

Europeans' Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy:

Topline Results from Round 6 of the
European Social Survey

ESS Topline
Results Series

4
Issue

Accessing the European Social Survey Data and Documentation

The European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure Consortium - ESS ERIC - provides free access to all of its data and documentation. These can be browsed and downloaded from its website: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>.

Specific initiatives have been developed to promote access to and use of the growing dataset, including EduNet and NESSTAR, both of which are available via the ESS website.

EduNet

The ESS e-learning tool, EduNet, was developed

for use in higher education. It provides hands-on examples and exercises designed to guide users through the research process, from a theoretical problem to the interpretation of statistical results. Eight topics are now available using data from the ESS.

NESSTAR

The ESS Online Analysis package uses NESSTAR which is an online data analysis tool, documentation to support NESSTAR is available from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (<http://www.nesstar.com/index.html>).

Public attitudes matter in democratic societies. They reflect what citizens believe, want, fear and prefer. They are difficult to measure, are often unexpressed, and cannot be inferred from electoral choices alone. Nor can they be gleaned from media opinion polls which tend to give momentary and incomplete glimpses of attitude formation and change. The European Social Survey provides detailed accounts of public attitudes and behaviour utilising high quality scientific methodologies and repeat measures over time.

The ESS Topline Results Series provides an introduction to key issues in European societies from leading academic experts in the field. The series goes beyond a simple presentation of the data, providing references to theory and detailed academically informed analysis. It is hoped not only that the series is informative but also that it will inspire others to utilise this rich data resource.

Rory Fitzgerald

ESS ERIC Director

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Europeans' Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy: Topline Results from Round 6 of the European Social Survey

Mónica Ferrin and Hanspeter Kriesi

Introduction

In Europe, democracy is seen by many as being a universal value and considered by them to be the best possible system to organise citizens' preferences. At the same time, however, there are major concerns about the public's apparent dissatisfaction with the way democracy actually works in most European countries. European democracies are facing serious challenges which might be undermining citizens' trust in the capacity of their democracies to solve important problems. One such major challenge is globalisation, and the consequent erosion of the power of national parliaments in favour of supranational organisations such as the European Union and global corporations. Another is the strong economic crisis which has hit European democracies in recent years.

Within this context, it is of major importance to have a comprehensive view of Europeans' attitudes towards democracy. Are Europeans still committed to democracy? If this is the case, what exactly do they think that democracy should provide? With what aspects of their countries' democracy do Europeans express particular discontent?

Until now, there has been a lack of detailed data on citizens' attitudes towards democracy in Europe. A new module of questions fielded in the sixth round of the European Social Survey (ESS)

provides an opportunity to address these issues. It provides an innovative set of indicators aimed at assessing the meaning Europeans attach to the concept of democracy and how they evaluate the democratic performance of their country. Round 6 of the ESS was conducted in 29 countries towards the end of 2012. Approximately 54,600 standardised face-to-face interviews were carried out in the 29 countries, providing representative national samples of the population via random probability methods. Each country organised its own translation and fieldwork to standards specified by the ESS Core Scientific Team.ⁱ

This report presents key findings for the participating countries.ⁱⁱ These include countries from four different geographical areas (regions): seven Western European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK; five Northern European countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden; four Southern European countries: Cyprus, Italy, Portugal and Spain, plus neighbouring Israel; and twelve Central and Eastern European countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Kosovo, Russia and Ukraine. These countries vary considerably in terms of democratic performance, and also with respect to the degree to which the economic crisis has hit them. This allows us to investigate when and why democratic support might be put under stress.

Democracy – a multi-dimensional concept

Even if there is agreement both among political theorists and citizens that democracy is to be valued in and of itself, there is much less agreement on what democracy is or should be. The ESS Round 6 module on democracy is therefore based on a multi-dimensional concept of democracy drawing mainly on the work of Morlino (2009) and Kriesi et al (2013). Considering the numerous ideas people might hold about democracy we have broadened the concept of democracy to embrace notions which go beyond the classic liberal democratic model. We have distinguished 6 dimensions which aim at capturing different components of democracy (see Table 1).

The first two dimensions presented in Table 1 encompass the procedural elements of the liberal democratic model: the electoral process and its components (electoral dimension) and the guarantee of citizens' protection against governments' arbitrary decisions against each other (liberal dimension). The next two dimensions expand on this classic definition of democracy by introducing two additional models. The social model of democracy loads with substantive content the concept of democracy and views the achievement of certain social outcomes (e.g. the reduction of inequality) as an essential feature of democratic government (social dimension). The direct democracy model opposes the classic liberal representative model of democracy and incorporates the idea that people should be allowed a direct say in decision-making (direct democracy dimension). Finally, the last dimensions presented in Table 1 introduce distinct ways of

institutionalising democracy. The inclusiveness dimension refers to the extent to which democratic rights and responsibilities are extended to include all of the resident population or whether certain groups are excluded. This is particularly relevant in the European context where immigration constitutes almost 10% of the population. The representation dimension distinguishes broadly between majoritarian systems that tend to concentrate power in the hands of single parties, and proportional systems that tend to lead to power sharing between different parties.

For each of these sub-dimensions, two questions were posed in the Round 6 module, distinguishing between two different aspects of people's attitudes towards democracy. One question addressed the importance people attach towards each one of the sub-dimensions of democracy, i.e. the meaning they attribute to democracy. The other question aimed at capturing people's judgements regarding whether each one of these sub-dimensions of democracy was present in their country, i.e. their evaluation of democracy. In order to avoid contamination between people's views on democracy as an ideal and their assessments of the actual functioning of their democracies, respondents were first asked about the importance of all sub-dimensions for democracy in general, and then asked to evaluate all sub-dimensions in their country. Attitudes on each sub-dimension were measured on a 0-10 scale as shown in Figure 1 below (with the exception of the three sub-dimensions marked with an asterisk* in Table 1).ⁱⁱⁱ Due to space constraints, the analysis that follows focuses on the electoral, liberal, social and direct democracy dimensions of democracy (excluding the asterisked sub-dimensions).

Table 1: Dimensions and sub-dimensions of democracy

ELECTORAL DIMENSION	
Competition	Free and fair elections
	Differentiated offer by parties
	Opposition free to criticise government
Vertical accountability	Retrospective accountability via elections
	Justification of decisions by government
Deliberation	Participation in political discussion
Responsiveness	Responsiveness to citizens*
	Responsiveness to other EU governments

LIBERAL DIMENSION	
Rule of law	Equality before the law
Horizontal accountability	Checks and balances on government power via the courts
Minority rights	Protection of minority rights
Freedom of expression	Freedom to express one's views*
Freedom of press	Media freedom
	Media reliability

SOCIAL DIMENSION	
Social Justice	Protection against poverty
	Reduced income inequality

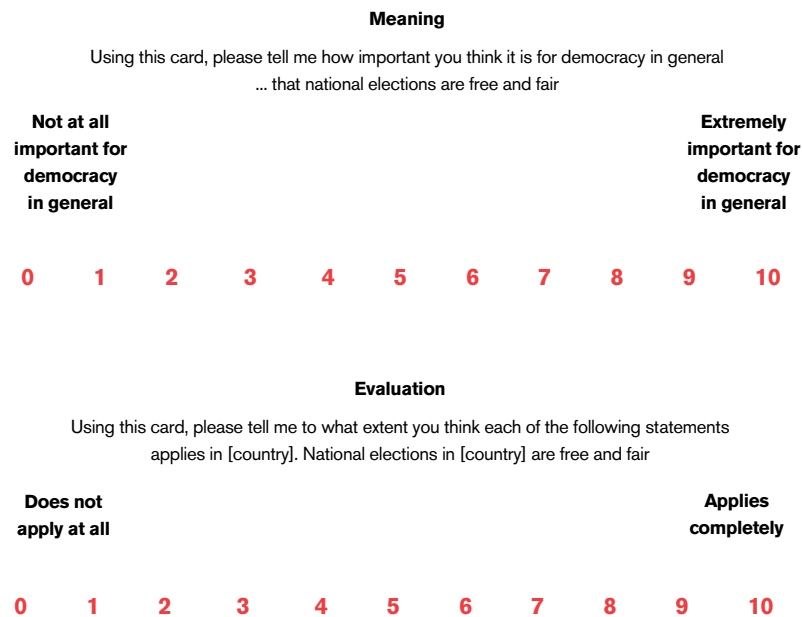
DIRECT DEMOCRACY DIMENSION	
Direct participation	Citizen participation via referendums

INCLUSIVENESS DIMENSION	
Inclusiveness	Inclusiveness of participation rights (migrants)

TYPE OF REPRESENTATION DIMENSION	
Type of representation	Majority vs. proportional*

Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

Figure 1: ESS Round 6 questions on the meaning and evaluation of democracy



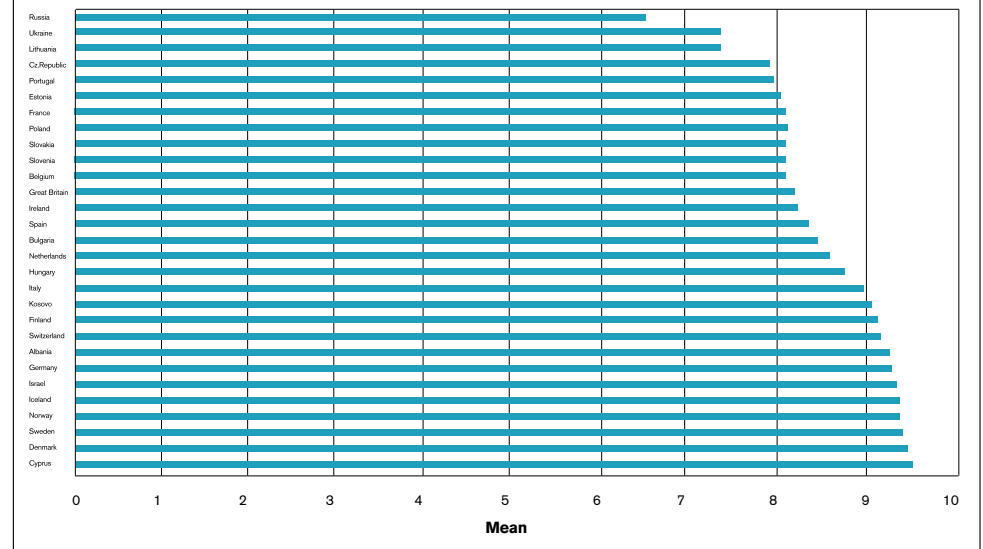
Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

The meaning of democracy in Europe

There is a strong commitment to the idea of democracy in most ESS countries (Figure 2). The mean level of support for the idea that *it is important to live in a country governed democratically* is above 8 (measured on a 0 to

10 scale) in 24 of the 29 countries that took part in Round 6. The exceptions are Portugal, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Ukraine and Russia. There is, however, quite a large difference in the strength of attitudes across countries with support for democracy as an ideal highest in Cyprus (mean = 9.5) and lowest in Russia (mean = 6.5).

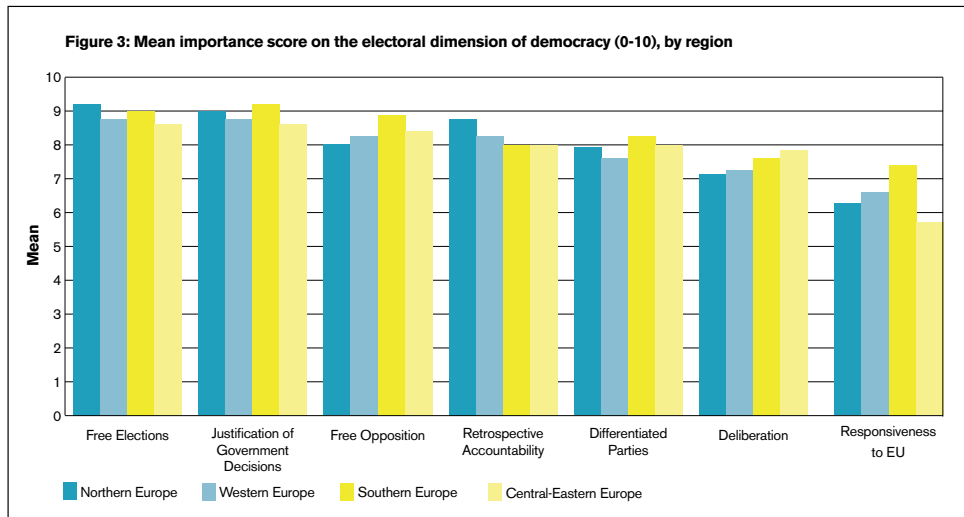
Figure 2: Perceived importance of living in a democratic country (0-10)



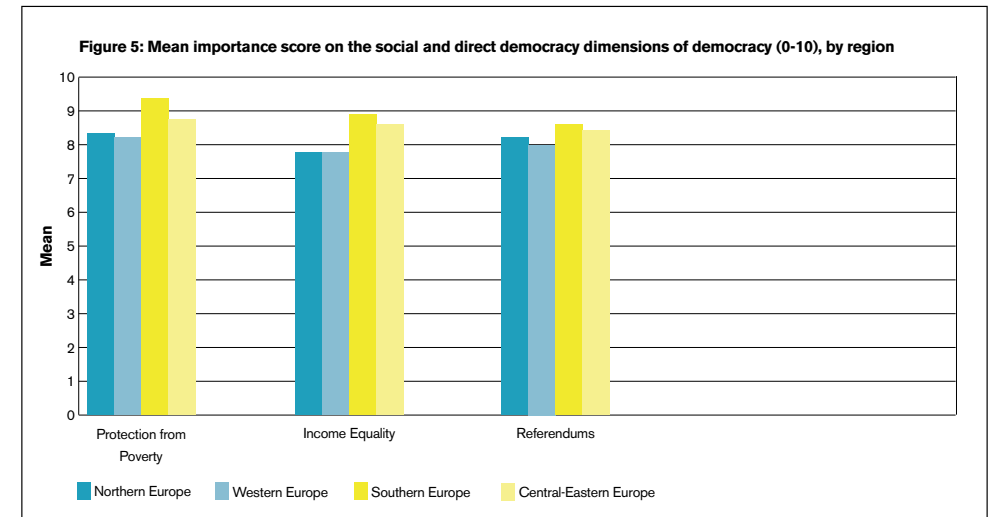
Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

But how committed are Europeans to the different dimensions and sub-dimensions of democracy? Figures 3 to 5 present the mean importance assigned to each of the attributes (except those with an asterisk*) listed in Table 1 corresponding to the electoral (Figure 3), the liberal (Figure 4), and the social and direct democracy dimensions (Figure 5) of democracy, summarised by region. These figures reveal that, independent of where they live, Europeans are rather demanding of democracy. Across all four regions, the mean score on the importance scale was equal to or higher than 8 for most attributes. Moreover, it

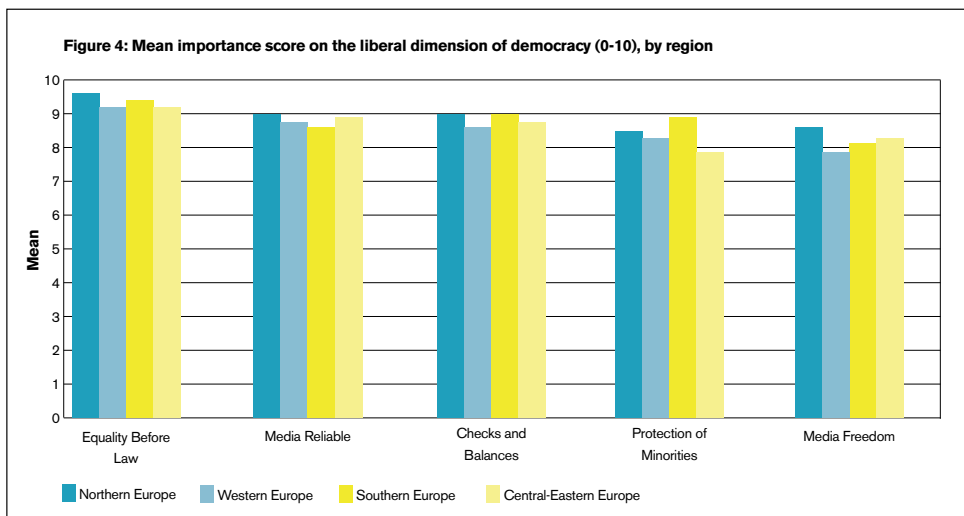
appears that Europeans have a broad notion of democracy which is not limited to a purely procedural conception of democracy. As well as attaching importance to key procedural aspects of a liberal electoral democracy, such as free and fair elections and equality before the law, respondents also rated the social and direct democracy dimensions of democracy above 8 out of 10 on average. Democracy, according to Europeans' ideals, is supposed to have a social dimension and give citizens the opportunity to participate directly in decision-making.



Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012



Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012



Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

Further investigation of attitudes towards the different sub-dimensions of democracy suggests that Europeans have a clearly developed understanding of what constitutes democracy (i.e. what needs to be present in order to identify 'democracy') and that this understanding is broadly similar across countries. Our analysis, which focuses on those features of democracy that respondents can be thought to consider essential, i.e. the sub-dimensions that they score 10 on the 0-10 importance scale, reveals two things about respondents' understanding of democracy. First, respondents appear to distinguish empirically between three major aspects of democracy corresponding to the different models of democracy identified in Table 1 above. Based on Mokken scale analysis of the dichotomous items created by recoding the original 11-point scales as 1 or 0 depending on whether the respondent considered each sub dimension as a necessary condition for democracy (10=1) or not (0/9=0), attitudes can be grouped empirically into three summary indices: the liberal democracy index (comprising elements of the liberal and electoral

dimensions of democracy), the social democracy index (comprising the two elements on the social dimension) and the direct democracy index (comprising the one item on the direct democracy dimension).

Second, Europeans' notion of democracy is hierarchically ordered. Europeans consider that some elements of democracy are more important than other elements. Not everyone will necessarily be equally demanding of democracy; some people may hold a minimalist view of democracy and consider only a few aspects as essential whilst others may have more extensive requirements. However, those who are less demanding of democracy identify as important the same key democratic principles as those with more extensive requirements (who then also place additional demands on democracy). For example, considering the 12 items included in the liberal democracy index, a majority of respondents, including those who hold a minimalist view of democracy, identify two sub-dimensions - equality before the law and free and fair elections - as

being essential for democracy. Those who expect more from democracy also consider other features as necessary, including horizontal accountability, justification of their decisions by governments and media reliability. The hierarchical ordering of items

included in the liberal democracy index is similar across all countries. A pooled analysis of all 29 ESS countries places “equality before the law” top and responsiveness to other EU governments” at the bottom in terms of importance (Table 2).^{iv}

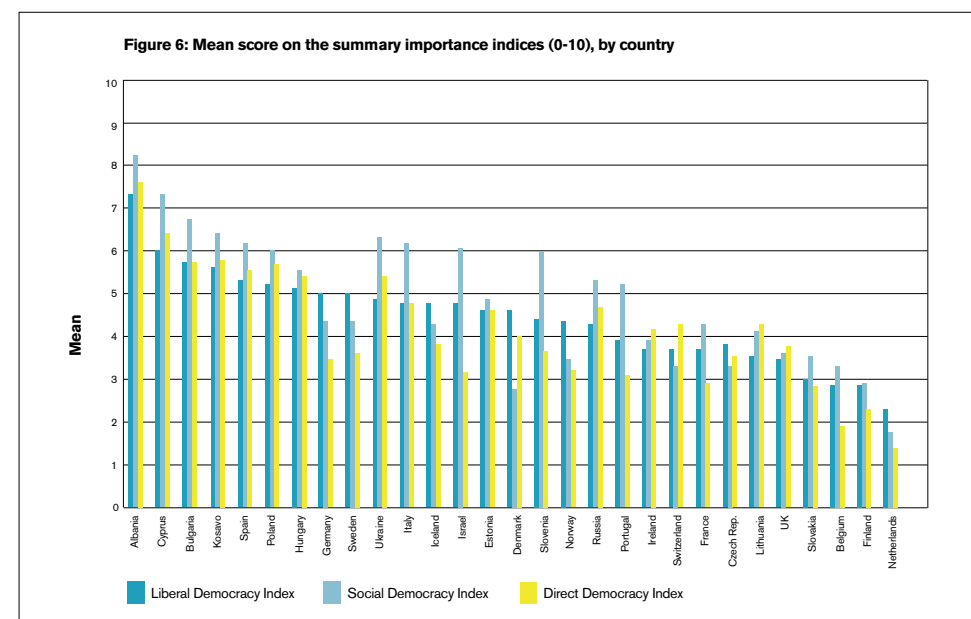
Table 2: Europeans' understanding of democracy: Ordering of sub-dimensions considered essential for democracy

INDEX AND SUB-DIMENSION	HIERARCHICAL ORDERING
LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDEX	
Equality before the law	1
Free and fair elections	2
Checks and balances on government power	3
Justification of decisions by government	4
Media reliability	5
Retrospective accountability via elections	6
Protection of minority rights	7
Media freedom	8
Opposition free to criticise government	9
Differentiated parties	10
Participation in political discussion	11
Responsiveness to other EU governments	12
SOCIAL DEMOCRACY INDEX	
Protection against poverty	1
Reduced income inequality	2
DIRECT DEMOCRACY INDEX	
Citizen participation via referendums	1

Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

Although there is a common understanding across ESS countries that the notion of democracy is hierarchical and encompasses three distinct aspects – represented by the liberal democracy, the social democracy and the direct democracy summary indices – there are differences across countries in terms of the relative importance attached to each one. Figure 6 illustrates cross-national variations in the mean scores on each of the summary indices, measuring the extent to which respondents consider the sub-dimensions that comprise these indices as *essential* for democracy. In some countries, people are very demanding of democracy, viewing elements of all three indices of democracy as essential.

This is particularly the case in Albania, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Kosovo. In contrast, respondents in other countries such as the Netherlands, Finland, Belgium and Slovakia are much less demanding of democracy and are less likely to consider any of the three broad aspects of democracy as essential. In the middle, we find countries – such as Germany and Sweden – where people view the components of the liberal democracy index as essential but not, for example, the direct democracy index attributes. In most countries, however, the similar scores on each index suggest that people do not perceive the different models of democracy as contradictory or alternative to one another, but rather as complementary.



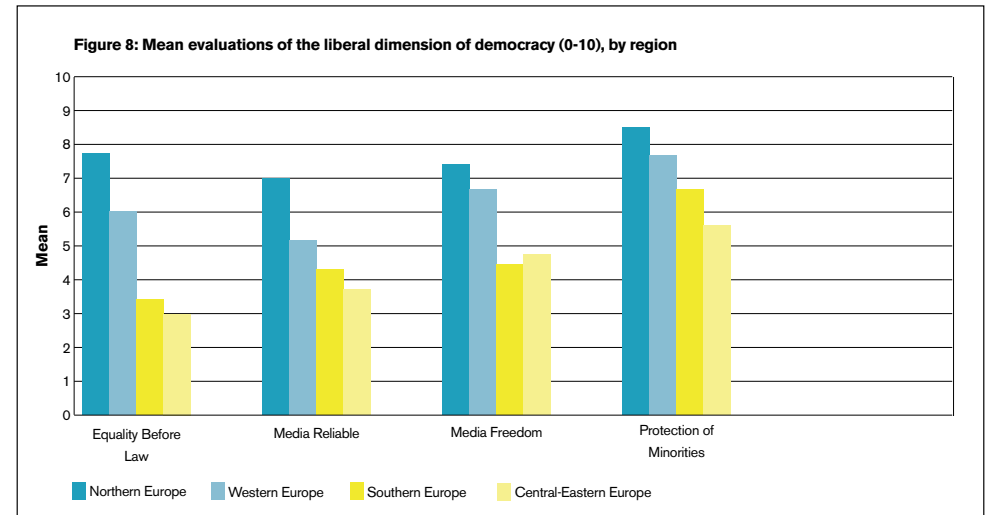
Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

Europeans' evaluations of democracy

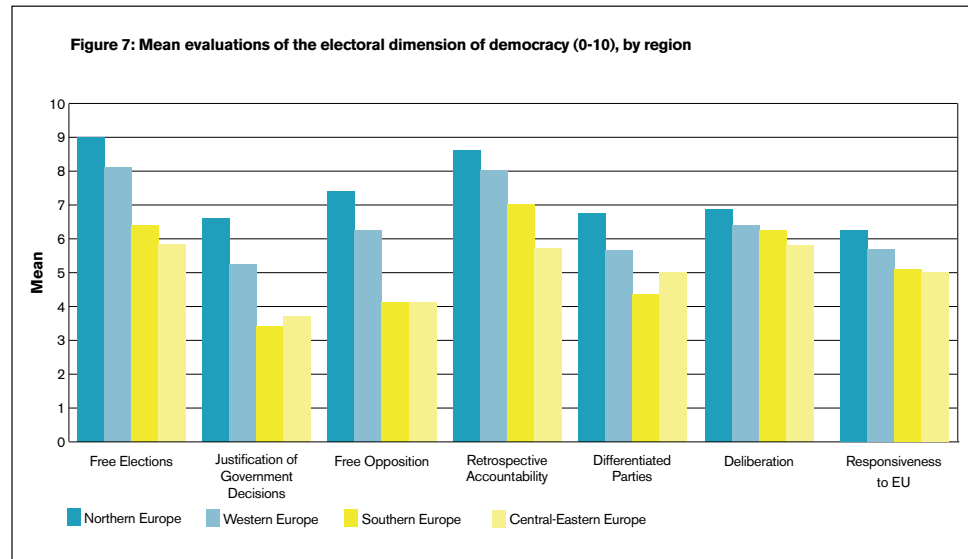
Having looked at people's views regarding the meaning of democracy as an ideal, we now go on to consider how far people think democracy lives up to this ideal in practice. Figures 7 to 9 show mean evaluations of the different sub-dimensions of democracy across the four European regions.^v A first result that emerges is that evaluations of how far the different attributes of democracy apply in practice are generally much lower than support for the different attributes as important features of an ideal democracy (shown in Figures 3 to 5). European democracies appear to fall short of their citizens' expectations as to *how democracy should be*. This is particularly noticeable with regards to the social and direct democracy dimensions of democracy. Across all four European regions, the

liberal and electoral dimensions of democracy are generally evaluated more positively than the social and direct democracy dimensions; the two items on the social dimension receive mean scores of only 6 out of 10 or below in all regions, whilst the referendum item representing the direct democracy dimension receives mean scores below six everywhere but Northern Europe.

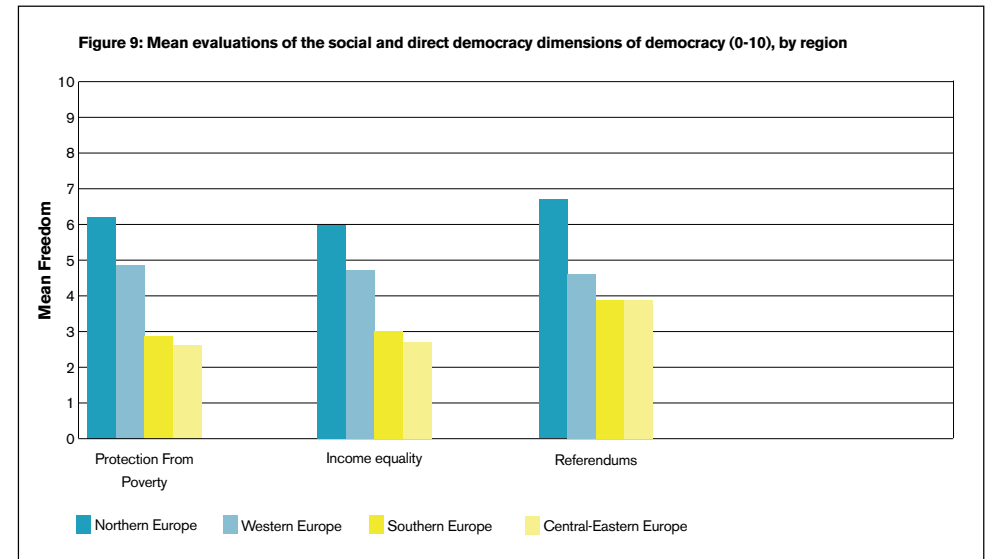
Figures 7 to 9 also show that there is considerable variation in evaluations across regions. Clearly the most satisfied with the functioning of their democracies are the Northern Europeans, followed by the Western Europeans, whilst evaluations of democracy by Southern and Central-Eastern Europeans lag behind. This pattern of regional variation is broadly the same for all sub-dimensions.



Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012



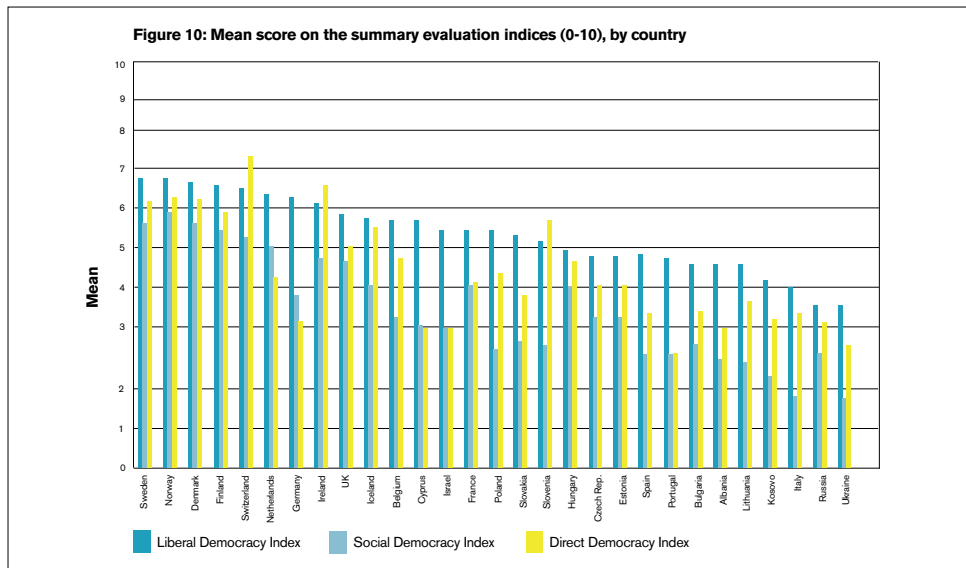
Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012



Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

Figure 10 provides more information on how evaluations of democracy vary across countries. Three summary evaluation indices have been constructed based on the theoretical distinction between liberal, social and direct democracy adopted previously. The score on each index provides the mean evaluation of all sub-dimensions composing that index. Only four countries score below 5 on the liberal democracy evaluation index: Ukraine, Russia, Italy and Kosovo. This indicates that most European democracies are seen to perform relatively well as regards the basic

procedural features of electoral democracy and the functioning of liberal democratic institutions; they are evaluated more positively than negatively even if just barely in some countries. In contrast the direct democracy evaluation index and, even more noticeably, the social democracy index, fail to reach even an average score of 5 in most countries. Considering that these two dimensions also find strong support among Europeans as being important for democracy, there is an evident failure of democratic governments to live up to public expectations.



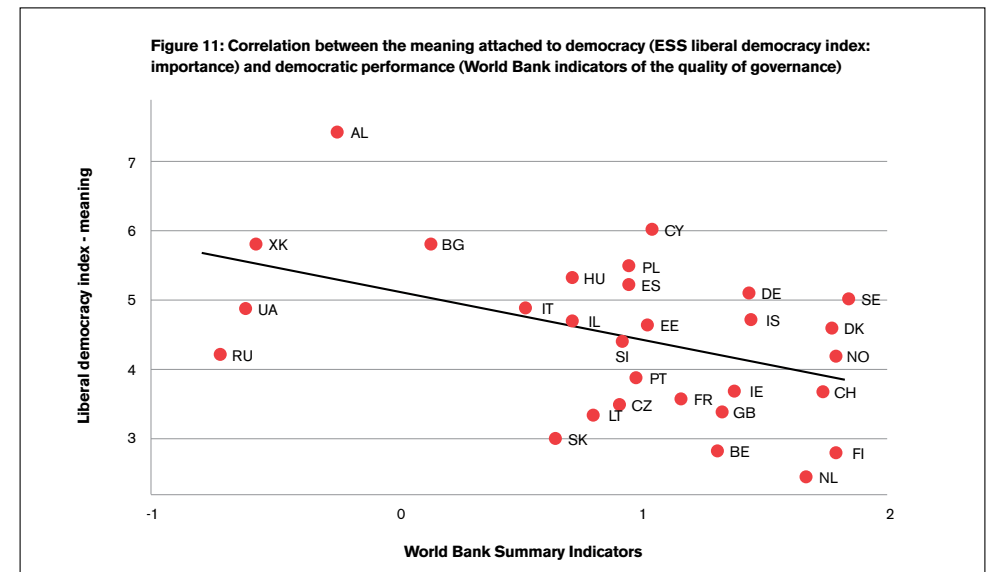
Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

The relationship between attitudes to democracy and democratic and economic performance in Europe

How do attitudes towards democracy as measured by the ESS correlate with established measures of democratic performance? We would expect that citizens' expectations and evaluations of democracy are dependent on how democracies work in practice. Evaluations of democracy are necessarily connected to democratic performance. In addition, the meaning that people attach to democracy, i.e. what they expect an ideal democracy to deliver, is likely to be context dependent: people might be more demanding of what democracy should provide if their democracy is performing well, raising their expectations as to

what might be possible or, alternatively, citizens might be more demanding in less developed democracies, precisely because they perceive the consequences of a shortfall in democracy.

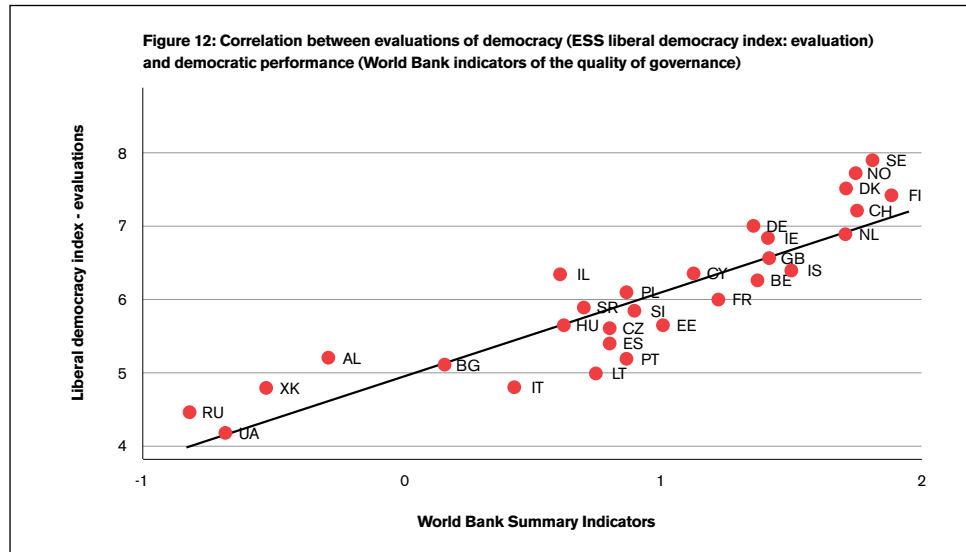
Figure 11 provides partial support for the second hypothesis; the correlation between people's attitudes regarding the meaning of democracy as measured by the above mentioned ESS liberal democracy index and World Bank summary indicators of the quality of governance^{vi} is negative ($p = -0.48$). The public seem to be more demanding with regard to democracy in countries where the quality of governance is low. In contrast, in well-performing democracies people are less demanding.



Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

As hypothesised, there is a positive relationship between established indicators of democratic performance and Europeans' personal evaluations of their democratic systems on the ESS liberal democracy index (Figure 12). The correlation

between the two is above 0.90, which indicates that the public is a reliable source for the assessment of democratic quality and may provide a valuable source of additional information on those aspects of democracy which need improvement in a country.



Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

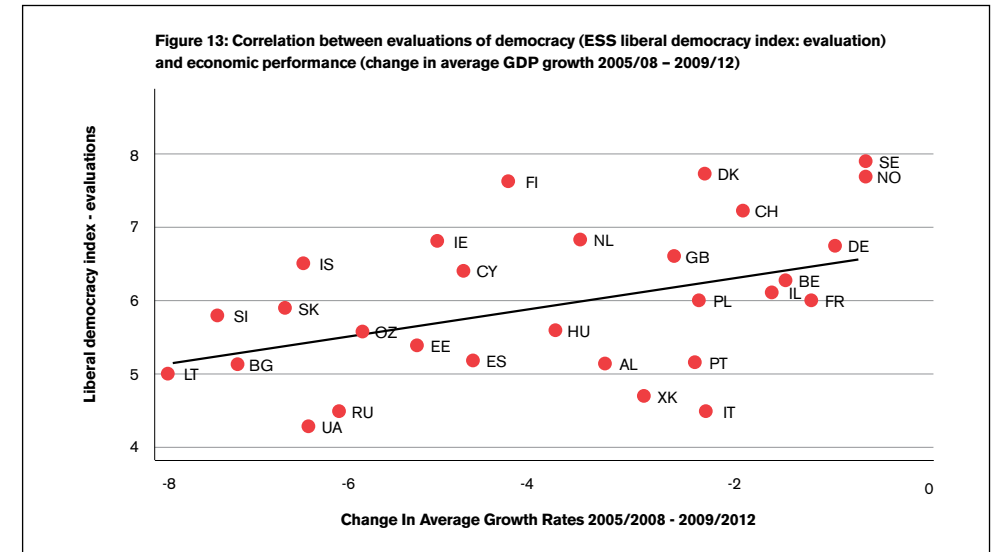
People's evaluations of how well democracy is performing in their country are also expected to be correlated with economic performance, with people likely to hold more positive evaluations of democracy and the way their country is governed when it is delivering economic prosperity (see, for example, Anderson and Guillory 1997).

Figure 13 illustrates the relationship between economic growth (measured by the change in average GDP growth 2005/08 – 2009/12)^{vii} and evaluations of democracy as measured by the ESS liberal democracy index. This confirms that there is a positive relationship between economic performance and evaluations of democracy ($p=0.49$). However, it is notable that the correlation between people's evaluations of their democratic regimes and indicators of economic performance is weaker than the correlation between people's evaluations and established indicators of democratic performance. This suggests that, whilst

the economy plays a role, how well democratic institutions and procedures work in practice is even more important to the public's perceptions of democracy. This finding may provide encouragement for European democracies in light of the recent economic crisis.

Conclusions

The ESS Round 6 module on attitudes to democracy provides us with a uniquely detailed view of Europeans' attitudes to democracy. Democracy as an ideal is strongly supported by the public in almost all ESS countries. Furthermore, the public generally holds a broad view of democracy and considers it at least fairly important that, as well as meeting the basic procedural requirements of free and fair elections and equality before the law, democracy also delivers social outcomes and



Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

opportunities for citizen participation. However, the meaning that people attach to democracy and the type of democracy that is supported does vary within and across countries; there are differences in terms of the attributes that people consider essential for democracy. Whereas some Europeans hold a more restricted conception of democracy - emphasising only some procedural aspects of democracy such as free and fair elections as being essential for democracy - others have a broader notion of what democracy should be, encompassing several different theoretical models of democracy: the liberal model, the social model and the direct democracy model.

As for evaluations of how well democracy is seen to work in particular countries, Round 6 of the ESS provide invaluable and precise data about Europeans' perceptions of their countries' democracies. The data show that evaluations of actual democratic performance in most countries

are relatively low and that democracy in all countries falls short of people's expectations of what democracy should be. Although beyond the scope of this report, these findings suggest that a careful look at the public's evaluations of different aspects of democracy could help to identify the main issues that European democracies need to address.

Lastly, findings from the ESS indicate that democratic performance is more important than economic performance in determining attitudes to democracy. This suggests that the recent economic crisis in Europe need not necessarily have negative consequences for democracy. However, with only cross-sectional data from one point in time available, it is currently premature to give any guarantee for the future regarding Europeans' long-term commitment to democracy. The role of the ESS in monitoring any future changes in attitudes to democracy will be of major importance.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Further details of the ESS can be found at www.europeansocialsurvey.org, including details of participant countries, sample sizes, questionnaires and response rates.

ⁱⁱ Analysis is based on the full sample of around 54, 600 respondents aged 15 and over. ESS design weights have been applied for country-level analysis; and both design and population weights have been applied for region-level analysis.

ⁱⁱⁱ We used a different measure for these three items due to their trade-off nature: majority vs. proportional representation; delegate vs. trustee representation; and freedom of expression to all vs. no freedom of expression for intolerant views.

^{iv} The two items which form the social democracy index are also hierarchically ordered. Priority tends to be given to protection from poverty with more respondents viewing this as essential and then a subset of these respondents also considering reduction in income differences as essential. The direct democracy index contains only one item so there is no hierarchy implied.

^v Respondents were not asked to evaluate the "Horizontal accountability" sub-dimension (though they did rate it in terms of importance).

^{vi} Mean of the six summary estimates for 2012: Control of corruption; Government effectiveness; Political stability; Regulatory stability; Rule of law; Voice and Accountability. Source: Worldwide Governance Indicators (www.govindicators.org). Higher values indicate better governance.

^{vii} Change in average GDP growth (annual %) 2005-2008 as compared to 2009-2012. Source: World Development Indicators (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>).

About the ESS

The European Social Survey is a biennial survey of social attitudes and behaviour which has been carried out in up to 36 European countries since 2001. Its dataset contains the results of nearly 300,000 completed interviews which are freely accessible. All survey and related documentation produced by the ESS ERIC is freely available to all.

ESS topics:

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- Attitudes to welfare
- Trust in criminal justice
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- Economic morality
- The organisation of the life-course

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Observers:

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Other Participants:

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Find out more about the ESS ERIC and access its data at www.europeansocialsurvey.org

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