

The correlates of European citizens' views of democracy

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Introduction

Asking people in surveys whether they prefer “democracy” as a form of government is unlikely to be very informative about their actual regime preferences. There are two main reasons for this. First, the excessive abstraction of the object “democracy” (Kiewiet de Jonge 2016), possibly together with the pressure to provide socially desirable answers (Inglehart 2003; Svobik 2019), results in overwhelming levels of measured support for democracy. However, such levels often fail to resist deeper examination. For example, when citizens’ level of rejection of non-democratic alternatives is also elicited (Dalton and Shin 2014; Kiewiet de Jonge 2016), the picture that emerges is much more nuanced, with important variations not only across countries but also through time (Claassen 2020). Similarly, candidate choice experiments designed to indirectly measure democratic support show that important segments of society, defined by their partisanship or ideology, tend to tolerate practices that are hardly compatible with any meaningful support for “democracy” (Graham and Svobik 2020; Gidengil et al. 2022; Svobik et al. 2023).

The second main reason why simply asking people whether they prefer “democracy” is uninformative is the fact that, when probed about what that concept means to them, citizens tend to convey a wide variety of views. In other words, we cannot assume that the notion of “democracy” always triggers the same assumptions, experiences, or aspirations. This has been clear from early on as a result of survey-based studies asking either open-ended (Miller et al. 1997; Bratton et al. 2005; Dalton, Shin, and Jou 2007; Braizat 2010; Canache 2012a, 2012b) or closed-ended questions (Crow 2010; Welzel

2011; de Regt 2013). A recent systematic review of the fast-expanding literature dedicated to “people’s conceptions of democracy, their preferences for certain models of democracy, or concrete decision-making processes” (König et al. 2022) counted close to 100 empirical studies on the topic. In spite of their different approaches, these studies reach at least one common simple conclusion: “democracy” does not mean the same thing for everyone. As a result, in contexts where real-world political actors engage in rhetoric and action that challenges liberal democratic regimes and practices, even when they do so in the name of “democracy”—a trend thought to be on the rise today (Waldner and Lust 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021)—such words and deeds are likely to resonate differently with different people. Furthermore, as several other chapters in this volume suggest—particularly Chapters 9 (by Irene Palacios) and 13 (by Mónica Ferrín, Enrique Hernández, and Pedro Riera)—the extent to which different conceptions of democracy are endorsed is consequential for how citizens end up evaluating the performance of the regime they live under and how they vote in elections.

In this chapter, we focus on Europeans’ adherence to different views about what “democracy” should be. More specifically, complementing other chapters in this volume, our approach is to examine the individual-level correlates of those views. Like in the previous volume (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016) that analyzed the data resulting from the European Social Survey’s round 6 (2012/13), our starting point for the joint analysis with the new round 10 (2021/22) surveys is the notion that popular visions about democracy, although theoretically different and empirically distinguishable, are not necessarily incompatible in the minds of citizens. They can—and indeed seem to—be combined to some degree, as Chapter 5 by Hanspeter Kriesi shows. However, the extent to which different people in different contexts emphasize each of those views also varies. Some people are more likely than others to emphasize a *liberal democratic* view, conceiving democracy as requiring the combination of regular free and fair elections, civil liberties, minority rights, and the rule of law. A second possible view is *direct democratic*, emphasizing the participation of the citizenry in political decision-making through referendums and initiatives as an essential component of “democracy.” A third view is a *social democratic* one, stressing, as intrinsic and desirable features of “democracy,” the reduction of poverty and economic redistribution. And finally, in this new round 10, we can also examine citizens’ adherence to a fourth view of what “democracy” should be: a *populist* one, in which “ordinary people”—rather than “political elites”—are seen as the ultimate and unrestricted source of political authority.

After this introduction, we revisit our arguments and findings from the analysis of ESS round 6, placing them in the context of other studies about people's conceptions of "democracy." Previous reviews of this strand of the literature on democratic attitudes suggest that the heterogeneity of the conceptual, measurement, and empirical aggregation approaches employed "invites disparate, possibly conflicting conclusions about the state of democracy on the level of citizen preferences" (König et al. 2022: 2039). However, we suggest a recurrent pattern underlying this heterogeneity: people's visions of "democracy" partially reflect their position in vertically stratified societies, in which conflicting interests around the preservation of the political status quo translate into a differential endorsement of democratic conceptions. In other words, we suggest and show that *social class* is an important correlate of views of democracy. Second, we introduce the data and variables used before presenting the main results. We examine the individual-level correlates of the extent to which Europeans emphasize these four different visions of democracy and submit our argument to further examination by looking at how the relationship between social class and democratic conceptions is moderated by contextual features that characterize polities and societies. Finally, we conclude with thoughts about the implications of these findings and further directions for research.

Socio-economic status, the status quo, and views of democracy

Socio-economic status and democratic conceptions

The burgeoning literature on popular conceptions of democracy defies simple characterization, even in terms of basic empirical findings (König et al. 2022). However, several patterns about individual-level correlates of democratic conceptions seem to be recurrent in those studies. For example, individuals with higher levels of education and/or income seem more likely to endorse "polyarchic" (Carlin and Singer 2011), "representative" (Coffé and Michels 2014; Medvic 2019), "elite-friendly" (Landwehr and Steiner 2017), "delegative" (Ulbricht 2018), "procedural" (Norris 2011), or, simply put, "liberal democratic" (Bratton et al. 2005; Seyd 2023; König 2022; Bryan 2023) conceptions of democracy.

Conversely, the same profile of individuals—wealthier and/or more educated—typically emerges as *less* enthusiastic about other notions of "democracy." For example, to the extent that support for the use of initiatives,

referendums, and plebiscites also conveys adherence to a more “direct” conception of democracy, such adherence seems to be weaker among those with higher levels of education (Donovan and Karp 2006; Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2010; Coffé and Michels 2014; Fernández-Martínez and Font 2018) and higher levels of income (Seyd 2023). The same markers of higher socio-economic status also tend to be negatively related with an emphasis on democratic “ends” rather than “means” (Baviskar and Malone 2004), such as social justice (Seyd 2023) or social welfare and redistribution (Letsa and Wilfhart 2018; see also Bratton et al. 2005 and Davis et al. 2022). Finally, this literature has also begun to focus on citizens' affinity with populist conceptions of democracy, characterized by the notion that a “true” and “unitary” will of the people should be realized in political decisions. Here, again, König (2022: 380) finds that “support for a populist form of democratic politics goes along with lower formal education,” echoing findings of other studies focusing on populist attitudes more generally (Spruyt et al. 2016; Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020).

Taken together, these findings suggest a straightforward notion: individuals who enjoy a more privileged position in society are more likely than others to conceive of “democracy” in “liberal democratic” than in “social democratic,” “direct,” or “populist” terms. Despite its emphasis on principles such as one-person-one-vote or vertical accountability, the liberal democratic view is also characterized by obeisance to the rule of law and limits to majority rule. Such a conception of what “democracy” should be promises greater protection of the interests of privileged social groups than other visions that encompass delivering power to “the people” (populist) or to “majorities” (direct), or even policy outputs that reduce economic equality and benefit “the poor” (social democratic). In fact, more than just promising, it also seems to deliver such protection. We now have abundant evidence that even the more “high-quality” and “egalitarian” liberal democracies systematically generate policies that are more sensitive to the interests of socially and economically privileged individuals than to those of other social groups. Not only in the United States (Bartels 2018; Gilens 2012) but also in Europe, the picture that has emerged from empirical research is one of systematic over-representation of—and enhanced responsiveness to—the preferences of higher-income (Peters and Ensink 2015; Elsässer et al. 2017; Schakel 2021), more educated (Rosset and Stecker 2019; Schakel and van der Pas 2021; Persson 2021), and upper-class (Elsässer et al. 2021) segments of the population (but see also Elkjær and Iversen 2020). From this point of view, it is hardly surprising that, in the established democracies where most of these findings have been obtained, the adherence to a conception of “democracy”

aligned to the liberal democratic status quo should be more pronounced among high-socio-economic-status individuals.

Furthermore, and more generally, conflict-based social psychological theories of legitimacy have suggested all along that individuals who acquired and expect to maintain a privileged social position under a particular political order are more likely to see the authorities and institutions that characterize such order as beneficial (Tyler 2006: 391–2).¹ As a result, while “members of advantaged groups (who benefit from the status quo) are the most likely to justify and legitimize it” (Jost and Major 2001: 20), “low-status groups are more likely than high-status groups to reject the status quo that disadvantages them” (Brandt 2013: 765). At least under liberal democratic regimes, we should expect that when asked about what defines “democracy,” individuals with higher socio-economic status should give more emphasis to conceptions aligned with the status quo—including elections, individual rights, and checks and balances (i.e., the liberal democratic view)—than the rest of society. Conversely, conceptions of democracy that involve in some way changing that status quo—shifting political decision-making to popular majorities through referendums, reducing poverty and economic inequalities, or eliminating limits and restrictions to popular sovereignty—are ways of thinking about “democracy” that members of other social strata are bound to find more attractive than social elites. In a nutshell, while we expect a *positive* relationship between socio-economic status and the emphasis on a liberal democratic view, the relationship should, in turn, become *negative* in what concerns the direct democratic, social democratic, or populist visions of democracy.

The moderating role of context

An additional implication of social psychological theories of legitimacy is that the relationship we just described above might change depending on what the status quo happens to be. For example, in contexts that deviate from liberal democracy, social elites should be *less* likely to emphasize a liberal democratic conception. This is precisely what we found in our two previous studies of popular views of democracy in Europe. In established liberal democracies, individuals with higher levels of income (or above-average levels of education relative to their birth cohort) were indeed more likely to espouse a *liberal democratic* view than other individuals. However, in countries with

¹ In spite of their important differences, realistic conflict (Sherif 1966), social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979), and social dominance (Sidanius and Pratto 2001) theories are convergent in this respect.

no democratic experience (Ceka and Magalhães 2016) or in fully fledged autocracies (Ceka and Magalhães 2020), the relationship between markers of socio-economic status and the espousal of a liberal democratic view was actually *reversed*: there, the greater emphasis on the liberal democratic view was given by those placed in *less* privileged socio-economic positions.

A similar context-dependency was found in the endorsement of referendums and initiatives as part of what “democracy” should be. As expected, higher-status respondents tended to de-emphasize the direct democratic conception in comparison with lower-status individuals. This was mostly the case in contexts where the use of such decision-making mechanisms was uncommon; that is, not part of the political status quo. However, the more the macro-political context was characterized by frequent resort to mechanisms of direct democracy, the smaller the gap between high- and low-status respondents became, to the point of ultimately disappearing (Ceka and Magalhães 2016). In other words, as with the liberal democratic view, the relationship between the socio-economic status of individuals and the emphasis on the direct democratic view depended, again, on whether the political status quo matched that conception or not.

A similar argument could be made about the emphasis on “social democratic” or “populist” conceptions of democracy. For example, from this point of view, countries with lower levels of income inequality or greater levels of income redistribution—in other words, somewhat closer to the “social democratic” ideal—might elicit lower reluctance on the part of social and economic elites to endorse a “social democratic” vision of democracy. In contrast, under a more economically unequal status quo, with increased stakes around redistribution from rich to poor, we might expect stronger demands of the poor to change that status quo and a greater reluctance of the upper classes to endorse a social democratic conception. However, existing evidence has not been so compelling from this point of view. For example, Ceka and Magalhães (2016) found no clear evidence that, in Europe, the relationship between socio-economic status and the emphasis on a social democratic view was moderated by contextual levels of income redistribution. In fact, in the literature on preferences for redistribution, greater levels of economic inequality have been found to be associated with *smaller* differences between the redistributive preferences of groups defined by income or social class (Finseraas 2009; Dion and Birchfield 2010; Andersen and Curtis 2015, Schmidt-Catran 2016; Dimick, Rueda, and Stegmüller 2017, 2018).

It is also unclear whether the more socially privileged segments of society should be comparatively less opposed to a “populist” conception of democracy when the political status quo is closer to that conception. The first

problem here results from defining what a “populist status quo” might mean. On the one hand, the notion of a “populist political system” seems particularly difficult to operationalize, ranging from its ideal form as a “‘pure’ democratic regime where the people are given the first and final word” (Mény and Surel 2002: 13) to the practical and almost diametrically opposite consequences of “populist governance”: state capture, extensive patronage, and assaults on liberal institutions of horizontal accountability (Pappas 2019: 71–3; see also Muno and Pfeiffer 2022). On the other hand, it is possible to think about a “populist status quo” from what has been called an “ideational” or “discursive” point of view, which would allow us to compare different contexts in terms of the prevalence of populist ideas in the public arena, as expressed, for example, in the political rhetoric of parties.² However, what should we expect to find here? If the political discourse in a country is strongly permeated by populism, is that the expression of a status quo characterized by an established set of ideas about unrestrained popular sovereignty, which privileged classes are less likely to reject? Or is it, quite the contrary, the expression of a more salient and prevalent “elite-challenging” political mood that should make social elites more alert and hostile to “populist” views of democracy? In sum, whether context—and what aspect of context—moderates the relationship between socio-economic status and the endorsement of social democratic or populist views of democracy has so far remained unclear or unexplored.

Data and variables

The data we analyze in this chapter come from both round 6 and 10 of the ESS survey data. More concretely, we used a total of 60 surveys in 36 countries that applied the module on views and evaluations of democracy. As dependent variables, we use the “views of democracy” scales presented and discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 of the volume: *liberal democratic*, *direct democratic*, *social democratic*, and *populist democratic*. For the first three scales, we present analyses using not only all 60 surveys but also separate analyses for both ESS round 6 and 10, including, in that case, for comparability purposes, only the 24 countries where both rounds were applied. For the analysis of populist views, we are limited to the 31 countries included in round 10.

² Following Mudde (2017), we conflate the “ideational” and “discursive” conceptions of populism, leaving aside the “authenticity” discussion as to whether populism should be seen as a sincere “set of ideas” or as mere “rhetoric” (Norris 2020).

For our main independent variable, instead of treating income or education as markers of socio-economic status, this time we explicitly resort to a measure of objective social class. Using data available in all ESS surveys about respondents and their partners (past or present occupation, employment status, and number of employees), we employ Oesch's five-class scheme (Oesch 2006).³ We adopt this simplified scheme because it focuses on the vertical (hierarchical) axis of social stratification based on the availability of organizational and professional marketable skills. The five social classes thus identified are (1) the *higher-grade service class*, an upper-middle class of managers, professionals, large employers, and high-expertise technical professionals; (2) the *lower-grade service class*, a lower-middle class of associate managers, semi-professionals, and technicians; (3) *small business owners*, such as farmers, shop or restaurant owners, and artisans; (4) *skilled workers*, including office clerks and skilled manual or service employees; and (5) *unskilled workers*, the working class of operatives, farmhands, and other low-skilled employees. As proposed earlier, we expect the members of the higher-grade service class to emphasize liberal democratic conceptions of democracy in comparison with other social classes and the opposite to occur in what concerns direct, social democratic, and populist conceptions.

To test whether this pattern changes according to context, we conduct four analyses where the relationship between belonging to the higher-grade service class and the endorsement of the different democratic visions is assessed while allowing for its moderation by macro-level variables. As for the liberal democratic view, although most European countries surveyed in ESS are liberal democratic regimes, the political status quo in a few of them is far—in some cases very far—from that liberal democratic ideal. At the time the ESS surveys in rounds 6 or 10 were conducted, this included countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Round 10 also collected data in Hungary and Poland, where a process of democratic backsliding has been occurring for nearly a decade. We therefore expect that the propensity of social elites to give greater emphasis to a liberal democratic conception of democracy should be stronger the more the status quo conforms to that conception but also to be comparatively less pronounced in countries where the status quo regimes are further away from the ideal of competitive elections and the functioning rule of law and checks and balances. Using data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Coppedge et al. 2016), we can examine whether the greater emphasis of the upper-middle classes on a liberal democratic view depends on the extent to

³ We employed the scripts for social class available at: <https://people.unil.ch/danieloesch/scripts>.

which the regime is indeed liberal democratic, a phenomenon captured by V-Dem's *Liberal democracy index* (*v2x_libdem*), as measured for each country and the year in which the survey data were collected.⁴

Second, we expect that the comparatively *lower* emphasis given by the same social elites to other views of democracy should also be sensitive to context: the more the status quo matches those alternative views (direct democracy, social democracy, populist democracy), the less the dominant classes are likely to reject it in comparison with other social groups. In what concerns direct democracy, although most European countries do not frequently resort to referendums and initiatives, some countries are exceptional in this regard, such as Switzerland, and, in varying periods in time, countries such as Slovenia, Italy, Slovakia, or Lithuania. This also allows us to examine whether, in those contexts where direct democracy is indeed more prevalent, the upper-middle classes become comparatively less reluctant to endorse it as part of their conception of democracy. For this purpose, we resort to V-Dem's *Direct popular vote index* (*v2xdd_dd*), which captures, for each country and year, the extent to which referendums, plebiscites, or initiatives are utilized. This allows us to test whether the polarization between the higher-grade service class and other classes around direct democracy diminishes when the use of referendums and initiatives is part of the political status quo.

Third, we assess whether objective levels of income inequality moderate the relationship between social class and adherence to a social democratic conception of democracy. The relevant macro-variable here is the Gini coefficient of equivalized disposable income (Eurostat 2023 and Solt 2020 for missing cases). Finally, we assess whether the predicted negative relationship between belonging to the upper-middle class and the endorsement of a populist view is moderated by the prevalence of populist rhetoric in politics in each country. For this purpose, we resort to the 2019 Global Party Survey (Norris 2020), which contains a variable (*V8—Populist Rhetoric*) that codes parties on the extent to which they employ language that “challenges the legitimacy of established political institutions and emphasizes that the will of the people should prevail.” For each country, our measure of the prevalence of *Populist party rhetoric* is the average of *V8* weighted by the size of each party in parliament. This country-level variable will be interacted with measures of social class when modeling of adherence to populist conceptions

⁴ More specifically, for surveys whose fieldwork was completed in the first semester of the year, we code *v2x_libdem* with the value of the preceding year; when fieldwork was completed in the second semester, we code the current year.

of democracy, to determine whether the prevalence of populist rhetoric in politics affects class-based polarization around such conceptions.

Analysis

The presentation of the results of our empirical analyses is structured into two main sub-sections. In the first, we investigate the relationship between social class and the extent to which citizens emphasize our four views of democracy. Using ordinary least squares (OLS), we regress the four scales on dummy variables representing the social classes, with the higher-grade service class as the reference category. As individual-level controls, we include whether the respondent is *Female*, the respondent's *Age* and *Age*², whether the respondent is *Unemployed*, and *Religious attendance* (on a scale from 1 to 7, from "Never" to "Every day"). We present three results for each dependent variable: for the entirety of available data, encompassing all 60 surveys from ESS rounds 6 and 10, and for each of the separate sets of surveys from rounds 6 and 10, including, in that case, only the 24 countries where both rounds were conducted. This allows us to examine the relationship between social class and democratic views for the entire set of surveys and also to determine whether the correlates of these views have changed from 2012/13 to 2021/22. For the populist view of democracy, we are, of course, limited to the 31 surveys conducted in round 10. Our estimation approach involves employing fixed effects for each country (as well as for the ESS round, for the larger dataset), coupled with standard errors clustered by survey, allowing us to estimate social class effects while controlling for omitted macro-level factors and overall time trends. As recommended by Gelman (2008), we standardized all independent variables that are not binary by dividing them by two standard deviations. Binary variables are mean-centered. This adjustment makes all coefficients more easily comparable, even those related to binary variables. The outcomes are visually represented using the coefficients associated with these standardized variables, including the corresponding 95 percent confidence intervals.

In the second sub-section, the scope of our analysis broadens to encompass macro-level variables as potential moderators of the relationship between social class and views of democracy: *Liberal democracy index*, *Direct popular vote index*, *Gini coefficient*, and *Populist Party Rhetoric*. We estimate cross-level interactions between those variables and a dummy variable identifying members of the *higher-grade service class*. Here, to leverage cross-contextual variation as much as possible but also to attend to the fact that not all



Figure 6.1 Liberal democracy.

countries conducted both rounds (and, obviously, each round fails to include all countries), we use the pooled dataset of 60 surveys in 36 countries to estimate a cross-classified multilevel model with a random intercept and a random slope for the *higher-grade service class*. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and the Gini coefficient for income inequality at the time the surveys were conducted are always included as macro-level controls.

Social class and democratic views

Figures 6.1 to 6.4 show the coefficient plots of the individual-level correlates of our four dependent variables. The complete regression results are shown in tables in the Online Appendix (Tables A6.1 to A6.4). The first three figures present the results for ESS rounds 6 and 10 separately (in the 24 countries where both rounds were conducted), as well as the results for all 60 surveys in both rounds. Figure 6.4, populist democracy, includes only the surveys conducted in round 10.

Figure 6.1 shows that, as hypothesized, when compared to the higher-grade service class—the reference category—members of all other social classes are less likely to espouse a liberal conception of democracy. This is especially true for skilled and unskilled workers. Still, even the lower-middle class

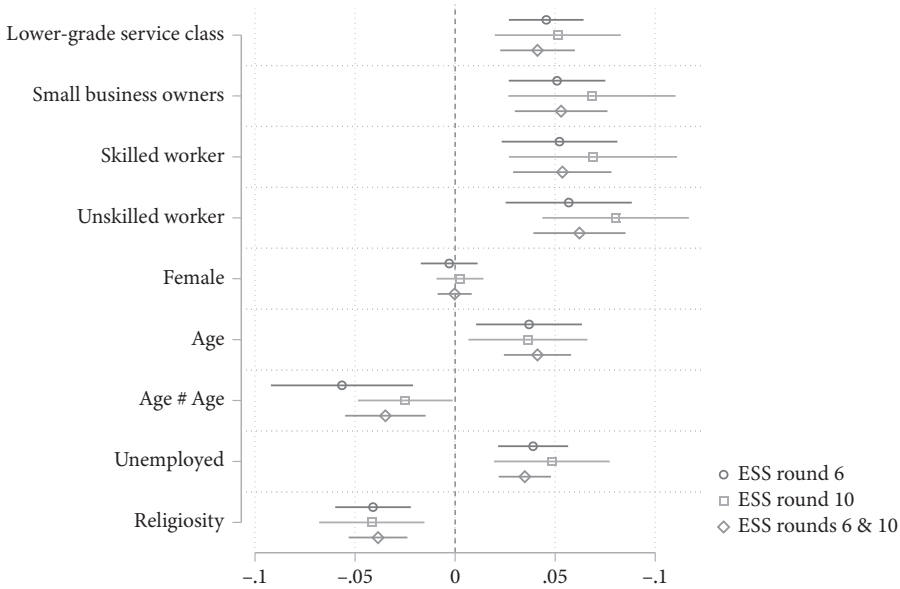


Figure 6.2 Direct democracy.



Figure 6.3 Social democracy.

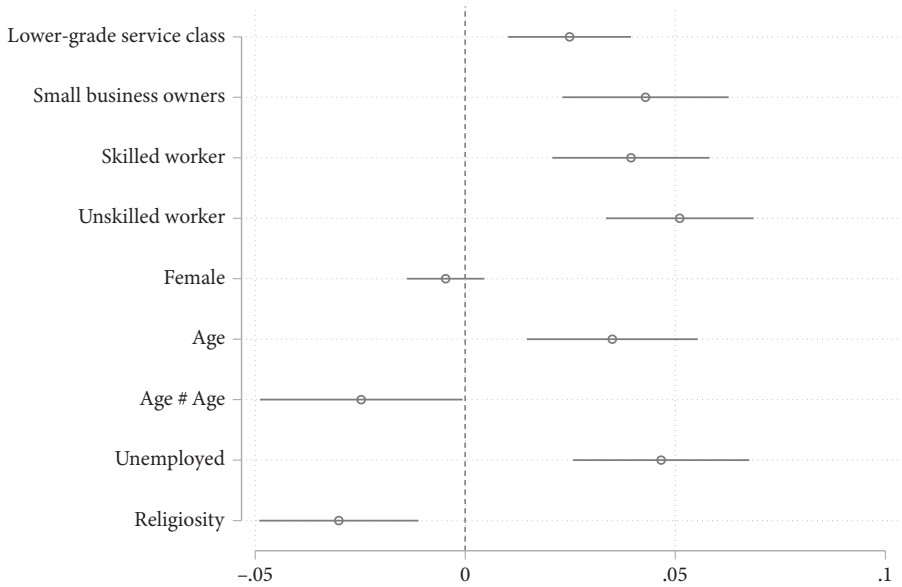


Figure 6.4 Populist democracy.

and small business workers give less emphasis to the liberal democratic view than the upper-middle class. The exact opposite is true for direct democracy (Figure 6.2), social democracy (Figure 6.3), and populist democracy (Figure 6.4): in comparison with members of the professional and managerial elites, all other social classes give greater emphasis to these other views of democracy. Figures 6.1 to 6.3 also confirm a great deal of stability in the signs and the relative size of the coefficients across time. The coefficients for the social class dummies (and, in fact, for most other variables) are undistinguishable between round 6 and round 10. In other words, social class is a significant correlate of which features of democracy Europeans view as most important, and little or nothing in this respect has changed between 2012/13 and 2021/22.

The results for the control variables also deserve mention. The respondents' sex seems to play a marginal role in determining views on democracy. The coefficients for this variable are either statistically insignificant or very small compared to those of other individual-level variables. The one exception is *Social Democracy*. As can be seen in Figure 6.3, female respondents are more likely to emphasize a social democratic conception of democracy than males in both ESS rounds and this result is statistically significant at

the .05 level. Age has a curvilinear relationship with various conceptions of democracy. There is relatively strong evidence of an inverted U-shape of Age on the importance given to liberal democracy, direct democracy, and populist democracy, as shown by the negative sign of the squared age term in Figures 6.1 to 6.4. This suggests that both the youngest and the oldest individuals are less likely to consider liberal democracy as extremely important than those in the middle of the age continuum. However, for social democracy, this curvilinear effect of age is statistically insignificant for ESS round 10 (see Figure A6.1 in the Online Appendix for the marginal effects graphs). Higher levels of religiosity are associated with less emphasis on liberal, social, direct, and populist democracy. In contrast, unemployed individuals are more likely to emphasize all four conceptions of democracy.

In the Online Appendix (Table A6.5), we re-estimated these models by adding a series of attitudinal controls: *Political interest*, *Political trust* (the regression-based scores resulting from a factor analysis of trust in politicians, parliament, and political parties), and the 11-point scale of *Left-right self-placement* (and its square). Previous studies suggest that low interest in politics is associated with greater indifference about notions of “democracy” (Davis et al. 2022: 82)⁵ and thus with weaker and less elaborated opinions about it (Ceka and Magalhães 2016, 2020: 872). High levels of political trust also seem to go together with less emphatic or elaborate conceptions of what democracy should be (Ceka and Magalhães 2016, 2020; Davis et al. 2022: 106; Quaranta 2018: 876), arguably the result of the lower demands upon government placed by people who believe political institutions and elected officials will do the “right thing” (Armingeon and Ceka 2014). Finally, individuals who place themselves at the center of the ideological left–right spectrum are also less likely to emphasize any particular view of democracy (Ceka and Magalhães 2016). Although not all of them can be defined in this way, we know that a large segment of respondents who place themselves in centrist positions are “nominal centrists,” characterized by low levels of political knowledge and engagement (Rodon 2015), for whom the expression of a moderate ideological position represents almost a hidden form of non-response (Scholz and Zuell 2016). As a result, the relationship between left–right self-placement and the endorsement of democratic views of all sorts typically emerges as convex curvilinear. There is only a partial—and predictable—exception: people located away from the centrist ideological positions were more likely to endorse a social democratic view of democracy

⁵ But see König (2022), where political interest is negatively related with a “post-democratic” conception of democracy, that narrows it down to mere electoral participation and elite insulation. In this study, however, we do not examine such a conception.

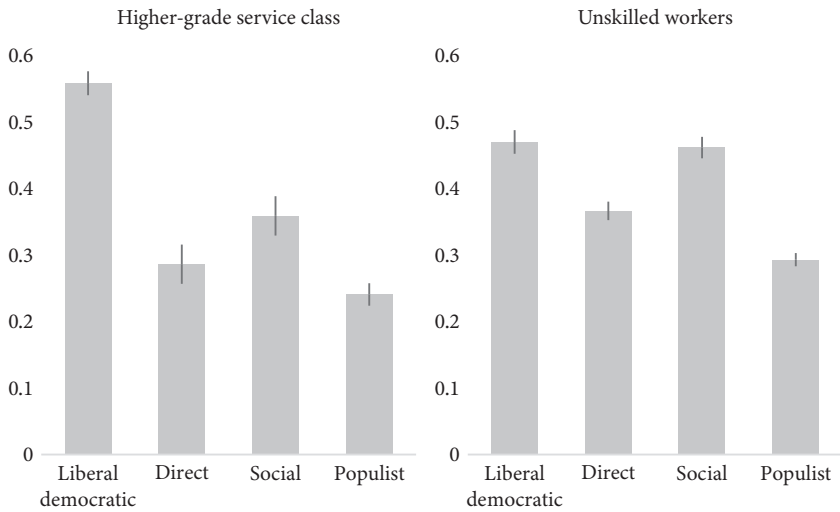


Figure 6.5 Views of democracy for different social classes.

when they placed themselves on the left than when they placed themselves on the right (Ceka and Magalhães 2016: 105). The results in the Online Appendix confirm all these expectations (Table A6.5). Importantly, however, the results for social class are, albeit somewhat weaker, fundamentally unaltered.

Figure 6.5 shows the implications of these relationships between social class and democratic views from a different point of view: focusing on analysis of the core 24 countries that conducted round 10, it plots the predicted values of *liberal democratic*, *direct democratic*, *social democratic*, and *populist democratic* views for the higher-grade service class and unskilled workers, again following models with country fixed effects and *Female*, the respondent's *Age* and *Age*², *Unemployed*, *Religious attendance* as controls (with controls set at mean values for numeric variables and the mode for dummy variables). It therefore provides, for the classes placed at the two extremes of social stratification, a profile of which conceptions of democracy they emphasize.

The differences are not dramatic but important enough to identify two contrasting ways of thinking about what “democracy” should be. For the professional and managerial elites, liberal democracy stands out as clearly more important than any other way of conceiving “democracy.” In contrast, for the individuals placed at the bottom of social stratification, a more multi-faceted conception of “democracy” emerges, where the goals of ensuring free and meaningful elections and protecting individual rights are placed at an

equal plane with alternative or complementary goals, especially those related to fighting poverty and reducing inequality.

In sum, social class plays a relevant role in shaping the importance Europeans attribute to different ways of conceiving “democracy.” Notably, individuals belonging to the dominant high-grade service class, comprising high-level managers, professionals, and large employers, exhibit a heightened propensity to prioritize a liberal democratic perspective when contrasted with all other socio-economic classes. This group also tends to downplay other supplementary facets of democracy, such as the direct, social, and populist ones, comparatively compared to individuals from lower social classes. The results from ESS rounds 6 and 10 showcase complete consistency between each other in this regard, revealing great temporal stability in the observed patterns.

Cross-level interaction analysis

We have also hypothesized, following conflict theories in social psychology, that the relationship between social class and democratic conceptions should be contingent upon the extent to which such conceptions match what the social and political status quo happens to be in any given country. To test this, we employ a series of interaction models with a dummy for the high-grade service class interacted with various macro-level indicators that measure such a status quo for each of our dependent variables. Table 6.1 reports the regression output, and for easier interpretation, Figure 6.6 presents the marginal effects of being part of the high-grade service class on the various conceptions of democracy, contingent on different contextual factors. For robustness checks, we also ran our models with the attitudinal controls discussed previously and controlled for the mode of data collection (self-completion vs. face-to-face interviews). The results remain virtually the same (see Tables A6.6 and A6.7 in the Online Appendix).

As can be seen in the upper-left graph of Figure 6.6, the greater emphasis that social elites put on a liberal democratic view of democracy is evident in countries where regimes are liberal democratic. The greater the value of the *Liberal democratic index*, the stronger the support for liberal democratic conceptions of democracy among the social elites compared to others. However, this difference in emphasis diminishes and eventually vanishes as the regime deviates further from this ideal of liberal democracy. At the low end of the *Liberal democratic index*, there is no statistically significant difference between individuals belonging to the highest social class and others concerning the emphasis they attribute to liberal democracy. To put it differently,

Table 6.1 Cross-classified multilevel models (random intercept and random slope for higher-grade service class)

Variables	Liberal democracy	Direct democracy	Social democracy	Populist democ- racy
Higher-grade service class	.069*** (.003)	-.050*** (.006)	-.061*** (.004)	-.032*** (.007)
Liberal Democracy Index	.084*** (.010)			
Direct popular vote index		-.112*** (.012)		
Gini coefficient	-.116*** (.009)	-.019 (.014)	-.013 (.010)	.001 (.031)
Populist partisan rhetoric				.047 (.035)
Higher-grade service class* Liberal Democracy Index	.037*** (.006)			
Higher-grade service class* Direct popular vote index		.051*** (.008)		
Higher-grade service class* Gini coefficient			.015* (.007)	
Higher-grade service class* Populist partisan rhetoric				-.017 (.014)
GDP per capita	-.026* (.011)	-.017 (.012)	-.012 (.011)	-.080* (.034)
Female	-.018*** (.002)	-.001 (.003)	.034*** (.003)	-.006 (.004)
Age	.029*** (.002)	.041*** (.003)	.069*** (.003)	.035*** (.004)
Age* Age	-.074*** (.005)	-.033*** (.007)	-.051*** (.006)	-.022** (.008)
Unemployed	.010* (.005)	.037*** (.006)	.062*** (.006)	.050*** (.008)
Religiosity	-.046*** (.002)	-.038*** (.003)	-.031*** (.003)	-.029*** (.004)
Constant	.532*** (.029)	.420*** (.038)	.479*** (.034)	.315*** (.015)
Observations	94,781	95,542	97,995	49,438

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

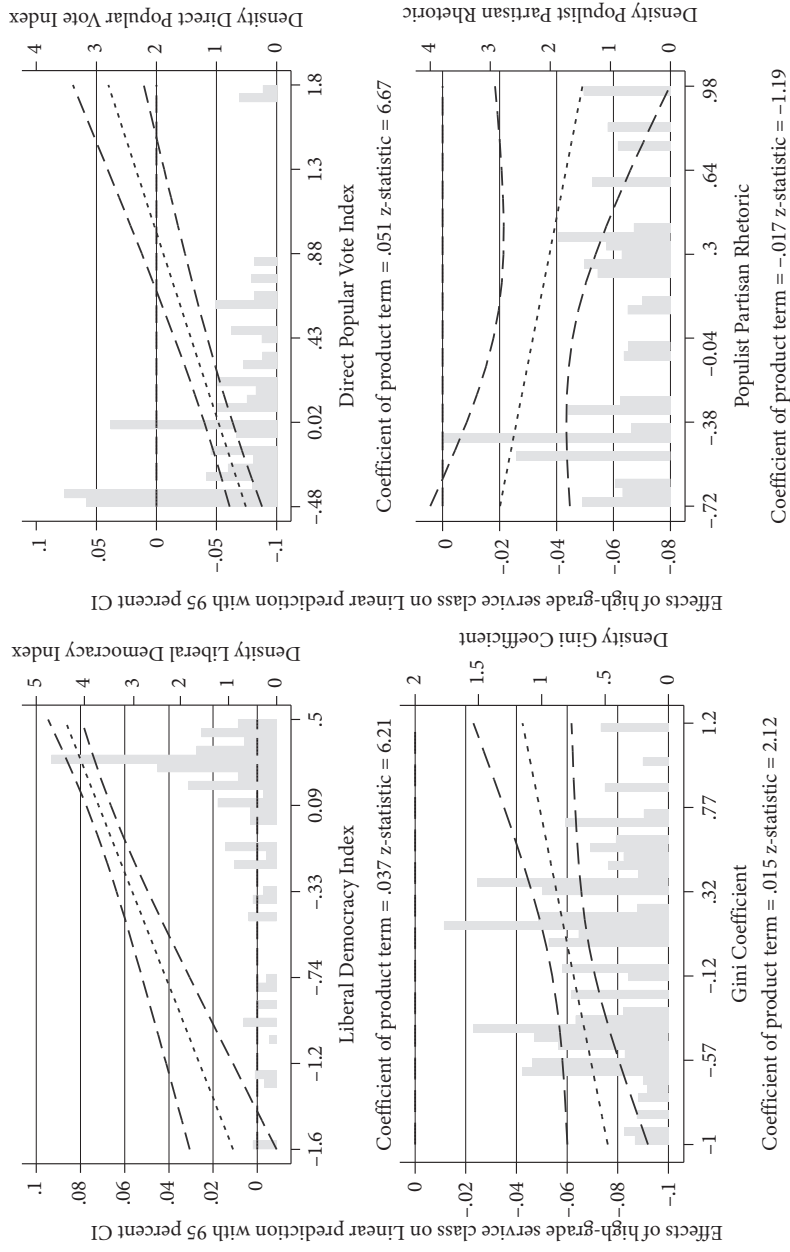


Figure 6.6 Marginal effects of being part of the high-grade service class on various conceptions of democracy, contingent on contextual factors.

the degree to which social elites prioritize a liberal democratic perspective, in comparison to others, hinges on how closely the current political system aligns with liberal democracy, as we had hypothesized.

Shifting the focus to direct democracy reveals a similar phenomenon. As shown by the graph in the upper-right corner of Figure 6.6, in countries where direct democracy lacks institutional presence or usage, individuals from social elite circles are more likely to deemphasize direct democracy in comparison with other social groups. However, this class-based polarization narrows and eventually disappears as direct democracy becomes more ingrained in the prevailing political landscape. In countries where a frequent resort to direct democracy mechanisms is the status quo, there is no statistically significant difference in how much emphasis social elites put on direct democracy compared to others. Observation of the distribution of cases suggests the possibility that this interaction effect might be driven by the cases with the most extreme values of the *Direct popular vote index*, Switzerland in both rounds 6 and 10 and Slovenia in round 6. However, as we show in the Online Appendix (Figure A6.2), when the model is estimated excluding those three cases, the same pattern is present: the more frequent the use of the direct popular vote, the lower the polarization of social classes around a direct democracy conception.

In the lower-left quadrant of Figure 6.6, we show how the effect of belonging to the upper-middle classes on the emphasis given to a social democratic conception of democracy varies depending on the level of income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient. We speculated that, in countries where income inequality is lower, social classes might be less polarized around a redistributive view of democracy than in highly unequal countries. However, this is not supported by the data. In fact, we find the opposite result: the coefficient of the interaction term between belonging to the higher-grade service class and income inequality is positive and significant, showing that, in contexts with higher income inequality, the negative relationship between belonging to the upper-middle classes and emphasizing a social democratic conception of democracy becomes less pronounced. This echoes findings from previous studies showing that income- or class-based polarization around redistribution diminishes as income inequality increases (Finseraas 2009; Dion and Birchfield 2010; Andersen and Curtis 2015; Schmidt-Catran 2016; Dimick, Rueda, and Stegmüller 2017, 2018), a phenomenon consistent with altruistic concerns with social welfare on the part of the upper classes or to their self-interested concern with avoiding the negative externalities of very high inequality.

Finally, we turn to the populist view of democracy that was measured only in ESS round 10. In the previous section, we found that members of the upper-middle classes are less likely to support populist democracy than others. Still, we also speculated that this pattern might vary depending on the extent to which populist party rhetoric was prevalent in each country. But in what way? The results in the lower-right quadrant of Figure 6.6 and the last column of Table 6.1 are inconclusive. The interaction between belonging to the social elites and the prevalence of populist partisan rhetoric is not statistically significant, perhaps unsurprisingly, given the smaller number of macro-level observations we have available in comparison with the preceding analyses. Still, the results suggest that the lower propensity of the higher-grade service class to emphasize a populist conception we found in the previous section is absent in countries with the lowest score in the populist partisan rhetoric measure. This is consistent with the notion that a class-based polarization around an anti-elitist conception of democracy and the threats and opportunities it poses is more likely to emerge in contexts of heightened populist rhetoric. Such an argument, however, requires further empirical examination.

Conclusion

“Democracy” is an abstract concept that, at least overtly, elicits widespread support from citizens. As Sergio Martini shows in Chapter 11 of this book, Europeans do rate the “importance of living in a democracy” at very high levels. However, one of the questions this volume seeks to answer is what “democracy” really means to Europeans. In this chapter, we approach that question from a particular angle: what explains why some citizens give more emphasis to some conceptions of democracy rather than to others?

We answer that people's views about the meaning of democracy reflect their position in a vertical hierarchy of social stratification. Despite their promise of political equality, liberal democracies have been shown to be far from perfect in this regard. The policies they generate are more likely to reflect and be responsive to the concerns and preferences of the rich, the more educated, and the upper classes. It should, therefore, not come as a surprise that the rest of society holds a conception of “democracy” that reflects a greater demand for something “more” than free elections and individual rights. Furthermore, those who hold more socially privileged positions acquired them under a particular political status quo. It is not surprising that, when that status quo is a liberal democracy, the privileged hold views of

“democracy” that stress that status quo and deemphasize views that might disturb or even pose challenges to it.

Empirically, we found that social class does partially account for the extent to which people emphasize or deemphasize different views of democracy. This seems to be a remarkably stable feature of how conceptions of democracy are socially grounded. Despite the pronounced variations in economic, social, and political landscapes across Europe from 2012/13 to 2021/22, our analysis reveals a remarkable consistency in results between rounds 6 and 10: the higher-grade service class, composed of managers, professionals, and large employers, conceives of democracy primarily in terms of regular free and fair elections, civil liberties, minority rights, and the rule of law. Although this social class does not totally neglect other views of democracy, their relative importance pales in comparison to liberal democracy and its cornerstones. However, as we move down the social ladder, the notions of what it takes for a country to be “democratic” become more multifaceted. Although the liberal democratic conception is not entirely overlooked, it is somewhat downplayed in favor of alternative visions. Greater emphasis is placed on social democratic objectives and the role of “ordinary people.” This emphasis is manifested through institutional mechanisms that aim to break down the exclusivity of political elites as policymakers, such as direct democracy. It also underscores the idea that ordinary people are the ultimate and unrestricted source of political authority (i.e., populist democracy).

We also posed that social elites’ affinity to the political status quo could be further uncovered by examining whether the class-based polarization around democratic conceptions varied according to what that status quo happened to be. For both the liberal democratic and direct democratic visions, this indeed seems to be the case, confirming previous studies. The more distant a regime is, in practice, from the liberal democratic ideal, the lower the propensity of the upper classes to share a distinctively liberal democratic conception of democracy compared to those lower on the socio-economic ladder. The more referendums and initiatives are part of the commonly employed instruments of political decision-making in a polity, the less reluctant social elites are to emphasize a direct democratic view. However, a similar pattern could not be found for the social or the populist democratic visions. In European contexts characterized by greater income inequality, class-based polarization around a social democratic vision seems lower rather than higher, a finding that replicates those of other studies dedicated specifically to the study of redistributive preferences. As for the populist conception, the very notion of “status quo” is difficult to operationalize, and

our findings are merely suggestive of increased class-based polarization in contexts of heightened populist partisan rhetoric.

Why does any of this matter? In later chapters in this volume, several answers to this question will be developed. The first is that citizens' views about what democracy should be and their evaluations of how their political systems perform seem inherently connected. As Irene Palacios shows in Chapter 9, the direction of that connection is also clear. Although the empirical relationship between “demand” (conceptions) and “supply” (evaluations) is reciprocal, the former affects much more the latter than the other way around. Although the strength of this relationship is not immutable—as Mariano Torcal and Alexander H. Trechsel show for liberal democratic conceptions and evaluations in Chapter 8—those who give greater emphasis to different conceptions of democracy end up making more critical evaluations of the performance of their regimes from those points of view.

The second answer is that conceptions of democracy also have behavioral consequences. As Mónica Ferrín, Enrique Hernández, and Pedro Riera show in Chapter 13, the mismatches between different types of democratic “demands” and their respective “supply” by the political system are closely associated with voting behavior, particularly in what concerns the vote for challenger or populist parties of the right or the left (see also Wegschneider et al. 2023). Recently, others have also shown that individuals who put more emphasis on the liberal democratic conception are more likely to punish violations of democratic norms in candidate choice experiments, even if they are co-partisans (Wunsch, Jacob, and Derksen 2023). This suggests, therefore, that examining the social bases of the different visions of “democracy” held by Europeans is key to understanding the social bases of dissatisfaction with democratic performance, the electoral responses such dissatisfaction engenders, and the extent to which those responses end up punishing or rewarding undemocratic practices and actors.

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