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Towards a better comprehension of satisfaction with democracy

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Abstract

Understanding citizens' attitudes towards their political systems continues to be a matter of great importance in the beginning of the 21st century. Traditional approaches used to assess these attitudes have proven to be limited and lead to erroneous conclusions. Using data from a pilot study conducted by the European Social Survey in the United Kingdom and Russia in late 2011, this article employs multiple items to offer a comprehensive analysis of citizens' evaluations of the functioning of their democracies. Findings reveal deep citizen concern with economic performance. Other important conclusions are drawn at both the substantive and methodological levels.

1. Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century has witnessed the emergence of a series of social movements around the world that renews academic interest in studying citizens' attitudes towards their political systems. At the core of many of these movements lies the feeling that current democracies are not complete, that they are not 'true' democracies and that they can be improved. The fight of the Spanish *indignados*, for example, is not related to the question of whether they prefer a democratic system over a dictatorship, as the issue may have been in Spain during the transition from the Franco regime period. Their struggle is related to the question of what 'type' of democracy they demand (hence the slogan '*democracia real ya!*'). Protests in New York City, London, and other important cities have aimed in the same direction: citizens seem to be dissatisfied not with democracy as a concept, but with how democracy is functioning in everyday practice.

What is the most appropriate strategy for assessing citizens' evaluations of the functioning of their democracies? One of the questions most commonly used by scholars drawing on survey data is the one usually referred to as 'satisfaction with democracy'. According to several analysts, this question has been tapping citizens' evaluations of the performance of their systems, or the so-called 'specific' political support first coined by David Easton in his theory of political systems (1965, 1975). But the use of this question has not been without problems. For a start, the measure has proved to be highly sensitive to different institutional contexts and ideological configurations (Linde & Ekman, 2003). As well, it has been found to tap three different dimensions of political support: authorities, the political system, and democracy as a form of government (Canache, Mondak, & Seligson, 2001). Lastly, it has also been argued that citizens have different understandings and expectations of what democracy is and what it should deliver (Booth & Seligson, 2009; Bratton & Mattes, 2001; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007; Vargas Cullell, 2006). In this sense, it is far from obvious what 'satisfaction with democracy' actually measures, and this limits our capacity to derive meaningful inferences from its analysis.

A comprehensive understanding of attitudes towards democracy today requires the use of more elaborate measures that tap specific citizen attitudes towards distinct components of the democratic system. It is not enough to rely on only one indicator such as 'satisfaction

with democracy' to gauge citizens' evaluations of a concept of the complexity of democracy. It is more relevant for the academic debate today to disaggregate democracy into several components and analyze citizens' evaluations towards each one of these components separately, not only because this approach is much more informative, but because it leads to important theoretical implications.

Following recommendations from a strong academic current (Canache et al., 2001; Kriesi, Morlino, Magalhaes, Alonso, & Ferrin, 2010; Linde & Ekman, 2003; Norris, 1999), this article makes use of multiple indicators to conduct an in-depth analysis of citizens' evaluations of how democracy works in their country. This will be achieved by assessing their answers to different survey items which gauge attitudes towards a range of possible components of a democratic system. The analysis will be performed by applying the technique of 'importance-performance analysis' to data coming from the European Social Survey's 6th round pilot study, conducted in the United Kingdom and Russia in late 2011.

2. Theoretical framework: political support and its measurement

Most academic research dealing with citizens' attitudes towards political systems has departed from David Easton's ideas on political support. More than forty years ago, Easton put forward the idea that political support should be considered a multidimensional concept (Easton, 1975). He originally proposed a dual conceptualization of support that could account both for evaluations of authorities' performance ('specific' support) and for attitudes towards more basic and fundamental aspects of the political system ('generalized' or 'diffuse' support). "Support is not all of a piece", he stated, and its constituent classes can vary independently from each other (1975, p. 437).

On the one hand, Easton defines specific support as the type related to the "satisfactions that members of a system feel they obtain from the perceived outputs and performance of the political authorities" (1975, p. 437). It may include both evaluations according to the extent to which citizen demands have been met and evaluations tapping perceived general performance of the system and authorities. It is, by definition, conditional on perceived benefits and satisfactions. Generalized support, on the other hand, is related to the

“evaluations of what an object is or represents -to the general meaning it has for a person- not of what it does” (1975, p. 444). This type of support has been related to the “affective” orientations citizens have towards political systems (Almond & Verba, 1963; Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999). Generalized support is more durable and shows fewer fluctuations than specific support, and is normally independent of outputs and performance in the short run. It is the “reservoir of favorable attitudes” (Easton, 1975, p. 444) that allows members of a system accept or tolerate policy outputs to which they are opposed while maintaining esteem for the democratic principles.

The original idea of Easton was that people who showed diffuse support for a political system would in general accept the authorities chosen through it. But they could also lose trust in these authorities and be dissatisfied with the functioning of their system while maintaining support for its fundamental principles. Diffuse support and low levels of specific support can live together: up to a certain threshold, they are independent of each other. And as Easton himself proposes, “it is the unpredictability of the relationship between political dissatisfaction and tension on the one hand and the acceptance of basic political arrangements on the other that constitutes a persistent puzzle for research” (1975, p. 437).

As important as they have been for the study of political attitudes, Easton’s conceptualizations have been described as somewhat vague and have led to research that is “ambiguous, confusing and noncumulative” (Kaase, 1988, p. 117). While there is wide acceptance among scholars that political support is indeed a multidimensional concept, no agreement has been achieved in terms of the proper way to assess it through empirical research. Different understandings of Easton’s ideas have led to a variety of schemes, approaches and indicators designed to study the nature and structure of political support. Discussions regarding which indicators are more appropriate for measuring both specific and diffuse support date back to the 1970’s, when authors debated whether the increasing levels of discontent shown in surveys in the United States reflected attitudes towards the incumbents or towards the democratic regime in general (Citrin, 1974; Miller, 1974). Forty years later the debate is still open: indicators which have been used to measure both types of support have been strongly and recurrently criticized. There is no academic agreement on how exactly Easton’s theory should be interpreted or empirically tested.

In the political support literature, ‘satisfaction with democracy’ has been one of the concepts widely used by analysts as a measure of Easton’s ‘specific’ support. The concept has traditionally been assessed through one ‘classical’ indicator: most of the important survey programs around the world (American National Election Studies, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, European Social Survey, AmericasBarometer, Latinobarometro, Afrobarometer) use slight variations of the following question: “How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in (country)?”, and most of them include a four point unipolar scale with the categories ‘very satisfied’, ‘fairly satisfied’, ‘not very satisfied’ and ‘not at all satisfied’¹ as possible answers.

Through the ‘satisfaction with democracy’ item, analysts have assumed to be tapping citizens’ evaluations of the functioning of the democratic system in their countries. But several authors have expressed concerns regarding this indicator’s serious problems of validity. Canache, Mondak and Seligson find that the ‘satisfaction with democracy’ item is a severely flawed empirical measure because it “...taps multiple dimensions of political support, and the mix of those dimensions varies across both individuals and nations” (2001, p. 525). In the same line, Linde and Ekman state that it is “far from obvious what ‘satisfaction with democracy’ actually signifies” as it is highly sensitive to different institutional settings (2003, p. 391).

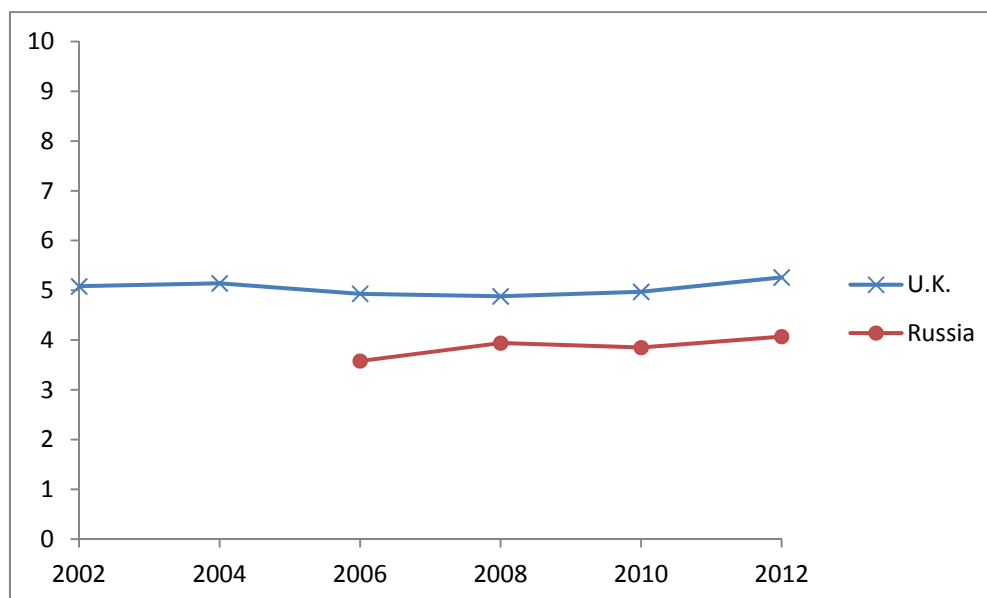
Furthermore, there is evidence that citizens have different understandings and expectations of what democracy is and what it should deliver (Booth & Seligson, 2009; Bratton & Mattes, 2001; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007; Vargas Cullell, 2006). If indeed the meaning of democracy varies from person to person, individuals will have different things in mind when answering survey questions that assess their attitudes towards democracy. For one person, the meaning of democracy might be strongly related to the protection of personal freedoms while to another, to how equal the justice system treats everyone. The meaning of democracy may also change through time: at a given point, freedom of press might have special saliency in the political scenario of a nation, thus influencing the public conception of democracy towards that connotation, while at electoral times it is likely to

¹ Exceptions to this are the AmericasBarometer Surveys, which use a four point bipolar scale ranging from ‘very satisfied’ to ‘very dissatisfied’ and the European Social Survey, which uses an eleven point bipolar scale which ranges from ‘extremely dissatisfied’ to ‘extremely satisfied’. For extensive details on types of scales and other characteristics of survey questions refer to (Saris & Gallhofer, 2007).

be more related to how elections function. And if the substantive content of satisfaction with democracy is both uncertain and varied, meaningful comparison is impossible, and the indicator results in having limited or no theoretical utility (Canache et al., 2001).

Take figure 1, for example. According to the classical ‘satisfaction with democracy’ question, it appears evident that Russian citizens are more dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their country than their British counterparts. It also seems evident that the difference in satisfaction between citizens of both countries is quite stable through time. But what does this actually mean? The figure does not – and cannot - reveal what exactly about democracy are Russian and British citizens dissatisfied about. Is it the democratic system as a whole? Is it the functioning of elections? Is it the availability of different political alternatives? Is it the performance of authorities? The direct indicator tapping satisfaction with the functioning of democracy is limited in this sense, as “in the best-case scenario, (it) captures one of seven different things: support for authorities, system support, support for democracy as a form of government, any two of these three dimensions of support, or all three” (Canache et al., 2001, p. 525).

Figure 1.- Satisfaction with the way democracy works (‘classical’ indicator)



Notes: The numbers above represent the mean score to the question: “And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?” which was answered using a scale where “0 = extremely dissatisfied” and “10 = extremely satisfied”. Data comes from the European Social Survey rounds 1 – 5 (for years 2002 – 2010) and from the European Social Survey’s Round 6 Pilot Study (for year 2012).

The traditional ‘satisfaction with democracy’ question is unable to discriminate between citizens’ attitudes towards different components of democracy. What academics and policy makers need today is to distinguish the specific components of democracies that are failing, or the ones that citizens evaluate the worst. For this sake, it is necessary to study satisfaction with the functioning of democracy from a multidimensional perspective. This article follows the advice of several authors (Canache et al., 2001; Kriesi et al., 2010; Linde & Ekman, 2003; Norris, 1999) who argue in favor of using multiple indicators which tap citizens’ evaluations of different democratic components independently of each other to achieve a better understanding of citizens’ evaluations of democratic systems.

3. What to measure? Possible components of a democratic system

While there are numerous ongoing debates among scholars on what an appropriate definition of democracy consists of, one thing there are few disagreements about is the multidimensional nature of the concept. Democracy is without a doubt a concept which embraces several distinct aspects, components, or ‘dimensions’. This article argues that satisfaction with each one of these aspects may be independent from each other. In this sense, it is possible that citizens feel satisfied with the functioning of some of the elements of their democratic system while being very critical towards others. To be able to distinguish the different attitudes empirically, multiple measures should be used. This will allow the assessment of citizens’ attitudes towards different possible democratic components.

Two approaches can be used to measure citizens’ evaluations of different components of a democratic system. The first one, which for the sake of this paper will be call ‘closed’ approach, implies establishing an initial definition of what democracy is and the components it includes, and then measuring attitudes towards each one of these components. The initial definition in this case should be established by the researcher and should be informed by theory. It should be a definition which is both “minimal”, implying that all the properties or characteristics that are not indispensable for its identification are not included in the definition (Sartori, 1976, p. 61), and “complete”, in the sense that “no other discrete features are necessary to characterize” the concept (Mainwaring, Brinks, &

Pérez-Liñán, 2001, p. 41). In sum, the definition used should not lack anything nor include anything that is not necessary. This way, when measuring attitudes towards all of the different components included in the initial definition, one could have certainty of completely – and exactly - covering the concept at stake (at least in theory).

The second approach, which I will label ‘open’, does not depart from a strict definition of what democracy is. In fact, it leaves it open for citizens to decide what is and what is not important in a democratic system. This approach allows for the inclusion of certain aspects of political systems which frequently do not find a place in conventional definitions of democracy, such as social or economic equality. It also allows for the inclusion of aspects coming from different – and even opposed – definitions of democracy. In sum, it can act as a conciliatory ‘basket’ where competing definitions of democracy can coexist.

Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. The ‘closed’ approach has the advantage that it can rest on more solid theoretical grounds, as academic discussions about the definition of democracy are vast and rich. But this same richness of theory on the proper definition of democracy acts also as a problem for the ‘closed’ approach, as there is no academic agreement on what a correct definition of democracy is. Definitions of democracy have been offered by dozens throughout the last decades (Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Diamond & Morlino, 2004; Munck & Verkuilen, 2002; Schmitter & Karl, 1991). In fact, it has been repeatedly described as an “essentially contested” concept (Gallie, 1956), in the sense that its definition is the focus of endless disputes that, “although not resolvable by argument of any kind, are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence” (Gallie, 1956, p. 169). Thus, choosing a ‘closed’, strict definition of democracy is not an easy task, and it always implies taking sides with one branch of the theory, and leaving out some possible aspects.

On the other hand, the ‘open’ approach could be criticized for its ‘lightness’. If every single possible aspect that could belong in a democratic system is included in the definition, you end up without knowing what exactly you are measuring, with a definition that is by no sense “minimal” – and very likely not “complete”. However, this approach has the advantage of allowing citizens to express their understandings of what components a

democracy is made up of, and this is an area of political attitudes which has not been studied profoundly.

The interest of this paper is not to assess citizens' evaluations of a particular conception of democracy, but to assess their evaluations of the importance and performance of several components that could make part of a democratic system. For this sake, I have opted to follow the 'open' approach described above. A wide range of possible components of a democratic system are included in the analysis, and it remains open for citizens to decide if they are indeed important for a democracy or not. I do not claim that the different aspects of democracy included here make up neither a "minimal" nor a "complete" definition of democracy; they are barely a collection of components of democracy commonly found in the literature. It could even be the case that essential dimensions of a democratic system are missing from the analysis, or that different items included tap attitudes towards very similar objects. Again, I do not intend to offer an analysis of citizens' attitudes towards a theoretically 'correct' definition of democracy, but to understand how citizens define and evaluate their political systems.

For the decision of which possible components of democracy to include in the analysis I have relied on two sources. The first is the work of one of the most prominent theorists of democracy, Robert Dahl. Most items included in the analysis are based on Dahl's concept of 'polyarchy' (1971), a procedural minimum definition that has gained acceptance as one of the regular standards for operationalizations of democracy. Dahl coined 'polyarchy' as a term for real world approximations of true democracy –which he thought was an unattainable ideal-type regime. According to him, for 'polyarchy' to exist, eight 'institutional guarantees' must be provided by society: 1) freedom of organization, 2) freedom of expression, 3) the right to vote, 4) equal eligibility for public office, 5) the right of political leaders to compete for votes, 6) availability of alternative sources of information about politics, 7) free and fair elections, and 8) the dependence of public policies on citizens' preferences.

Dahl's definition of democracy was complemented by the one used by the European Social Survey on its 6th round rotating module on democracy (Diamond & Morlino, 2004; Kriesi et al., 2010; Morlino, 2009). The module includes indicators tapping attitudes towards a

total of twenty one possible aspects of a democratic system, covering most of Dahl's institutional guarantees, but also other aspects such as different civil liberties, democratic procedures, democratic institutions, and other aspects sometimes neglected from conventional definitions of democracy, such as societal welfare and income equality.

When choosing the components to be analyzed, I aimed at not only including what democratic theory deems as the most important aspects of a democratic system (free and fair elections, freedom of opposition, freedom of expression, among others), but also at including a wide range of aspects that are sometimes not seen as essential for a democracy. Out of the twenty one aspects included in the European Social Survey's 6th round module on democracy, for the sake of parsimony, twelve possible aspects of democracy were chosen in the end. The twelve components used in the analysis are the following:

- 1) Free, fair, and inclusive national elections.
- 2) Different parties and candidates offer alternatives.
- 3) Freedom of political organization and opposition.
- 4) Freedom of press.
- 5) Freedom of expression.
- 6) Protection of the rights of minority groups by the government.
- 7) Governments take into account demands of majority and minority groups.
- 8) Rule of law.
- 9) Vertical accountability.
- 10) Horizontal accountability (balance of powers).
- 11) Welfare.
- 12) Social equality.

4. Method and data

a.- Method: Importance – Performance Analysis

The technique of 'importance-performance analysis (IPA)' was developed in the field of market research, where it was initially introduced by Martilla and James (1977) as a tool

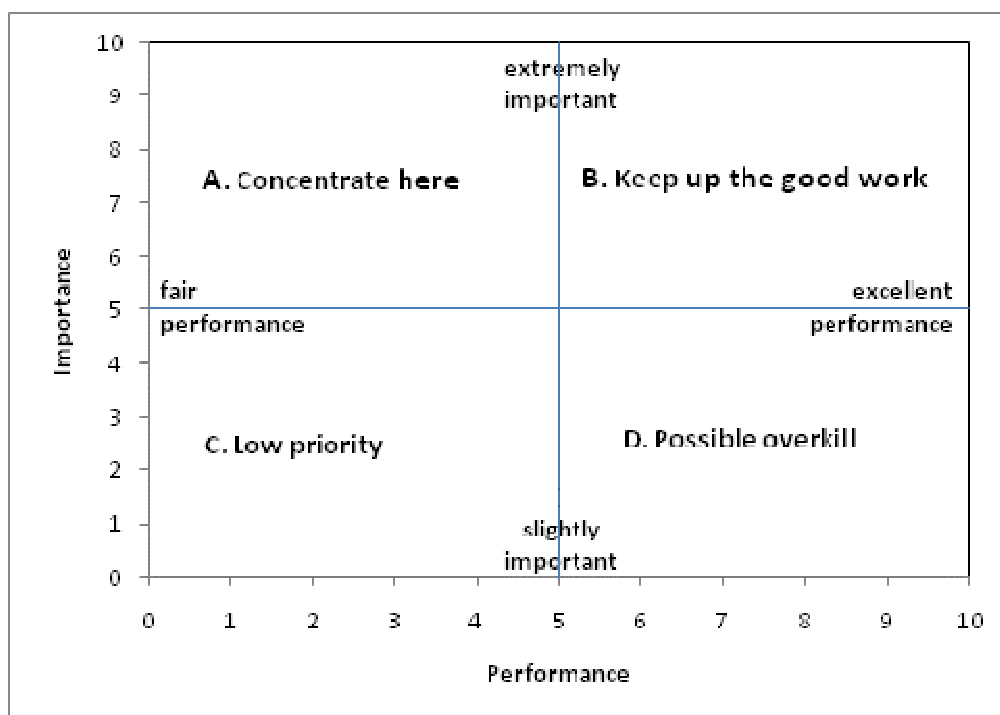
to evaluate customer satisfaction with products and services. Basically, the technique consists of analyzing both the importance customers give to different attributes that make up a product or a service and the evaluation they make of those same attributes after having made use of them. The hypothesis behind this technique is that “consumer satisfaction is a function of both expectations related to certain important attributes and judgments of attribute performance” (Martilla & James, 1977, p. 77). In this sense, the evaluation a person makes of a certain characteristic of a product, service, or as in our case, a concept such as democracy, has to also take into account the importance the characteristic has for the person and not only the evaluation by itself. A characteristic that is evaluated very poorly but is not very important according to the evaluator has a substantially different meaning than a characteristic which is also evaluated very poorly but is seen as very important. Through the use of ‘importance-performance analysis’, this paper argues that a comprehensive understanding of citizens’ satisfaction with democracy, not only needs the assessment of the evaluations of different components of democracy, but also the assessment of their relative importance.

One of the attractive features ‘importance-performance analysis’ offers is the possibility of graphically displaying the scores on a two-dimensional grid. A usual approach is to plot the points in a graph such as the one shown in figure 2. In it, the four quadrants labeled by the letters A, B, C and D are indications of what market researchers call “marketing effort” (Martilla & James, 1977, p. 77). For example, “concentrate here” (quadrant A) denotes an area where attributes are important but performance is evaluated low (thus the need to “concentrate here”). Quadrant B is labeled “keep up the good work” and denotes an area where attributes are important and are evaluated positively. The two bottom quadrants of the graph denote areas of low importance for respondents, the difference being that in quadrant C the evaluation of the performance is low, and in quadrant D it is high, which could imply “possible overkill” of resources.

The positioning of the axes on these graphs is arbitrary. In fact, one of the controversies related to ‘importance-performance analysis’ is the positioning of the vertical and horizontal axes on the grid. The advice from the original developers of the technique was that “positioning the vertical and horizontal axes on the grid is a matter of judgment...(as) the value of this approach lies in identifying relative, rather than absolute, levels of

importance and performance” (Martilla & James, 1977, p. 79). Different authors have argued for placement of the axes on either: a) arbitrary points that depend on the good judgment of the researcher, b) the total means (or medians) of the importance and evaluations, or c) the midpoints of the scales. In this article, in order to compare the two countries included in the pilot study on the same graph, I have opted for the last option.

Figure 2.- Classical representation of the Importance-Performance Analysis (as presented by Martilla and James, 1977)



b.- Data.-

The data used in this article comes from the pilot study of the 6th round of the European Social Survey, which incorporates a module of questions about attitudes towards several different possible components of democracy (Kriesi et al., 2010). The questionnaire asks citizens both about the ‘importance for a democracy’ (normative judgment) and the ‘functioning in your country’ (evaluation) for each one of the elements, thus permitting the application of the importance-performance analysis described above. The survey was conducted in two countries, in late 2011: Russia (N=422) and the United Kingdom

(N=401). The fact that these countries are very different in terms of their democratic systems and their democratic history is particularly beneficial for the objectives of this article, as it allows a comparison of attitudes between citizens of two substantially different political contexts.

In the survey, in order to avoid possible compounding and order effects (Martilla & James, 1977, p. 79), respondents were first presented with a battery of items that asked them to give their normative judgments on the importance for a democracy of different elements that possibly could belong in a democratic system. In order of their appearance in the questionnaire, the twelve ‘importance’ indicators that were used in this article’s analysis were:

“Using this card please tell me how important you think each of the following is for a democracy, where 0 is not at all important and 10 is extremely important. How important do you think it is for a democracy that...”

- 1) ...national elections are free and fair? (**Free, fair, and inclusive national elections**).
- 2) ...different political parties or candidates offer clear alternatives to one another? (**Different parties and candidates offer alternatives**).
- 3) ...opposition parties are free to criticize governments? (**Freedom of political organization and opposition**).
- 4) ...newspapers are free to publish news or criticisms, even if they are damaging to governments? (**Freedom of press**).
- 5) ...the rights of minority groups are protected? (**Protection of the rights of minority groups by the government**).
- 6) ...those who hold extreme political views are free to express them openly? (**Freedom of expression**).
- 7) ...governments take into account the demands of minority groups? (**Governments take into account demands of majority and minority groups**).
- 8) ...the courts treat everyone the same? (**Rule of law**).
- 9) ...governments protect all citizens against poverty? (**Welfare**).
- 10) ...the highest court is able to stop the government acting beyond its powers? (**Horizontal accountability / balance of powers**).

- 11) ...the differences in income between the rich and the poor are not too large? (**Social equality**).
- 12) ...governments explain their decisions to voters? (**Vertical accountability**).

After respondents were asked about the importance of these possible characteristics of a democratic system, they were asked to evaluate the performance of these same aspects in their countries. The 'evaluation' (or 'performance') questions, as they appeared on the questionnaire, were the following:

- 1) To what extent do you think national elections in [country] are free and fair? Choose your answer from this card where 0 is not at all and 10 is completely. (**Free, fair, and inclusive national elections**).

Using this card where 0 is not at all and 10 is a great deal, please tell me how much you think each of the following statements applies in [country] (questions 2-5):

- 2) The different political parties or candidates in [country] offer clear alternatives to one another. (**Different parties and candidates offer alternatives**).
- 3) Opposition parties in [country] are free to criticize the government. (**Freedom of political organization and opposition**).
- 4) Newspapers in [country] are free to publish news or criticisms, even if they are damaging to the government. (**Freedom of press**).
- 5) The rights of minority groups in [country] are protected. (**Protection of the rights of minority groups by the government**).
- 6) To what extent do you think people in [country] are free to express their political views openly, even if they are extreme? Use this card where 0 is not at all and 10 is completely. (**Freedom of expression**).
- 7) To what extent do you think governments in [country] take into account the demands of minority groups as well as following the demands of the majority? (0 is not at all and 10 is completely). (**Governments take into account demands of majority and minority groups**).
- 8) To what extent do you think the courts in [country] treat everyone the same? Choose your answer from this card where 0 is not at all and 10 is completely. (**Rule of law**).

- 9) To what extent do you think governments in [country] protect all citizens against poverty? (**Welfare**).
- 10) To what extent do you think the highest court in [country] is able to stop the government acting beyond its powers? (0 is not at all and 10 is completely). (**Horizontal accountability / balance of powers**).
- 11) Do you think the income differences between the rich and poor in [country] are too small or too large? Use this card where 0 is far too small and 10 is far too large². (**Social equality**).
- 12) How well do you think governments in [country] explain their decisions to voters? Use this card where 0 is extremely badly and 10 is extremely well. (**Vertical accountability**).

5. Results

The ‘importance-performance analysis’ technique was applied using the twenty four indicators specified above. Table 1 presents the mean importance and performance ratings for the twelve components of democracy under analysis for both countries. Figure 3 presents the same information in graphical form.

The distribution of the scores on the two-dimensional grid (figure 2) is a straight forward illustration of the variation found in the two axes. The greatest variation is found in the performance axis. The ranges of the scores on this axis go from approximately 2 to 6 in Russia and from 4 to 8 in the United Kingdom (item 12 is a special case in both countries). This shows that respondents are able to give different evaluations to the performance of the different concepts at stake. In the importance axis there is less variation, with scores ranging from 7 to 9 in both countries. While all items included seem rather important for citizens in both countries (mean score is 8,43 in the U.K. and 8,35 in Russia), there is still evidence that citizens are able to differentiate the different concepts in terms of their importance for a democracy.

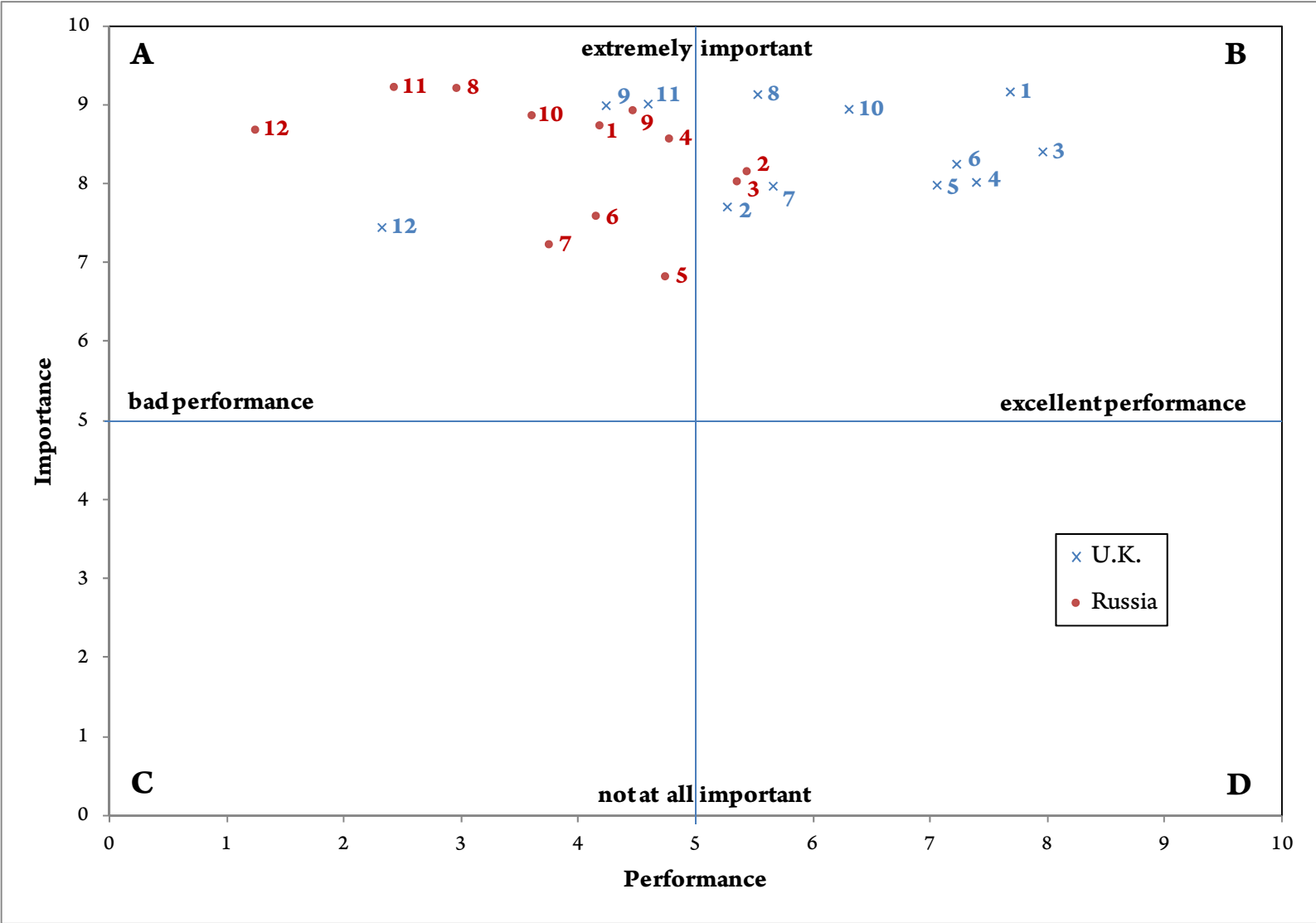
² For the subsequent analyses, the responses to this indicator were recoded so that 0 = far too large and 10 = far too small, in order to maintain the negative – positive direction of the other indicators.

Table 1.- Importance and performance ratings (means) for the 12 components

		United Kingdom		Russia	
		mean importance	mean evaluation	mean importance	mean evaluation
Item	Concept				
1	National elections free and fair	9,17	7,67	8,75	4,16
2	Different parties/candidates offer alternatives	7,71	5,26	8,17	5,42
3	Opposition parties free to criticise government	8,41	7,95	8,04	5,34
4	Newspapers free to publish	8,03	7,38	8,58	4,76
5	Free to express extreme political views	7,99	7,04	6,84	4,72
6	Rights of minority groups protected	8,26	7,21	7,60	4,13
7	Govts. take into account majority and minority groups	7,98	5,65	7,24	3,73
8	Courts treat everyone the same	9,14	5,52	9,22	2,94
9	Governments explain decisions to voters	9,00	4,22	8,94	4,45
10	Highest court able to stop govt. acting beyond its powers	8,95	6,29	8,88	3,59
11	Governments protect all citizens against poverty	9,02	4,58	9,24	2,41
12	Differences in income not too large	7,45	2,31	8,69	1,23
	Mean 12 items	8,43	5,92	8,35	3,91

When comparing the rankings of the importance scores between the two countries, several similarities can be found regarding the aspects that citizens see as most important for a democratic system. Although not in the same rank-order, the top five most important components are the same for both Russian and British citizens. These are: rule of law (item 8), welfare (item 11), vertical accountability (item 9), fairness in the electoral process (item 1), and horizontal accountability / balance of powers (item 10). Also, there are similarities regarding the items that citizens see as less important: freedom to express extreme political views is deemed as the least important aspect in Russia (6,84), and its score is also among the lowest in the U.K. (7,99). The same with the item asking about governments taking into account demands of majority and minority groups: the scores are among the lowest in both Russia (7,24) and the U.K. (7,98). The greatest difference between the two countries in terms of judgments of importance is found in the item dealing with social equality (item 12), which for British citizens has the lowest importance out of all (7,45) while in Russia it has an above average importance (8,69). There are other differences in terms of what British and Russian citizens see as important for a democratic system, but they are minor.

Figure 3.- Importance – Performance Analysis (12 indicators)



A first look at citizens' evaluations of the performance of the different aspects shows an overall greater dissatisfaction of Russian citizens. They, in general, evaluate most of the aspects much worse than their British counterparts: it is revealing that in figure 2, Russian scores cluster in the upper left part of the graph (quadrant A), while British scores are mostly spread through the upper right part (quadrant B). The mean performance evaluation of these twelve items is also a reflection of this: 5,92 in the U.K. vs. 3,91 in Russia. However, it is not possible to ascertain that these scores reflect 'true' scores that could be comparable across countries: there is the possibility that British and Russian citizens use the scales differently, or that they understand the questions differently, or simply, that other sources of error are present in the measures. If we were to compare absolute scores between countries, we would first have to make sure they were comparable, by performing some type of equivalence testing.

Besides the apparent general difference in dissatisfaction that Russian citizens show, interesting patterns can be found among the answers of citizens from both countries when comparing the rankings of the performance scores. For example, the aspect that by far was evaluated the worst in both countries was the one asking about 'differences in income being too large' (item 12). Citizens in both countries seem to be very concerned with social inequality (mean performance score in the U.K. = 2,31; mean performance score in Russia: 1,23), the difference being that while for British citizens this is the least important of the elements included in the analysis, for Russian citizens it is an element of above average importance when compared to the other aspects.

Other similarities can be found between the evaluations Russian and British citizens make. Both countries show very low evaluation scores on the items asking about welfare (item 11) and rule of law (item 8). On the components which are evaluated the best there are also similarities between the two countries: freedom of political organization and opposition (item 3), freedom of press (item 4), and freedom of expression (item 5) are amongst the best evaluated aspects in both Russia and the U.K.

There are only two items which behave very differently in Russia and the United Kingdom: 'different parties / candidates offer alternatives' (item 2) and 'government explains decisions to voters' (item 9). These items have similar absolute performance

scores in both countries (item 2: U.K. = 5,26; Russia = 5,42; item 9: U.K. = 4,22; Russia = 4,45). However, seen in the context of the rankings of the evaluations of the other aspects, they are very different from one country to the other. While in Russia both of these components are among the best evaluated (item 2 is the best evaluated with a score of 5,42), in the United Kingdom both are among the worst evaluated. It is important to see the scores in context – and this is another advantage ‘importance – performance analysis’ offers, by allowing the comparison of relative scores rather than absolute scores (Martilla & James, 1977, p. 79).

A striking pattern is found amongst both Russian and British citizens: the majority of the concepts that are seen as most important are not amongst the better evaluated (only item 1 in the U.K. and item 9 in Russia are both amongst the most important and better evaluated). The presence of this pattern is interesting: could it be that once the functioning (and thus the evaluations) of a certain aspect of democracy starts to improve citizens see this same aspect as less important? Or could it be that people are more lenient towards aspects that they do not deem as important - and thus give better evaluations to them - because in the end they are not as relevant as other aspects? The existence and nature of the possible causal relationship between importance and performance evaluations is a relevant topic for future research.

In sum, while at a first glance it may seem that there are significant differences between the evaluations of importance and performance Russian and British citizens performed, it is striking to see that there are many similarities between the publics of both countries. It is seen that in absolute terms Russian citizens appear more dissatisfied with democracy in general, and with almost every one of the aspects included in the analysis. But it is also seen that Russian and British citizens share common views, that they have similar opinions regarding what is important for a democratic system, that they are dissatisfied with many of the same things, and that there are some aspects of democracy which citizens in both countries evaluate the best.

6. Theoretical relevance: an illustration through the relationship between satisfaction with democracy and political participation

If examining satisfaction with democracy by looking at citizens' attitudes towards different components of the democratic system is to be of any theoretical relevance for the political attitudes literature, it will be because it may allow the explanation of something that has not been explained in detail before. In this section I will briefly illustrate the potential theoretical relevance of using multiple indicators to assess citizen satisfaction with democracy through looking at the relationship between satisfaction with democracy and political participation, a relationship commonly discussed in the political science literature.

For the sake of this, I constructed twelve indicators of satisfaction with different components of democracy (one for each of the components studied above). To be consistent with the 'importance-performance analysis' technique, this was done by multiplying the individual importance scores times the individual performance scores. The result was twelve performance indicators 'weighed' by the importance granted to each aspect by each citizen. Then, to assess the strength of the relationships between the evaluations of the performance of each one of the twelve components and political participation, I calculated Pearson's correlation coefficients between these twelve indicators and five common measures of political participation: 1) having contacted a politician or government official in the last twelve months, 2) having worked in a political party or action group in the last twelve months, 3) having signed a petition in the last twelve months, 4) having taken part in lawful public demonstration in the last twelve months, and 5) having boycotted certain products in the last twelve months. Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients of the relationships between the direct ('classical') satisfaction with democracy indicator, the twelve weighed indicators of satisfaction with the different components, and the five measures of political participation.

Table 2.- Correlations between evaluations of the 12 different aspects of democracy and political participation

	Contacted politician or government official		Worked in a political party or action group		Signed petition		Taken part in lawful public demonstration		Boycotted certain products	
	U.K.	Russia	U.K.	Russia	U.K.	Russia	U.K.	Russia	U.K.	Russia
How satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]	-0,09	0,03	0,01	-0,09	-0,02	-0,03	-0,01	-0,06	0,02	-0,02
National elections free and fair	-,11(*)			-,12(*)	-,18(**)				-,11(*)	
Different parties/candidates offer alternatives										-,12(*)
Opposition parties free to criticise government	-,15(**)		-,19(**)		-,19(**)				-,20(**)	-,11(*)
Newspapers free to publish	-,17(**)		-,20(**)		-,11(*)					
Free to express extreme political views										
Rights of minority groups protected	-,14(**)			-,17(**)	-,12(*)		-,14(**)		-,14(**)	
Govts. take into account demands of majority and minority groups		,17(*)								
Courts treat everyone the same				-,11(*)						
Governments explain decisions to voters										-,16(**)
Highest court able to stop government acting beyond its powers	-,17(**)			-,11(*)		-,11(*)			-,12(*)	
Governments protect all citizens against poverty				-,16(**)						
Differences in income not too large					,11(*)					

** Correlation is significant at 0,01 level (two-sided). * Correlation is significant at 0,05 level (two-sided).

Coefficients which were not statistically significant were removed from the matrix for the sake of clarity (except those corresponding to the direct ‘satisfaction with democracy’ indicator).

When examining the correlations of the thirteen ‘satisfaction’ indicators with the political participation measures, it is seen that the ‘classical’ satisfaction with democracy indicator does not have any significant correlation with any of them. Does this imply there is no relationship between satisfaction with democracy and political participation? It could be possible, but seems theoretically unlikely. Two arguments could explain these non-significant coefficients. The first one is the possibility that there are people who feel very satisfied with the functioning of the democracy, who trust authorities and institutions, and thus do not feel the need to participate, coexisting with people that are very dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy and feel alienated from the political system in general, who also do not participate in politics because they have low feelings of internal political efficacy. The coexistence of these different groups of people in the sample could make the correlations found within each group cancel each other out, thus resulting in an artificial non-existent relationship, such as the one found in the example. The second possibility is derived from the assumption that dissatisfaction with certain aspects of democracy may have a stronger correlation with political participation than others. In this sense, because people could be thinking of different conceptions of democracy when answering the direct satisfaction with democracy question, the correlation coefficients might again be artificial, as they could be mixing relationships between dissatisfaction with different kinds of democratic components and political participation. To assess this, it is illustrative to look at the individual correlation coefficients between the twelve satisfaction with the different components indicators and the five political participation measures.

There are many differences among the relationships between the twelve indicators of satisfaction with the different components and the five measures of political participation, both within and between countries. In the United Kingdom, for example, satisfaction with the functioning of the electoral process (item 1), with the freedom of opposition parties to criticize government (item 3) and with governmental protection of rights of minority groups (item 6) all have significant negative relationships with contacting politicians or government officials, signing petitions, and boycotting certain products in the last twelve months. These last two indicators of satisfaction (items 3 and 6) are especially interesting: each one has significant correlations with four out of the five measures of political participation. There are other indicators in the U.K., however, that do not have

significant correlations with any of the political participation measures, such as ‘different parties / candidates offer alternatives’ (item 2), ‘free to express extreme political views’ (item 5), ‘governments take into account demands of majority and minority groups’ (item 7), ‘courts treat everyone the same’ (item 8), ‘governments explain decisions to voters’ (item 9) and ‘governments protect all citizens against poverty’ (item 11).

In Russia, while not as many statistically significant correlations were obtained as in the U.K., some interesting patterns were also found. For example, the probability of working in a political party or action group in the last twelve months is negatively correlated with being satisfied with the functioning of the electoral process (item 1), with the protection of minority rights (item 6), with courts treating everybody equally (item 8), with the highest court being able to stop government acting beyond its powers (item 10), and with governments protecting citizens against poverty (item 11): the more satisfied citizens feel towards each one of these aspects, the less they will tend to work for a political party or action group. A similar pattern is found with boycotting certain products, which shows significant negative correlations with ‘different parties / candidates offering alternatives’ (item 2), ‘opposition parties free to criticize government’ (item 3) and ‘governments explain decisions to voters’ (item 9).

It is evident from this analysis that dissatisfaction towards certain components of democracy is more strongly related to certain forms of political participation than dissatisfaction towards others. The brief illustration provided serves as an example that assessing a relationship such as the one between satisfaction with democracy and political participation by using only one indicator is not advisable. The possibility that different kinds of relationships are being mixed in the statistical calculations performed is very likely to lead to unclear -if not completely erroneous- conclusions.

7. Conclusions

Many democracies today seem to be facing deep crisis, and citizen demand for improvement of their political systems is great throughout the world. Studying attitudes towards democracy in this environment of change requires new and more precise ways to

measure them through empirical research. In this article I have offered an example of one possibility to do so, through the use of multiple indicators and the technique of ‘importance – performance analysis’.

It has been argued and shown that assessing satisfaction with democracy through the use of an only indicator is a limited approach. Asking citizens about satisfaction towards an abstract concept such as ‘democracy’ will very likely conduce to meaningless inferences, as people might have different things in mind when thinking about it. It is necessary to study the specific attitudes citizens have towards different components of democracy, not only to obtain any useful substantive insights, but to be able to correctly assess relationships between citizen attitudes towards their political systems and other variables. In this sense, multidimensional perspectives for the analysis of citizens’ satisfaction with democracy will give much more informative conclusions than unidimensional analyses.

Another point this article has shown is that citizens are able to differentiate between levels of importance of different components of democracy, as well as to evaluate them differently from each other. This is very valuable information that allows the identification of the specific components of a political system which citizens are most critical towards. Political science researchers and policy makers should take this into account if any clear understanding of how citizens evaluate their democracies is to be found.

The comparison performed between Russia and the United Kingdom through the ‘importance-performance analysis’ also allows the drawing of important substantive conclusions. While in absolute terms Russian citizens appear to be more dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy than British citizens, in relative terms more similarities than differences between their attitudes were found. Citizens in both countries see similar aspects, such as the rule of law or governmental protection against poverty, as the most important ones for a democratic system. Also, citizens in both countries give the best evaluations to aspects of democracy dealing with freedoms: of political organization and opposition, of press and of expression. But what is probably the most important conclusion in substantive terms is that by far the biggest concerns in both nations have to do with welfare and inequality. Both Russian and British citizens expressed to be very dissatisfied with these aspects. It seems that the crisis many countries in the western

world are going through is especially affecting individuals' dissatisfaction with the functioning of the economic outputs of the political system. Although this trend seems strong and clear in these two countries, it cannot be extrapolated from this analysis and should be confirmed through further research in other contexts.

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