) uses them in his assessment of the relationship between education, fertility, and democratization, finding widespread support for democracy among Islamic publics. Welzel and Inglehart (2008) introduce them into their analysis of the role of self-expression values and human empowerment in the emergence and survival of democracy. Weinberg et al. (2008) and Lampinen (2008) refer to them while examining the relationship between terrorism and changes in civil liberties and political rights. Freedom House scores are also used by Heckelman (2010) in the analysis of democratic characteristics in former Soviet Republics, and by Diamond (2008) evaluating democratization in Africa. Also, Sherrill (2006) discusses theoretical definitions of democracy, emphasizing Freedom House's detailed assessment approach.

Although a comprehensive examination of citizens' evaluations of democracy has been conducted, several factors remain understudied, providing valuable opportunities for additional research. Internal and external political efficacy, operationalised as the belief that individual actions can affect the political process, and that the political system is responsive to these actions, has not been thoroughly investigated in the context of democratic evaluations. Understanding the impact of political efficacy on citizens' perceptions

of democracy could reveal whether feeling empowered or disempowered is associated with higher or lower satisfaction with the performance of democratic institutions.

Moreover, investigating how satisfaction with healthcare and educational services informs democratic evaluations is a particularly promising line of inquiry, as these sectors constitute citizens' routine, lived encounters with state performance in domains fundamental to human well-being. In light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the societal controversies it exacerbated, the impact of conspiracy theories and beliefs on democratic evaluations presents a novel research frontier. Investigating the influence of conspiracy beliefs on democratic evaluation can offer valuable insights into the resilience of democracies in the face of such challenges. Given the increasing prevalence of misinformation and its potential to undermine trust in democratic institutions, this area of study is particularly relevant.

The arguments presented above lead us to the following **research questions**:

1. How do Europeans evaluate different aspects of democracy? Specifically, which aspects of democracies exhibit the highest and lowest levels, as well as the most and least variation across countries?
2. What is the impact of subjective political efficacy, satisfaction with health services and education, and belief in conspiracy theories on various dimensions of evaluation of democracy?
3. How is the impact of external and internal political efficacy on evaluation of democracy moderated by the levels of political rights?

These questions can be expanded and specified through the following **hypotheses**:

H1 External political efficacy (i.e. belief in responsiveness of the political sphere and institutions) is positively related to satisfaction with all four dimensions of democracy.

H2 Internal political efficacy (i.e. the belief one's capable of political activism) is positively related to satisfaction with all four dimensions of democracy.

H3 Satisfaction with the state of health services is positively related to satisfaction with social democracy.

H4 Satisfaction with the state of education is positively related to satisfaction with social democracy.

H5 Agreement with conspiracy beliefs is positively related to dissatisfaction with all four dimensions of democracy.

H6 Higher levels of political rights will intensify the impact of external political efficacy on evaluations of democracy.

H7 Higher levels of civil liberties will intensify the impact of internal political efficacy on evaluations of democracy.

Data, method, and variables

To investigate the research questions, I employ data from the European Social Survey Round 10, which covers the years 2020 to 2022, depending on the data collection period in each country participating in the ESS (ESS, 2020). To date, this is the latest ESS dataset focusing on indicators of perceptions and assessments of democracy in Europe. The dataset consists of responses from 31 countries, with a total of 58,810 individuals who were selected using nationwide representative sampling methods. The data were collected through in-person interviews conducted at the respondents' place of residence. Self-completion fieldwork was allowed in nine countries because of the recurring Covid-19 pandemic outbreaks. The extensive amount of data from different countries may warrant the use of a multilevel approach for their analysis; to check this empirically, the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) and design effect (DEFF) values are estimated for each of the four null models (electoral, liberal, social, and direct democracy) before adding any explanatory variables to the regressions. The common threshold for ICC is 0.05, meaning that any values above this level warrant the use of a multilevel model (cf. Sommet and Morselli, 2021: 11). However, as suggested by Sommet and Morselli (2021: 11–12), the design effect, or DEFF, as a more accurate measure than the ICC alone. The DEFF metric takes into account both the average cluster size (n , calculated here as the total N divided by the number of countries) and the within-cluster homogeneity (ICC) to measure the extent to which a multilevel sample deviates from a simple random sample. DEFF ranges from 1, indicating no difference, to n , representing maximum difference. As seen from Table 1, both measures together advise strongly for the use of a multilevel model due to substantial variation across countries.

Table 1. ICC and DEFF values for the null models

Dimension	ICC	Std. error	95% CI		N	DEFF
			Low	High		
Electoral	0.201	0.04	0.134	0.292	55,314	359.448
Liberal	0.185	0.03	0.133	0.252	56,021	335.134
Social	0.120	0.029	0.074	0.188	57,242	222.462
Direct	0.142	0.035	0.087	0.225	55,017	252.871

Source: European Social Survey Round 10 data, author's calculations.

Outcome variables

Evaluations of democracy were operationalised with eleven statements requesting the respondents to assess how much each of them applies to their country on a 0 – 10 scale (0 – does not apply at all; 10 – applies completely). The statements were as follows, listed in the order mentioned in the ESS Round 10 questionnaire:

1. *National elections in [Country] are free and fair*
2. *Different political parties in [Country] offer clear alternatives to one another*
3. *The media in [Country] are free to criticise the government*
4. *The rights of minority groups in [Country] are protected*
5. *Citizens in [Country] have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums*
6. *The courts in [Country] treat everyone the same*
7. *Governing parties in [Country] are punished in elections when they have done a bad job*
8. *The government in [Country] protects all citizens against poverty*
9. *The government in [Country] takes measures to reduce differences in income levels*
10. *In [Country] the views of ordinary people prevail over the views of the political elite*
11. *In [Country] the will of the people cannot be stopped*

The higher the score of each variable, the more positively democracy's relevant aspect is evaluated. Therefore, the items discussed above can be regarded as proxy variables for measuring satisfaction with the relevant aspect of democracy. Following Ferrín and Kriesi (2016), questions 1, 2, and 7 fit neatly into the electoral dimension of democracy. Not only the elections should be free and fair, but also the selection of competing parties or candidates should enable voters to identify clear alternatives between their programmes and promises. The fairness of elections also implies that losers must leave the office if voted out by the people. Items 3, 4 and 6 embody the equality of everyone before the law and that no one can be arbitrarily and unjustly persecuted or deprived of their rights by authorities and politicians. The socioeconomic dimension of democracy is presented by items 8 and 9 on this list. Finally, items 5, 10, and 11 reiterate the general conception of democracy as 'power by the people', emphasizing the importance of referendums and the unacceptability of overriding plebiscitary decisions by political bodies such as the parliament or the executive. Scales for each of the four dimensions of democracy are constructed as average scores obtained from the respective items, and their internal consistency was checked by calculating the Cronbach alpha (0.72 for electoral; 0.69 for liberal; 0.87 for social; and 0.80 for direct as calculated from the ESS Round 10 data). All four scales exhibit alpha measures that are close to or surpass the minimal threshold of 0.70, indicating that they demonstrate an adequate level of internal consistency.

Factor variables

Hypotheses 1 – 7 necessitate the introduction of explanatory variables which are expected to affect the evaluations of democracy and its dimensions. The definition of political efficacy as feeling that individual action can have an impact

on the political process is borrowed from the seminal work of Campbell et al. (1954). According to Seligson (1980), political efficacy can be split into external and internal aspects. External political efficacy refers to the political system's responsiveness to citizen political participation. It can thus be operationalized by a summated index created from ESS Round 10 questionnaire items: *How much would you say the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?* and *How much would you say that the political system in [country] allows people like you to have an influence on politics?* Both indicators are measured on a five-rank scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal). The Cronbach alpha measure for the external political efficacy index is 0.80, indicating good internal consistency. Similarly, internal political efficacy represents the citizen's self-assessment of his/her ability to influence political decisions and can be empirically represented by another two items: *How able do you think you are to take an active role in a group involved with political issues?* and *How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?* Likewise, the response options for these items range from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely). The Cronbach alpha measure for the internal political efficacy index is 0.81, indicating good internal consistency.

Evaluation of health services and education is measured by two single indicators for each attitude, namely: *What do you think overall about the state of health services in [country] nowadays?* and *What do you think overall about the state of education in [country] nowadays?* The response scale is interval, ranging from 0 (extremely bad) to 10 (extremely good).

The Covid-19 outbreak has sparked conspiracy theories surrounding the origin of the virus and the hidden motives of those believed to be responsible for initiating the pandemic. In accordance with Mari et al. (2022: 279), conspiracy theories are characterised as the tendency to ascribe notable political and societal events to a clandestine and powerful group's malevolent plot, aimed at accomplishing a particular objective by intentionally deceiving the general public. This belief can be assessed using three statements from the ESS questionnaire, which are rated on a five-point scale (1 – strongly agree, 5 – strongly disagree; lower numbers indicate a stronger belief in a conspiracy). The statements are: *A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics*; *Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public*; and *Coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of some government or organization*. For data reduction purposes, these items are pooled into an aggregated index rather than used as separate explanatory variables. The Cronbach alpha measure for the derived conspiracy index is 0.79, as calculated from the ESS R10 data.

Hypotheses 6 and 7 incorporate country-level measures, positing that political rights, as operationalized and measured by Freedom House, would moderate the impact of external political efficacy on evaluations of democracy, and that civil liberties would enhance a similar effect of internal political efficacy. Therefore, these country-level variables are included in the analysis both as separate factors and as cross-level interaction terms with the respective type of political efficacy.

Control variables

The impact of factor variables should be controlled for measures that have been extensively studied in previous research, including measures of trust (social and political) as well as key demographic variables. In plain terms, social trust can be defined as “the belief that others will not deliberately or knowingly do us harm, if they can avoid it, and will look after our interests, if this is possible” (Newton, 2007: 343). Social trust is operationalized as an index of three ESS items: *Would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?* *Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?* and *Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?* The internal consistency for the social trust items, measured by Cronbach's alpha, is 0.80 as calculated from the ESS Round 10 data. Another important measure to include is the political trust, defined by Citrin and Muste (1999: 465) as “confidence that authorities will observe the rules of the game and serve the general interest.” Following the established practice (cf. Reher 2020; Vilhelmsdóttir 2020), the political trust index is formed from the ESS questionnaire items measuring trust in the country's parliament, politicians, and political parties. The original trust items are measured on an 11-point scale from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust). The Cronbach alpha measure for the derived index of political trust is 0.91. Finally, respondents' gender, age, education, and the subjective perception of their household income are added as control variables.

Findings

Descriptive indicators

One can see considerable variations among countries in scores for all four democratic dimensions (Table 2). The electoral aspect features the largest range, from almost 8 in Finland to 3.5 in Bulgaria (difference² equal to 4.47 and a cross-country standard deviation³ 1.03). The second largest contrast is observable in the direct democracy dimension, from 6.5 in Switzerland to 2.29 in Bulgaria (diff. = 4.01, ccstd = 0.93), followed by social democracy with Finland (6.5) on top and Bulgaria (2.29) at the bottom (diff. = 4.21, ccstd = 0.93) and liberal democracy with Norway (6.3) as champion and Poland (4.38) at the lowest point (diff. = 3.6, ccstd = 0.93). Two Nordic countries, Finland and Norway, occupy the top in most dimensions, and it is by no means surprising that Switzerland, renowned for its tradition of referendums, ranks highest in direct democracy. This descriptive review serves as a supplementary justification for selecting a clustered, multilevel model due to the significant variation in the values of outcome variables across different countries.

2 Diff. for short.

3 Ccstd for short.

Table 2. Dimensions of Democracy: Countries' Mean Rankings

Country	Electoral	Liberal	Social	Direct
Austria	6.69	6.84	5.03	4.23
Belgium	6.03	6.41	4.9	4.09
Bulgaria	3.5	4.41	2.29	2.29
Croatia	4.64	5.18	2.97	3.51
Cyprus	4.72	5.14	3.13	3.27
Czechia	5.89	6.67	5.04	5.22
Estonia	5.87	6.41	4.2	4.34
Finland	7.97	7.83	6.3	5.94
France	5.77	5.57	4.34	3.72
Germany	6.54	7.05	4.63	3.92
Greece	6.15	5.65	3.86	3.85
Hungary	5.24	5.52	4.14	4.68
Iceland	6.45	6.76	4.28	4.67
Ireland	6.52	6.59	5.16	6.07
Israel	5.21	5.42	3.64	3.93
Italy	4.68	4.99	4.23	3.83
Latvia	4.8	5.48	3.43	4
Lithuania	5.5	5.73	4.23	4.18
Montenegro	4.58	5.05	4.21	4.49
Netherlands	6.77	7.26	5.12	4.75
North Macedonia	5.17	5.23	3.14	3.76
Norway	7.73	7.98	6.04	6.27
Poland	5	4.38	4.37	3.32
Portugal	5.73	5.1	3.48	4.01
Serbia	4.22	4.97	3.8	4.17
Slovakia	6.08	5.5	3.62	4.34
Slovenia	5.8	5.72	3.9	4.59
Spain	6.09	5.24	4.19	3.75
Sweden	6.93	7.16	5.33	5.19
Switzerland	7.32	7.35	6.03	6.5
United Kingdom	6.61	6.82	4.69	5.29
N	55314	56021	57242	55017

Entries are mean rankings for dimensions of democracy, calculated as averages from the respective ESS Round 10 questionnaire items.

Data are weighted according to the *Guide to Using Weights and Sample Design Indicators with ESS Data* (Kaminska, 2020).⁴

4 https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/ESS_weighting_data_1_1.pdf

Also, there is a considerable variation among countries in their levels of political rights and civil liberties. Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands occupy the top positions in both ratings, while Western Balkan nations like Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia show the lowest scores. For the sake of analysis, the FH scores were grand-mean centered before plugging them into regressions.

Table 3. Freedom House scores for political rights and civil liberties (2020)

	FH Political Rights score (2020)	FH Civil Liberties score (2020)
Austria	37	56
Belgium	39	57
Bulgaria	34	46
Croatia	36	49
Cyprus	38	56
Czech Republic	36	55
Estonia	38	56
Finland	40	60
France	38	52
Germany	39	55
Greece	37	51
Hungary	27	43
Iceland	37	57
Ireland	39	58
Israel	33	43
Italy	36	53
Latvia	37	52
Lithuania	38	53
Montenegro	22	40
Netherlands	40	59
North Macedonia	24	39
Norway	40	60
Poland	35	49
Portugal	39	57
Serbia	23	43
Slovakia	36	52
Slovenia	39	55
Spain	38	54
Sweden	40	60
Switzerland	39	57
United Kingdom	39	55

Multilevel regression results

Table 4 presents the results of the multilevel random-intercept model with evaluation of various dimensions of democracy namely electoral, liberal, social, and direct. They include cross-level interactions between the measures of political efficacy and the Freedom House scores for political rights and civil liberties. Demographic variables, as well as social and political trust, are controlled as well.

Table 4. Multilevel regression results for electoral, liberal, social, and direct democracy

Factor	Electoral	Liberal	Social	Direct
Gender: female	-0.127*	-0.268*	-0.112*	0.012
Age	0.019*	0.020*	0.006	-0.006
Age squared	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Higher education: yes	-0.199*	-0.087*	-0.244*	-0.456*
Household income: very difficult	reference category			
Household income: difficult	0.119*	0.097	0.333*	0.075
Household income: coping	0.160*	0.149	0.514*	0.019
Household income: comfortably	0.243*	0.284*	0.608*	-0.033
Social trust index	0.016	0.024*	-0.014	-0.021
Political trust index	0.274*	0.231*	0.299*	0.282*
Satisfaction: health services	0.083*	0.095*	0.104*	0.080*
Satisfaction: education	0.102*	0.107*	0.131*	0.121*
Conspiracy beliefs index	-0.200*	-0.216*	0.044	0.009
External political efficacy (EPE)	0.265*	0.259*	0.392*	0.520*
Internal political efficacy (IPE)	-0.096*	-0.069*	-0.103*	-0.190*
FH Political Rights index (FHPR)	-0.074	-0.118*	-0.145*	-0.172*
FH Civil Liberties index (FHCL)	0.181*	0.204*	0.207*	0.216*
EPE*FHPR interaction	-0.037*	-0.026*	-0.034*	-0.034*
IPE*FHCL interaction	0.014*	0.020*	-0.005	-0.007
Constant	5.824*	6.005*	3.941*	4.483*
Variance (constant)	0.505	0.441	0.385	0.528
Variance (residual)	2.976	3.158	4.929	3.924
ICC, full model	0.145	0.123	0.072	0.119
ICC, null model	0.201	0.185	0.120	0.142
N	44195	44484	45022	44010

Entries are multilevel linear regression coefficients (statistically significant at 0.05 level are marked with an asterisk *.)

Data source: European Social Survey, Round 10.

The most optimal way to discuss the results is to organize them according to the hypotheses set forth in the Introduction section. Hypothesis H1 is

confirmed, as external political efficacy (EPE), measuring the belief in the responsiveness of political institutions, positively correlates with evaluations of democracy across all four dimensions. In contrast, Hypothesis H2 should be rejected, as internal political efficacy (IPE), representing the belief in one's capability for political participation, shows a negative association with evaluations of all four democratic aspects. This negative relationship suggests that feeling personally effective in political activities does not necessarily enhance overall satisfaction with democratic processes. Those who feel more politically competent may be more critical of the current state of democratic institutions, suggesting that higher levels of internal political efficacy might lead individuals to scrutinize and challenge the existing democratic structures more rigorously, therefore resulting in lower overall satisfaction with democracy.

Hypotheses H3 and H4 are confirmed, with satisfaction in health services and education positively affecting satisfaction with social democracy, highlighting the importance of public service satisfaction in democratic contentment. Moreover, the findings reveal that these two factors are also positively related to the other three dimensions of democracy—electoral, liberal, and direct. This underscores the broader impact of public service quality on overall democratic satisfaction.

Hypothesis H5 is partially confirmed, revealing mixed insights into the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and democratic satisfaction. Adherence to conspiracy theories is shown to be inversely related to satisfaction levels in electoral and liberal democracy dimensions. This implies that individuals who endorse conspiracy beliefs might harbor greater discontent with the functioning of electoral processes and liberal democratic principles. At the same time, the model does not unveil any significant relationship between conspiracy beliefs and satisfaction with social and direct democracy. This absence of correlation suggests that while conspiracy beliefs might impact certain facets of democratic evaluation, their influence may not extend uniformly across all dimensions of democratic governance.

Hypothesis H6 is rebutted by the findings through the revelation of a negative interaction between external political efficacy (EPE) and the Freedom House Political Rights index (FHPR). This outcome unveils a counterintuitive outcome wherein higher levels of political rights seem to diminish the positive influence of EPE on democratic evaluation. In other words, as the country-level state of political rights improves, the expectations and discernment of citizens tend to ascend, leading to a more critical appraisal of democratic processes. Finally, Hypothesis H7 receives partial affirmation, as evidenced by the positive interaction between internal political efficacy (IPE) and the Freedom House Civil Liberties index (FHCL), particularly in the realms of electoral and liberal democracy. This outcome suggests that heightened civil liberties amplify the constructive impact of IPE on the evaluation of these democratic dimensions, emphasizing the empowering effect of individual efficacy within contexts characterized by greater civil liberties. At the same time, this interaction fails to attain significance concerning social and direct democracy dimensions.

Conclusion

The exploration of democratic evaluation within this study contributes to an ongoing discourse on democracy, which has evolved over time. It also adds to the recognition that democracy is not a uniform concept but rather a multifaceted phenomenon, with interpretations varying across different contexts and periods. Scholars ranging from Dahl to Ferrín and Kriesi have proposed and delineated various dimensions of democracy. This culminated in the development of a set of European Social Survey (ESS) items capturing four main aspects of democracy, which demonstrate robust internal consistency and have been widely utilized in prior research. Studies within the European Social Survey framework, such as those by Hernández (2019), Quaranta (2016, 2018), and Heyne (2018), have also contributed to understanding citizens' beliefs and evaluations of democracy. These studies reveal the nuanced nature of democratic attitudes, challenging assumptions about public political sophistication while highlighting the influence of societal contexts on perceptions and evaluations of democracy. Furthermore, research by Pickel et al. (2016) and Christmann (2018) emphasizes the importance of integrating individual perspectives with macro-level measures to enhance the validity of democratic quality assessments. Following previous studies conducted by renowned academics like Inglehart (2003), Welzel and Inglehart (2008), and Diamond (2008), I integrated the Freedom House scores as country-level variables in my analysis as they provide informative insights into the broader context of democratic conditions by complementing individual-level survey data.

The findings of this study offer an examination of the varied landscape of democratic evaluation across different countries, contributing to our understanding of the complex nature of democracy and its diverse dimensions. Through the lens of Ferrín and Kriesi's framework, the study uncovers significant variations in the levels of democratic satisfaction, with Nordic countries emerging as frontrunners across multiple dimensions, while others, notably some countries in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, lag behind. One notable observation is the substantial variation in scores for all four dimensions of democracy, with the electoral aspect exhibiting the widest range. This variability reminds us of the complexity of democratic governance and reaffirms the need for detailed assessments that go beyond mere binary categorizations of states as democracies or non-democracies. Also, the observed disparities in levels of political rights and civil liberties among countries justify the inclusion of contextual factors in shaping democratic experiences and perceptions.

The study's findings also provide empirical support for several hypotheses offered in the introduction. For instance, the confirmation of Hypothesis 1, which posits a positive association between external political efficacy and democratic evaluation, echoes with previous research highlighting the role of citizen trust and confidence in political institutions. Conversely, the rejection of Hypothesis 2 challenges conventional assumptions regarding the relationship between internal political efficacy and democratic satisfaction, suggesting

a more complex understanding of the factors influencing individual evaluations of democracy. However, the study also uncovers mixed insights regarding the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and democratic satisfaction, highlighting the need for further exploration of this phenomenon.

The findings highlight the dynamic relationship between external and internal political efficacy and satisfaction with democracy. I observe a positive association between external political efficacy and evaluations across various forms of democracy. However, this relationship is more pronounced in nations with higher levels of political rights. One possible explanation is that as political rights expand, citizens tend to become more discerning and critical, which may affect their satisfaction levels. Conversely, internal political efficacy shows a negative association with democratic evaluations, suggesting that individuals with a strong sense of efficacy may initially hold more critical views. This trend diminishes or even reverses in countries with greater civil liberties, implying that expanded civil liberties may foster confidence in citizens' ability to influence political processes, thus enhancing satisfaction with democracy. These findings suggest the need for further investigation into the connections between political efficacy, civil liberties, and democratic satisfaction, providing valuable venues for future research.

Every study has its limitations; hence numerous avenues remain to be explored by future research on democratic attitudes. For instance, it could examine the longitudinal dynamics of political efficacy and democratic satisfaction, investigating how these attitudes evolve over time in response to changes in political rights and civil liberties, by using ESS data from Rounds 6 and 10 or other robust datasets with relevant measures of the variables of interest. Furthermore, forthcoming studies could focus more on the relationship between political efficacy and other dimensions of democratic health, such as trust in government institutions and political participation, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to a robust and resilient democratic system. Another limitation of this study is the assumption of a uniform relationship between internal political efficacy and satisfaction with democracy across countries. Future research could address this by employing a random-coefficient model to allow the effect of IPE to vary by country, capturing potential contextual differences such as political culture or historical experiences. Venturing into the realm of political values, one could explore the intersection between values such as tolerance, diversity, and inclusivity, as well as their interplay with political efficacy and the impact on democratic satisfaction. Last but not least, uncovering the role of populist attitudes in shaping satisfaction with democracy might offer insights into the underlying drivers of democratic discontent and political polarization, providing scholars and policymakers with a better understanding of the challenges posed by populist movements to the legitimacy and resilience of the democratic system.

References

- Alenda, Stéphanie. 2023. "The new radical right and dissatisfaction with democracy: Latin America in comparative perspective." *Lasa Fórum* 54 (2): 35–41.
- Campbell, Angus, Gerald Gurin, and Warren E. Miller. 1954. *The Voter Decides*. New York: Row, Peterson, and Company.
- Christmann, Pablo. 2018. "Economic performance, quality of democracy and satisfaction with democracy." *Electoral Studies* 53: 79–89.
- Citrin, Jack, and Christopher Muste. 1999. "Trust in government." In: Robinson, John P., Phillip R. Shaver, and Lawrence S. Wrightsman, eds. *Measures of political attitudes*. Academic Press: pp.: 465–532.
- Converse, P.E. .1964. "The nature of belief systems in Mass publics". In D.E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent*, New York, NY: Free Press, pp. 206–261.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1956. *A Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- De Mesquita, Bruce Bueno et al. 2005. "Thinking inside the box: A closer look at democracy and human rights." *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (3): 439–457.
- Diamond, Larry. 1999. *Developing democracy: toward consolidation*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 2008. "Progress and Retreat in Africa: The Rule of Law versus the Big Man." *Journal of Democracy* 19 (2): 138–149.
- Donovan, Todd, and Jeffrey Karp. 2017. "Electoral rules, corruption, inequality and evaluations of democracy." *European Journal of Political Research* 56 (3): 469–486.
- ESS Round 10: European Social Survey Round 10 Data (2020), Data file edition 3.0. *Sikt. Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research*, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC.
- Ferrín Pereira, Mónica, and Hanspeter Kriesi, eds. 2016. *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Freedom House (2024), *Freedom in the World 2024*. Data available from https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/All_data_FIW_2013-2024.xlsx (viewed on February 10, 2024).
- Gerring, John, Strom C. Thacker, and Rodrigo Alfaro. 2012. "Democracy and Human Development." *The Journal of Politics* 74 (1): 1–17.
- Gherghina, Sergiu, Inga Saikkonen, and Petar Bankov. 2022. "Dissatisfied, uninformed or both? Democratic evaluation, political knowledge and the acceptance of clientelism in a new democracy." *Democratization* 29 (2): 211–231.
- Gisselquist, Rachel M. 2012. "Good governance as a concept, and why this matters for development policy." *WIDER Working Paper* 2012/30: 1–39.
- Heckelman, Jac C. 2008. "Relationships among democratic freedoms in the former Soviet Republics: a causality analysis." *Constitutional Political Economy* 21 (1): 80–96.
- Hernández, Enrique. 2019. "Democracy belief systems in Europe: cognitive availability and attitudinal constraint." *European Political Science Review* 11 (4): 485–502.
- Heyne, Lea. 2018. "Democratic demand and supply: a spatial model approach to satisfaction with democracy." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 29 (3): 381–401.
- Inglehart, Ronald. 2003. "How Solid is Mass Support for Democracy—And How Can We Measure It?" *Political Science and Politics* 36 (01): 51–57.
- Ishiyama, John. 2019. "Is Democracy Necessary for Good Governance?" *Social Science Quarterly* 100: 2188–2208.

- Kaminska, Olena. 2020. "Guide to Using Weights and Sample Design Indicators with ESS Data." *Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex*, available at https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/ESS_weighting_data_1_1.pdf (viewed February 28, 2024).
- Kriesi, Hanspeter. 2017. "The implications of the euro crisis for democracy." *Journal of European Public Policy* 25 (1): 59–82.
- Lampinen, Stephanie Kay. 2008. "A comparative analysis of the effects of terrorism on freedom in forty-two countries." available from *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses* at: <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/comparative-analysis-effects-terrorism-on-freedom/docview/304688609/se-2> (viewed February 26, 2024).
- Liotti, Giorgio, Marco Musella, and Federica D'Isanto. 2018. "Does democracy improve human development? Evidence from former socialist countries." *Eastern Journal of European Studies* 9 (2): 69–87.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1963. *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books.
- Mari, Silvia et al. 2022. "Conspiracy Theories and Institutional Trust: Examining the Role of Uncertainty Avoidance and Active Social Media Use." *Political Psychology* 43 (2): 277–296.
- Mavee, Shana. 2015. "A conceptual analysis of civic apathy in democratic governance." *Administratio Publica* 23 (2): 137–152.
- Morlino, Leonardo. 2009. "Qualities of Democracy: How to Analyze Them." Florence: Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane. Available at: <http://indicatorsinfo.pbworks.com/f/Morlino+Qualities+of+Democracy.pdf> (viewed February 23, 2004).
- Newton, Kenneth. 2007. "Social and political trust." In: Dalton, Russel J., and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, eds. *The Oxford handbook of political behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: pp.: 342–361.
- Parry, Geraint, George Moyser, and Neil Day. 1992. *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pickel, Susanne, Wiebke Breustedt, and Theresia Smolka. 2016. "Measuring the quality of democracy: Why include the citizens' perspective?" *International Political Science Review* 37 (5): 645–655.
- Quaranta, Mario. 2016. "The Meaning of Democracy to Citizens Across European Countries and the Factors Involved." *Social Indicators Research* 136 (3): 859–880.
- . 2018. "How citizens evaluate democracy: an assessment using the European Social Survey." *European Political Science Review* 10 (2): 191–217.
- Reher, Stefanie. 2020. "Mind This Gap, Too: Political Orientations of People with Disabilities in Europe." *Political Behavior* 42: 791–818.
- Schumpeter, Joseph. 1947. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (2 ed.). New York: Harper.
- Seligson, Mitchell A. 1980. "A Problem-Solving Approach to Measuring Political Efficacy." *Social Science Quarterly* 60 (4): 630–642.
- Seyd, Ben. 2023. "Political legitimacy in western Europe: comparing people's expectations and evaluations of democracy." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 33 (1): 54–73.
- Sherrill, Clifton. 2006. "Promoting Democracy: Results of Democratization Efforts in the Philippines." *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32 (4): 211–230.
- Sommet, Nicholas, and Davide Morselli. 2021. "Keep Calm and Learn Multilevel Linear Modeling: A Three-Step Procedure Using SPSS, Stata, R, and Mplus." *International Review of Social Psychology* 34 (1): 1–19.

- Thomassen, Jacques. 2007. "Democratic Values." In: Dalton, Russel J., and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, eds. *The Oxford handbook of political behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: pp.: 418–434.
- Vilhjeldsdóttir, Sjöfn. 2020. *Political Trust in Iceland: Determinants and trends, 1983 to 2018*. Doctoral dissertation. The University of Iceland, Faculty of Political Science. Available at: https://vol.hi.is/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Political-trust-in-Iceland_Sj%C3%B6fn-Vilhjeldsd%C3%B3ttir_PhD-thesis_07022020-1.pdf (viewed June 9, 2024).
- Weinberg, Leonard, William Eubank, and Elizabeth Francis. 2008. "The Cost of Terrorism: The Relationship Between International Terrorism and Democratic Governance." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20 (2): 257–270.
- Welzel, Christian, and Ronald Inglehart. 2008. "The Role of Ordinary People in Democratization." *Journal of Democracy* 19 (1): 126–140.

Jurijs Ņikišins

Potruga za demokratskom srećom: Koje dimenzije drže ključ?

Apstrakt

Većina Evropljana ceni život u zemlji kojom se upravlja prema demokratskim principima. Smatra se da su procena demokratije i zadovoljstvo njenim funkcionisanjem ključni za njenu održivost i efikasnost. Kada se ispitanicima postavi pitanje o važnosti određenih pokazatelja demokratije, kao što su slobodni i fer izbori, jednakost pred sudovima i sloboda štampe, većina njih im pridaje visok i uporediv nivo značaja. Međutim, opšti značaj demokratije i njenih dimenzija ne odražava nužno i opaženi kvalitet demokratije unutar određene države.

Kako bi se istražili faktori koji utiču na zadovoljstvo stanjem demokratije, uzimajući u obzir međudržavne razlike, sprovedena je regresiona analiza na više nivoa. U okviru nje se ispituje uticaj različitih faktora na četiri dimenzije demokratske procene—izbornu, liberalnu, socijalnu i direktnu—koristeći uporedne podatke iz 10. talasa Evropskog društvenog istraživanja (ESS), modula Razumevanja i procene demokratije. Rezultati ukazuju na značajne razlike među dimenzijama demokratije, pri čemu nordijske zemlje prednjače, dok neke zemlje Zapadnog Balkana i Istočne Evrope zaostaju. Takođe se ističu složeni odnosi između političke efikasnosti i procene demokratije, pokazujući pozitivnu povezanost sa spoljašnjom efikasnošću, naročito u zemljama sa višim političkim pravima, i negativnu povezanost sa unutrašnjom efikasnošću, koja slabi u kontekstu većih građanskih sloboda.

Ključne reči: demokratija, izbori, sudovi, slobodna štampa, Evropsko društveno istraživanje

