

Democratic dreams and political reality in Europe

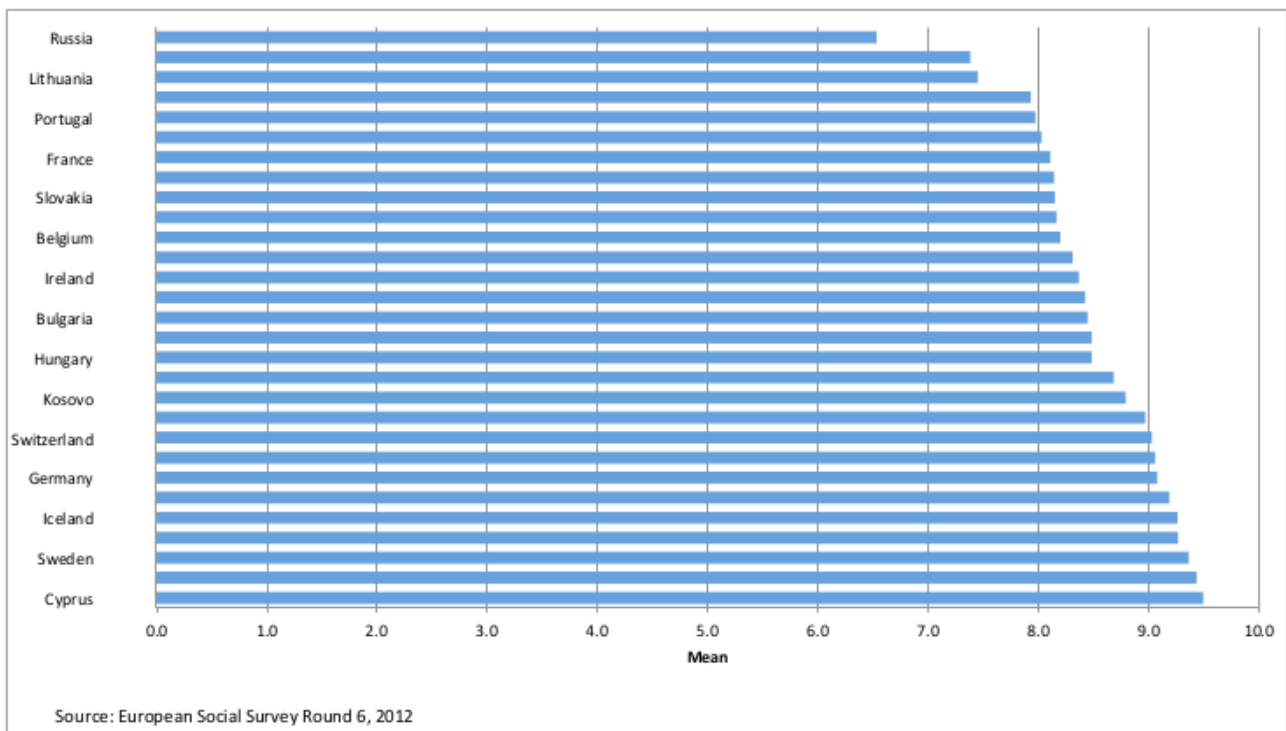
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A report on European attitudes to democracy, backed up by data from the [European Social Survey](#), is launched today to mark the UN day for democracy. The main message for the political class is that an increasingly qualified and demanding public opinion does not deserve to be administered from above.

Is the democratic dream confined to the political and intellectual *élites* or is it shared by the populace at large? When are politicians, of any stripe, no matter how often they invoke the word "democracy" on talk shows, able to interpret the wishes of the voters they are targeting? In principle, we should expect that they do this regularly, since the very word means the power of the people. But this does not ensure that the citizens are satisfied with what they get in democratic regimes. What the latter deliver might be short of their expectations – so much so that the people may be willing to have less power if they get greater benefits. Or perhaps they may desire to use their power in a different way.

These problems are hardly new, but the European Social Survey (ESS)[1] tackles them with data rather than guesswork. Thanks to an innovative project conceived by Hanspeter Kriesi, Leonardo Morlino and their colleagues, we can now say with confidence that the majority of Europe's citizens ascribe great value to life in a democracy. Despite prolonged economic crisis and the crumbling of social cohesion in many countries, people consider it essential to participate in the government of their political community. The data are as reported in Figure 1: in all countries that have taken part in the Survey, citizens regard living in a democratic country as hugely important. In all countries but Russia the values are above 7/10, and in 24 out of 29 countries the value is above 8/10. We, at least in Europe, are overwhelmingly democratic.

Such an attachment to the democratic ideal may seemingly contradict what we have seen quite recently in the European elections, since turnout was rather low in most countries, and populist politics gained a considerable consensus. These data help us to better understand citizens' view: even when there is strong dissatisfaction, this is not aiming at anti-democratic alternatives, but rather at procuring a more satisfactory and comprehensive mode of self-government.



[View larger version of Figure 1.](#)

Russians and Ukrainians are among those with the least desire to be run democratically - hardly surprising given the lack of experience they have had. But the absence of trust in democracy of these peoples helps to understand why politicians are so disrespectful of the rule of law; they know that it is unlikely that they will pay the bill – in terms of reduced consensus – if the rule of law is violated or if the press is repressed. At the other end of the spectrum, Scandinavians are the most loyal to the system that has doggedly built a rather powerful signal to the political class: any attempt to violate the rules of the game is severely punished.

Europe is long and wide, and the word democracy has increasingly numerous meanings. Are we sure that the term means the same thing in countries as different as Albania and Iceland? Do European Union member countries, from Ireland to Cyprus, share a common understanding of democracy?

The foremost method for grasping popular preferences is, of course, through free, competitive and recurrent elections. Elections are an indispensable method for selecting the government, but not necessarily for collecting preferences. Popping in the ballot box one card only does not allow much scope for sending information to the recipients. Citizens can name a candidate or a political party, and sometimes both, according to the electoral system. We choose candidates and parties for many criteria: foreign policy and health policy, the honesty and reliability of the leader, or ethical and religious values. With a single cross, the citizen cannot express her feelings. In a word, the voter does not have an *a la carte* menu available, but can only choose between different fix menus. The merit of the ESS is to dig inside the ballot box to discover citizens' desires and the complaints that the electoral process hides. At a time when the European project is under adjustment and the centrifugal forces multiply, the question is whether the peoples of Europe can be held together because they share the same democratic dream.

An analysis that assesses one's own political regime, made by citizens, allows us to link democratic dreams on the one hand to the political reality on the other. The Survey indicates that there are significant variations across areas. The outcome is reported in Table 1 for four groups of countries.^[2] In the North, the population is satisfied with existing electoral procedures, while in the East and even in the South there is much less trust. Freedom of media is questioned by citizens not only in the East, but also in the South. And another plank of democracy, equality before the law, is also considered unsatisfactory in a large part of Europe.

Table 1 - Divided Europe: Assessment by Regions

How are you satisfied from the following aspects in your own country?

Scale: from 0 to 10

	North	Scandinavia	South	East
Free and fair elections	8.1	9.0	6.5	4.8
Opposition free to criticise government	6.2	7.4	4.2	4.1
Equality before the law	6.0	7.8	3.4	3.1
Media Freedom	6.7	7.3	4.6	4.7
Protection against poverty	4.9	6.2	2.9	2.6
Reduced income inequality	4.7	6.0	2.9	2.8

Countries:

North: Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK

Scandinavia: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden

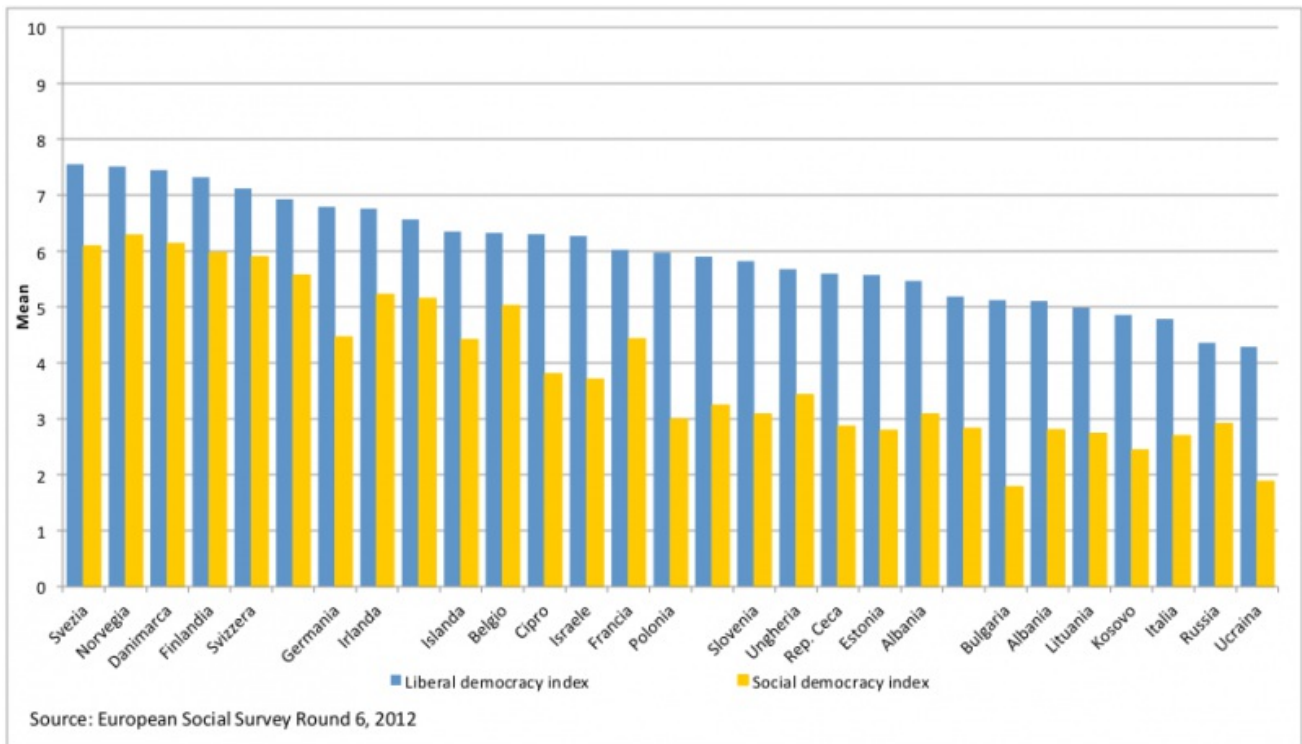
South: Cyprus, Italy, Portugal and Spain, plus neighbouring Israel

East: Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia. Kosovo. Russia and Ukraine.

Source: Elaboration on European Social Survey, Europeans and Democracy, Roma, 15 Settembre 2014

[View larger version of Table 1.](#)

These data also allow us to aggregate our evaluation across two main models of democracy: the liberal and the social democratic. The liberal democracy includes, among other elements, fair elections; an opposition free to criticize the government; equality before the law; media freedom. The social democracy model comprises protection against poverty and reduced income inequality. Figure 2 shows the values of assessment for weighted averages for the liberal and social components of democracy.



[View larger version of Figure 2.](#)

The first significant outcome is that the social component is assessed as substantially lower than the liberal component in all countries: the social component gets, on average, 2 points or more in all countries. The data clearly show that, while European public opinion consider that, at least in some countries, significant achievements have been obtained in terms of civil liberties and rule of law, much less has been obtained in social terms.

The liberal component of democracy passes the test in only half of the countries, and often is considered barely sufficient. The assessment of the social component of democracy is even harsher: in 26 out of 29 countries it is considered insufficient. The desire that democracy could imply also greater social justice is frustrated. It is an important telegram that the ESS survey sends to Angela Merkel, Ecofin and the ECB: the discontent for what the European political regimes deliver unites us from Germany and the United Kingdom to southern Europe.

Only Scandinavians promote their political regime in both the liberal and the social dimension. In these countries there is a diffuse democratic pride in the populace, and the difference between individual desires and what is acknowledged as already achieved is smaller than in any other country. But even in Scandinavia, there is the clear perception that the social dimension of democracy is substantially lagging behind the liberal.

Vox populi, vox dei?

How reliable are the opinions of the citizens? Do they accurately reflect the political reality in each country? For many years, international comparisons on the quality of political regimes made by individuals were deemed misleading. There was the fear that inhabitants of consolidated democracies would be more critical than those of new democracy since they have greater expectations. On the other hand, it was assumed that citizens of new democracies were rather satisfied with their different administration, and would overlook its shortcomings, since they tended to compare it with the previous authoritarian regime.

The survey rejects this hypothesis: the results are in fact very similar to the democratic assessment provided by external experts: both the World Bank and the Barometer of Democracy at the University of Zurich provide results very similar to those obtained through citizens' validation. This is major news

for political science and practice: citizens are today better informed and are able to provide a comparative, rather than absolute, assessment of the political regime of their own country. Tourism, media, and social networks make possible a far broader access to information, and citizens hone their expectations by looking at the global context. Thanks to these channels of the dissemination of ideas and practices, we can now see a rooted support for democracy. But this can also lead to frustrated expectations, precisely because there is awareness that democracy could deliver much more than it currently does.

The political class should therefore take this survey very seriously. It shows, first of all, that the public is increasingly demanding but also well informed. When expectations are not met, there is substantial resentment leading to the support for new entrants (as happened during the last European elections) or to abstention from the political sphere.

The main message for the political class is that an increasingly qualified and demanding public opinion does not deserve to be administered from above. New forms of participation should be invented. There are grounds for rediscovering forms of direct democracy and, above all, for a direct participation of citizens in the delivery of public goods. If people are to be asked to participate in the delivering of public goods they will have the opportunity to do better than their current elected representative. Or, at least, to realize if the democratic dream has not yet been fulfilled, this is not due to the inability of the rulers only.

The European Social Survey

The [European Social Survey](#) is periodically carried out in 29 European countries. 21 of them are EU members, and the nine others are Russia, Ukraine, Switzerland, Norway, Israel, Iceland, Albania and Kosovo. The last edition has implemented for the first time a major survey on how citizens understand and assess democracy.

[1] The European Social Survey is a periodic statistical analysis on social trends in 29 European countries (website: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>). The last edition of the survey has devoted its monographic part to the attitudes of Europeans towards democracy.

[2] North includes: Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK. South includes: South: Cyprus, Italy, Portugal and Spain, plus neighbouring Israel. East includes: East: Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Kosovo, Russia and Ukraine. Scandinavia includes: Scandinavia: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.