The Social Bases of Democracy

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Abstract

Who supports democracy and on what grounds? This paper investigates the social bases of democratic support in Europe. Building on theoretical literature on democracy, it contetnds that democracy is a multifaceted concept. It consequently argues that the support for and opposition to democracy is not unidimensional, but rather depends on the specific aspect of democracy. The paper investigates four core tenets of democracy: electoral democracy, liberal democracy, social rights, and people rule; as well as three oppositions to democracy: populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism. It shows that support and opposition to democracy is importantly rooted in basic sociodemographic factors, such as age, education, income, and religiosity. The paper highlights the role of individual's relationship to the polity, demonstrating how diverse ethnic minorities support different tenets of democracy.

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Introduction

Democracy is increasingly the only game in town. Even though the level of democracy is on a decline worldwide (V-Dem Institute 2024), democratic backsliding takes increasingly less overt forms. Bermeo (2016) highlights how blatant forms of democratic collapse, such as executive or military coups or election day fraud, have given way to more subtle undermining of democracy in the forms of executive aggrandizement or longer-term electoral manipulation. Democracy is consequently not opposed and attacked frontally, but rather fought through strategic attrition. Democracy is, as result, no longer perceived as a unified object, as an integrated set of institutions, but rather as a more complex combination of distinct arrangements that govern political lives of countries and citizens. These can be summarized as the electoral component of democracy, liberal components of democracy encompassing checks and balances as well as the support of minorities, social rights, and popular rule. Given its diverse aspects, democracy – and the support for it – cannot be understood as unidimensional – as simply greater or lower. Evaluation of democracy needs to consider the different aspects of democratic functioning.

This paper proposes that citizen support for or opposition to democracy is an interaction between individual characteristics and the particular aspects of democracy. While some citizens may prefer electoral, majoritarian aspects of democratic rule, others may favor the liberal component of democracy focusing on institutional checks and balances and rights equality, while yet others may rather find components of popular rule as central to democratic governance. This paper argues that specific social characteristics of voters determine whether and how they find particular types of democratic governance important.

Specifically, the paper considers four core tenets of democracy: *electoral democracy*, *liberal democracy*, *social rights*, and *popular rule*. Furthermore, the paper also assesses three distinct oppositions to democracy: *authoritarianism*, *illiberalism*, and *populism*. The paper argues that key social characteristics, particularly age, education, income, and religiosity, are important drivers of views on different aspects of democracy. Most importantly, the paper demonstrates the important effect of individual positioning with respect to the polity, high-

lighting the impact of belonging to a significant ethnic minority group on democracy. We find that minorities differ in their focus on distinct aspects of democracy. Minorities with a more precarious association to the majority-dominated state – eastern European historical minorities and western European Muslims – are particularly concerned about liberal democracy and social rights, while being more hesitant about electoral and popular democracy. Minorities more rooted within the existing state – western European historical minorities – show lower concern for democracy in general.

These are important findings for our understanding of democratic support. While much literature has focused on the role of changes in social class (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2008; Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024) , or on the impact of economic and occupational risks (e.g. Schwander 2019) as the root cause of changing democratic political competition, this literature has generally overlooked the potentially significant influence played by ethnic minorities, and their particular relationship to the state. Given that significant and increasing proportions of Europeans issue from minority background, the effect of minority status and its potential intersection with other social characteristics is of growing importance for European democracy.

The paper first discusses the different dimensions of democracy, introducing various tenets of democratic rule. In the next steps, it considers distinct oppositions to democratic government – populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism. The third section discusses the social roots of democratic support, presenting our key expectations about the social bases of democratic support and opposition. The next section sets out our methodological approach, and discusses the operationalization of our key democratic concepts. The next section reports the results, while the final section serves as a conclusion.

Dimensions of democracy

The elementary understanding of democracy rests on its institutional, electoral roots. Dahl (2008) defines the procedural minimum of democracy as entailing free, equal, and competitive selection of political leadership. This procedural minimum requires that officials be elected;

that this election be free, fair, and frequent; that all adults have the right to vote and stand for office; and that individuals may freely express their political preferences, have them heard, and be free to form political associations, interest groups, and parties that would seek to contest elections and implement their vision when in office (ibid.).

The competitive, *electoral* component of democracy rests on the principle of majoritarian decision-making. The majority of votes determines the outcome; a rule that rests on ideals of political freedom and equality (Munck 2016). (Waldron 2012, 198) underscores that "[i]ts main advantages are its decisiveness (at least for simple cases), its neutrality, and the way it treats voters as equals." The concept of majoritarian electoral democracy, has, however, been scrutinized since early modern democratic times. The founding fathers of the American republic questioned the corrosive potential of majoritarian democracy. Madison (2003, 72) complains "…that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority."

To protect minorities from the tyranny of the majority, the electoral, majoritarian principle of democracy needs redress. The *liberal* conception of democracy thus proposes two fundamental principles – deconcentration of political power via a system of institutional checks and balances, and the protection of minority rights through judicial review. The system of checks and balances dilutes the monopolistic rule of executives by providing for legislative and judicial oversight of the exercise of political power. Judicial review ensures the constitutional functioning of government and provides an ultimate constraint on measures that may undermine the rights of citizens, thus protecting political or other minorities. The electoral, and the liberal component of democracy are thus in inherent tension – they "are chiselled from a different stone" (Rhoden 2015, 574). As liberal democracy transforms the rule of political majorities of electoral democracy into the rule of judicial majorities on constitutional courts, "political arbitrariness is replaced by judicial arbitrariness" (Munck 2016, 15).

Liberal democracy with its institutional principles of checks and balances and judicial review thus additionally requires important informal principles that would maintain the balance

between institutional actors, and rotating political majorities and minorities. These informal principles are mutual toleration and forbearance. Mutual toleration is a central democratic principle suggesting that in a democracy, political rivals must accept each other's right to exist, compete for power, and govern (Schmitter and Karl 1991; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Furthermore, political actors need to exercise self-restraint and not exploit various constitutional or institutional loopholes that may increase their power and political control. This forbearance ensures that the spirit of democracy is not violated (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Beyond its constitutionally defined and principally supported aspects, democracy crucially rests on the concept of equality. But equality has many layers. As Schmitter and Karl (1991, 77) underscore, "[a]ll regimes have rulers and a public realm, but only to the extent that they are democratic do they have citizens." Citizenship expresses the egalitarian inclusion – today, commonly of all native and naturalized adults – in the political process, guaranteeing individual civil rights. But this political citizenship says nothing about the equality of material endowments citizens need to make informed choices and participate equitably in the political realm.

Theorists of democracy thus acknowledge that political citizenship rights may require reinforcement by *social rights*. In the words of Dahl (2008, 158), "citizens who are economically unequal are unlikely to be politically equal." This aspect of democracy is generally undertheorized, as scholars question how social conditions of citizens should best be incorporated into conceptions of democracy (see Munck 2016). Nevertheless, empirical studies have focused on the assessment of the extent to which democracies focus on the reduction of income inequality, and the protection from poverty (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016).

Finally, democracy may contain a direct, popular component, whereby citizens express their political will through direct methods such as plebiscites or referenda. The support for *popular rule* via direct democratic channels echos a sense that political elites lack the legitimacy to make certain central political decisions, including constitutional changes, or changes to the character of national sovereignty, like accession to important international treaties or regional organizations, such as the European Union. While the conception of popular rule expresses

the centrality and equality of citizens in the democratic process, it simultaneously constructs a distinction between citizens and elites.

Oppositions to democracy

As democracy has a diversity of forms, so does the opposition to it. Markowski and Kotnarowski (2024) highlight three key forms of democratic opposition: populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism. While all of these three democratic oppositions share a set of features, and a common anti-democratic core, they differ in their focus, and in the specific aspects of democracy they oppose, and how they oppose it. All three share majoritarian views of democracy, and are thus averse to counter-majoritarian checks and balances; all three put focus on political leadership rather than on political representation; and all three elevate the primacy of native populations and are skeptical of international influences, tending toward ethno-nationalism (see Jenne 2018; Vachudova 2021).

Each type of the three democratic opposition contains its specifics. *Populism* rests on the popular conception of democracy. It is rooted in opposition to established political elites, and in people-centrism (Mudde 2007). It conceives of "the people" – frequently defined as lower-middle class, native populations – as naturally endowed with common sense and elementary decency, and fundamentally opposed to a corrupt political elite. The people are thus the pinnacle of political legitimacy, and populism aims to give them unconstrained voice in politics. Populism frequently claims to be the ultimate form of democracy, as it empowers "the common folks". This empowerment, however, comes at the cost of protecting the rights and liberties of all those citizens who may not fit the proposed image of "the people" – either due to their social status, or their cultural background. Populism fundamentally calls for extensive use of direct popular rule – in which it connects with the popular rule dimension of democracy. It, however, simultaneously proposes the representation of "popular will" by a charismatic leader.

The core of *illiberalism* lies in its rejection of the liberal aspect of democracy, particularly

individualism and pluralism (Smilova 2021). It tends towards collectivism, and opposes individual rights and liberties, as well as the institutional constraints designed to protect them (Blokker 2021). Illiberalism is profoundly skeptical of the review of political power. It opposes the existence of checks and balances, and the protection of all kinds of minorities, which it decries as inefficient and foreign to the interests of the political majority. In a similar vein, illiberalism seeks to limit political oversight and dissent by constraining and censoring independent information channels, and opposing political views. Enyedi (2024) argues that illiberalism revolves around three core components. First, 'power concentration' seeks to extricate the executive from its accountability to other actors, limiting checks and balances. Second, illiberalism seeks to blunt the 'neutrality of the state' imposing the cultural standards of the majority on all types of minorities, political, economic or cultural. Finally, illiberalism seeks a 'closed society,' rooted in particularistic traditionalism that rejects universalistic aims and values, and is intransigent to change which it perceives as foreign imposition. Illiberal closure also tends towards irrationalism and opposition to skeptical scrutiny (ibid.).

Finally, *authoritarianism* shares illiberalism's disdain for civil rights and liberties, and the diffusion of political power. It, however, goes further, and proposes that political power be vested in an unconstrained leader. Authoritarianism views power as hierarchical, and society as deferential to it. It thus expects obedience to and loyalty for the leadership, values that it sees as central not only in politics, but in society more generally. Unlike illiberals, authoritarians are ready to use force and violence to achieve their political aims (Kauth and King 2021).

The Social Bases of Democracy

Who supports which dimension of democracy? This is a central question in our paradoxically contradictory context where democracy seems to be the only generally acceptable form of political regime, while many components of democratic governance are increasingly contested.

The study of democratic development has importantly highlighted the socially rooted nature of democratic change, focusing on the class-based sources of democratic support. Prominent works have outlined the association between the support for democracy and particular social groups or classes. Moore (1966) has famously demonstrates how the growth of commercially oriented middle classes and their cooperation with landed aristocracy can enable the gradual transition to democracy. Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) suggest that democratic development was both pushed and resisted by class interests. While the middle classes fought to wrest political control from the monarchy and aristocracy, they rarely sought its extension to lower, working classes, who in turn come to play "a decisively pro-democratic role" (ibid.: 59). Similarly, Lipset (1981, 125) observes that the "incorporation of workers into the body politic … has reduced their authoritarian tendencies greatly…"

While it is clear that the prime motors of democratization will be the social groups excluded from the political process, and thus those most likely to gain from democratic decision making, it less clear which social characteristics are likely to drive the support of democracy. As democracy is under multifaceted strain, the question of who will support it, and more specifically, who will support which aspect of democracy is crucial. In what follows, we theorize which social characteristics of individuals are likely to determine the support for different democratic dimensions.

Our theoretical framework takes a step back to focus on the core socio-demographic characteristics of individuals, and their association with the support for or opposition to distinct democratic principles. We consider the most elementary characteristics of individuals – gender, age, level of education, income, and level of religiosity. In addition, we zoom in on the particular position of the individual with respect to the society and the state in which they reside by considering whether an individual is member of a significant ethnic minority group. We consider two types of minorities – historical ethnic minorities who are native to their localities, but who differ from the majority population as a function of some salient ascriptive characteristic, such as language, religious denomination, or a strong local identity and culture[1]. Second, in order to capture the most consequential outgroups issuing from

[1]See tables 1 and 2 for the list of historical minorities we identify.

migration to Europe, we consider individuals who identify as Muslims. As our data do not include Muslim majority European countries, identifying as Muslim generally captures both a migrant origin, and belonging to a minority group that has in recent years been singled out as a significant other (Ivarsflaten and Sniderman 2022).

Furthermore, we consider membership in intermediary organizations, particularly labor unions. Finally, we control for core political preferences related to the two central dimensions of political competition – economic left-right views, related to the role of government in market regulation and allocation, and cultural liberalism-conservatism, related to one's views of toleration of alternative lifestyles, cultural openness and inclusion versus national traditionalism.

Concerning gender, we do not expect significant differences in democratic views between women and men. However, given the traditional care-providing role of women, as well as literature that identifies women as more positive towards higher welfare state support (e.g. Goossen 2020), we would expect them to be more favorable towards rights equality than men.

Concerning age, we expect older people to be more supportive of all aspects of democracy. This is due to the historical experience of older European generations with various forms of authoritarianism in Europe, as well as their general socialization into the democratic model of the post-war period. In terms of opposition to democracy, we expect older people to be less likely to support illiberalism, but – given their likely traditionalism – to be more open to authoritarianism than younger people.

With regard to income and education, we depart from the basic expectations of the general literature on democracy, that social groups benefiting from the status quo are most likely to support the core aspects of democracy – electoral democracy, and liberal democracy. These groups, are, however, less likely to support social and popular aspects of democracy, as these democratic dimensions seek to redress the political status quo by favoring economic redistribution toward the socially weak, and by valorizing the political views of the "common people." Consequently, we expect the wealthier and the more educated to favor electoral

and liberal democracy significantly more than those with lower income and education. We expect the reverse for social rights and popular rule – the wealthier and the more educated support social rights and popular rule significantly less than those with lower income and education. Similarly, we expect the wealthier and educated to significantly oppose populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism as critiques of democracy compared to the less wealthy and educated.

We expect religiosity to exert a generally negative effect on democracy. This is due to the absolute truths proposed by religious teaching which do not tolerate differences in opinion (Laitin 1978), making decision-making "less prone to compromise" (Gerring, Hoffman, and Zarecki 2018, 287), as well as the hierarchical nature of religious organizations. We expect religious individuals to consider all aspects of democracy, and particularly liberal democracy, as less important than secular individuals. In terms of opposition to democracy, we expect religiosity in encourage authoritarianism, and to a lesser extent illiberalism.

We expect ethnic minorities to behave as "circumstantial liberals" in the context of the polities they live in (Rovny 2024). This means that groups permanently tied to their minority status in states dominated by others are likely to support arrangements that constrain political (and ethnic) majorities. This fundamental search for constraining the tyranny of the majority via political rights and civil liberties makes ethnic minorities potential champions of the liberal component of democracy. We thus expect historical minorities as well as Muslims in Europe to significantly favor liberal democracy more than majority populations, while being skeptical towards the majoritarianism implicit in electoral democracy and in popular rule. Given that many historical as well as Muslim minorities in Europe tend to be socially weaker[2], we also expect these minorities to significantly prefer social rights. Concerning oppositions to democracy, we expect minorities to be significantly less supportive of illiberalism.

The liberalizing effect of minority status can, however, be overriden by various circumstantial

[2]The social position of historical minorities differs as a function of their past position in the polity. While many historical minorities were systematically disadvantaged, other historical minorities held priviledge social positions in past political orders, and these endowments in terms of economic and social capital carry over into the present. Examples include historically dominant minorities, such as the Swedes in Finland, or Germans in interwar central Europe or the Baltic states.

cross-pressures. Ethnic liberalism may erode where minority groups are defined in religious terms, or where ethnic kin states that associate them with a larger nation in which they are majorities, figuratively constraining their minority status (Rovny 2024), or where minorities feel established and secure in their position in and relationship with the majority state. The expected effects of minority status may thus decline among minorities defined in religious terms, among minorities effectively associated to a kin state rather than to the state of residence, and among established minorities more confident in the security of their position in the state of residence. Specifically, we expect that more established, historical minorities in western Europe may not exhibit significant effects. Similarly, religious minorities – particularly Muslims – may be prone to support the hierarchical structures and focus on social obedience found in authoritarian critiques of democracy.

Finally, we expect political preferences to importantly influence democratic outlooks. We expect that economically right-leaning individuals will be strongly opposed to the social rights component of democracy. Furthermore, we expect that cultural conservatives, with their traditional views, will be significantly opposed to liberal democracy. In terms of oppositions to democracy, we expect cultural conservatives to accept illiberalism and authoritarianism significantly more than cultural liberals.

Methods

To test our expectations about the social bases of democracy, we assess individual views concerning the importance of different aspects of democracy, as measured in the European Social Survey (ESS) module 10. We concentrate on 11 items of the ESS10 asking respondents about the importance they assign to different aspects for democracy: ("fairelc", "dfprtal", "medcrgv", "rghmgpr", "votedir", "cttresa", "gptpelc", "gvctzpv", "grdfinc", "viepol", "wpestop"). These 11 items are highly correlated. Their $\alpha = 0.86$, and a principle factor analysis produces a unique solution with the first factor obtaining an $eigenvalue = 3.99$.

In order to assess the evaluation of different aspects of democracy, we separate these items

into four theory-generated sub-groups and a fifth which regroups all 11 items. The following five aspects were grouped using factor analysis to create composite indices. In some instances, the variables were recoded beforehand to ensure that all scales align in the same direction. As a result, higher values consistently reflect greater importance assigned to each aspect of democracy:

1. *Electoral democracy* considers the importance of free and fair elections, differences between parties, and possibility that governing parties are punished ("fairelc", "dfprtal", "gptpelc"). The eigenvalue of the factor is of 1.2 and $\alpha = 0.65$.

2. *Liberal democracy* considers the importance of minority rights protection and equal treatment by courts ("rghmgpr", "cttresa", "medcrgv"). The eigenvalue of the factor is of 1.39 and $\alpha = 0.71$.

3. *Social rights* considers the importance of government protection from poverty and the reduction of income differences ("gvctzpv", grdfinc"). The eigenvalue of the factor is of 1.3 and $\alpha = 0.78$.

4. *Popular rule* considers the importance that ordinary people prevail over the political elite, that citizens have a final say in referenda, and that the will of the people cannot be stopped ("viepol", "wpestop", "votedir"). The eigenvalue of the factor is of 1.49 and $\alpha = 0.74$.

5.A *general model of attitudes towards democracy* regroups all 11 items. As indicated above, the eigenvalue of the factor is of 3.99 and and $\alpha = 0.86$.

These composite indices then serve as dependent variables in several OLS regressions. The models include variables that assess the importance of different social characteristics in predicting the evaluation of different aspects of democracy. Thus, our models test the effect of age, income, education, union membership, and gender. Further, we added measures of religiosity and two dummy variables indicating whether respondents identify as Muslim.

Additionally, we constructed classes of significant historic minorities in Western and Eastern Europe in the following way:

Table 1: Eastern European minorities

Country	Minority
Bulgaria	Turkish
Estonia	Russian
Croatia	Serbian
Lithuania	Russian, Polish
Latvia	Russian
Poland	German
Romania	Hungarian
Slovenia	Serbian
Slovakia	Hungarian, Czech

Table 2: Western European minorities

Country	Minority
United Kingdom	Irish, Welsh, Scottish
Scotland	Catholic Scots
Ireland	Protestant
Spain	Catalan, Basque, Galician
France	Breton, Basque, Catalan, Occitan, Corse
Germany	Danish
Finland	Swedish
Italy	German
Switzerland	French, Romansh, Italian

These minority categories were coded based on specific ethno-linguistic groups identified by language spoken at home or religious affiliation, and non-European migrant groups identified

by place of birth or parents' place of birth. The Eastern European ethno-linguistic minorities were coded based on Rovny (2024), while we created the coding scheme for the Western European minorities for this paper.

We further predict views on democracy as a function of membership in ideological groups concerning economic and cultural preferences. Economic preferences are proxied by views on redistribution ("gincdif"), and cultural preferences are proxied by a principal factor of items measuring views of homosexuality, obedience, loyalty, and immigration of culturally distinct people ("freehms", "hmsacld", "lrnobed", "loylead", "imdfetn", "imcuelt"), producing a unique factor solution with an $eigenvalue = 1.85$ and $\alpha = 0.65$. Again, the variables were recoded to ensure that higher values consistently reflect more conservative views. Finally, we include a dummy variable for Eastern European countries.

We thus run five different OLS models on each of four aspects of democracy and the general democracy factor. The models are weighted by the ESS design weights and include country fixed effects ($\gamma_k C_k$). They use the following equation for individuals i in countries k:

$$\begin{aligned} democracy.aspect_i \;=\; & \beta_0 + \beta_1 union_membership_i + \beta_2 religiosity_i + \beta_3 muslim_i + \beta_4 income_i + \\ & \beta_5 historic.minority.we_i + \beta_6 historic.minority.ee_i + \beta_7 women_i + \\ & \beta_8 education_i + \beta_9 economic.conservative_i + east.west.dummy_i + \\ & cultural.conservative_i + age + \gamma_k C_k + \epsilon_i \end{aligned}$$

Next, we assess the authoritarian, illiberal, and populist tendencies of the respondents of ESS 10, following the operationalization of Markowski and Kotnarowski (2024). Similarly to the democracy scores, we create three theory-driven indices through factor analysis based on items of the survey. The factors are the following:

1. *Authoritarianism* considers the importance of a strong leader above the law ("accalaw"), the (dis-)agreement to teaching children obedience and respect for authority ("lrnobed")

and to a country's loyality towards its leader ("loylead"). The eigenvalue is of 1.13 and $\alpha = 0.45$.

2. *Illiberalism* considers the importance of freedom of the media to criticize the government ("medcrgv"), of minority rights protection ("rghmgpr"), and the equality before the law ("cttresa"). The eigenvalue is of 1.39 and $\alpha = 0.71$.

3. *Populism* considers the importance of the ordinary people's views versus that of political elites ("viepol"), of the will of the people ("wpestop"), and of direct voting ("votedir"). The eigenvalue is of 1.49 and $\alpha = 0.74$.

We then run three OLS models on these factors including the same independent variables as in the democracy models. They again include country fixed effects ($\gamma_k C_k$) and are weighted by the ESS design weights. The models use the following equation for individuals i in countries k:

$$\begin{aligned} auth.illib.pop_i &= \beta_0 + \beta_1 union_membership_i + \beta_2 religiosity_i + \beta_3 muslim_i + \beta_4 income_i + \\ &\quad \beta_5 historic.minority.we_i + \beta_6 historic.minority.ee_i + \beta_7 women_i + \\ &\quad \beta_8 education_i + \beta_9 economic.conservative_i + east.west.dummy_i + \\ &\quad cultural.conservative_i + age + \gamma_k C_k + \epsilon_i \end{aligned}$$

Predicting support for democratic dimensions

We first consider the effects of sociodemographic characteristics on the four dimensions of democracy – electoral democracy, liberal democracy, social rights, and popular rule. The results of our model are summarized in figure 1, and generally support our expectations.

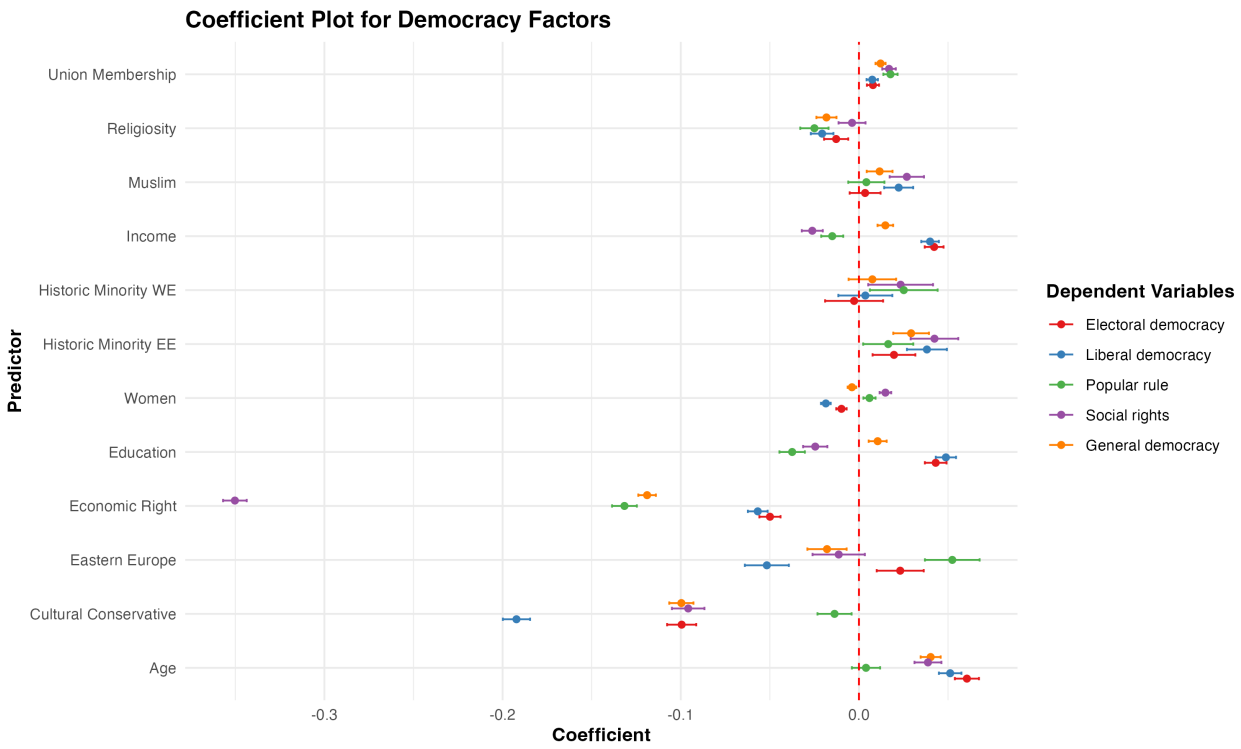

Figure 1: Coefficient Plot for different aspects of democracy

Women are significantly more supportive of social rights, and significantly less supportive of electoral and liberal democracy. Older people are significantly more likely to support all aspects of democracy, particularly electoral democracy and liberal democracy, than younger people. Their support for popular rule is insignificant, suggesting a certain unease with a popular conception of democracy. Further, in support of our expectations, wealthier and more educated individuals are significantly in support of electoral and liberal democracy, and significantly less supportive of popular rule and social rights than the less wealthy and less educated. This likely reflects an unease of the wealthy and educated to focus resources and decision making to the lower social strata. Religiosity generally reduces the support for all aspects of democracy with the exception of social rights. This reflects our general expectations about the exclusionary and hierarchical nature of religion, however, highlighting the socially solidaristic aspect of most religious teaching.

The three types of minority groups we assess exhibit somewhat distinct results. First, in line

with our expectation, historical minorities from eastern Europe are significantly more likely to support all dimensions of democracy than majority populations, reproducing the analyses of Rovny (2023, 2024). It is important to note that historical minorities from eastern Europe support the liberal component of democracy more than the electoral and popular components. Muslim minorities are, in support of our hypotheses, more in favor of liberal democracy and social rights than majorities. They however, do not differ in their views of electoral and popular rule from the majority.

These findings are important because they underline the particular effect of being a precarious minority. These minorities, seeking the redress of vagaries of majority rule, are particularly favorable towards the liberal constraints on democracy that seek to limit majorities by protecting the rights and liberties of all. Vulnerable minorities simultaneously show less enthusiasm for electoral and popular components of democracy, which center on majoritarian rule. They expose distinct ethnic groups to permanently minoritarian position.

Interestingly, historical minorities in western Europe show different results. While the are slightly more supportive of social rights and popular rule, their effect on electoral and liberal democracy is, however, insignificant. This is likely due to the established nature of these minority groups, and their lower political and social precarity in the more entrenched democracies of western Europe. Minority groups like the Bretons, Catalans, or Scots seem to be less concerned about their submission to the (ethnic) majorities in their states. This may be due to their relatively lengthy experience of reasonable cultural protection in their polities.

Finally, our results show that political preferences are powerful determinants of democratic views. In line with our expectations, economic right-wingers are very strongly opposed to social rights as being important for democracy. Interestingly, they are generally less likely to consider all other aspects of democracy as important than economic left-wingers. Cultural conservatives, as expected, are strongly opposed to the liberal component of democracy. They also oppose electoral democracy and social rights.

Predicting support for democratic oppositions

Turning to consider the determinants of the opposition to democracy, we rerun our models predicting populist, illiberal, and authoritarian attitudes with sociodemographic predictors and ideological views. The results broadly support our expectations.

The substantive effect of gender is minimal, however, women tend to support populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism slightly more than men. As expected, older people are less likely to support illiberalism, but more likely to support authroitarianism. The effect of age on populism is insignificant.

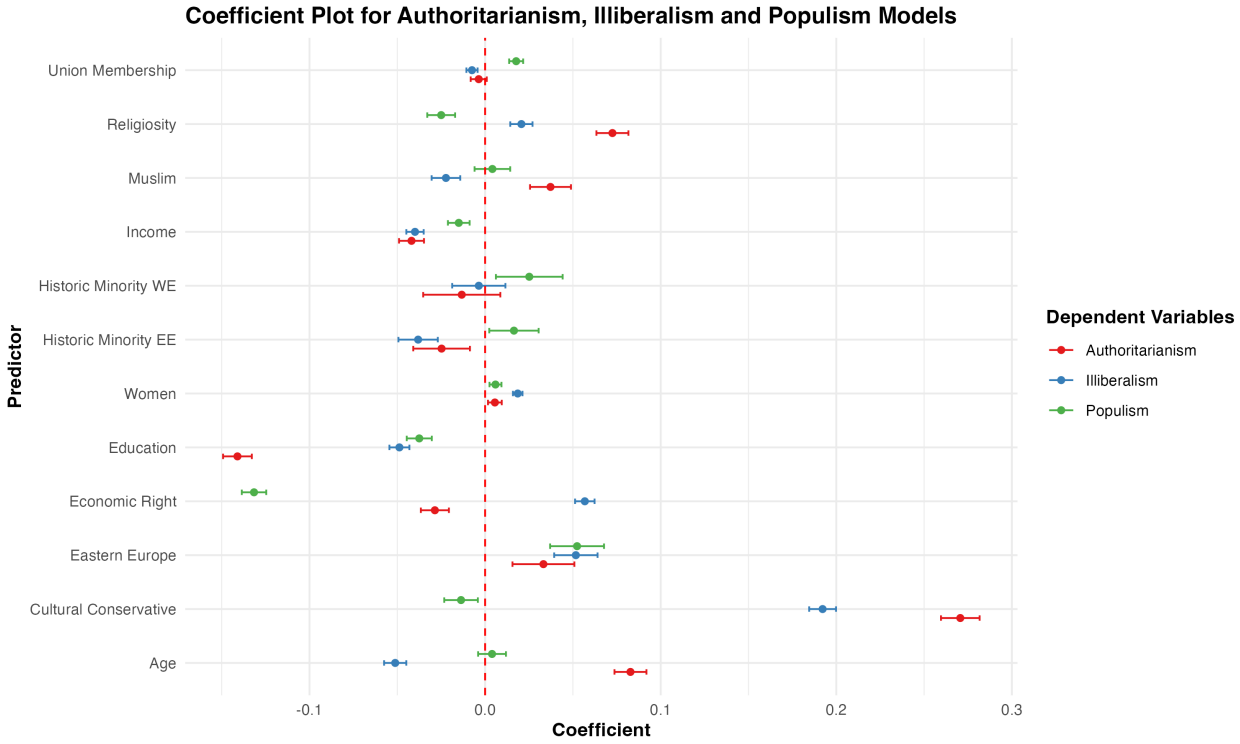

Figure 2: Coefficient Plot for Authoritarianism, Illiberalism, and Populism Facotrs

Income and education exhibit the expected outcomes, showing that wealthier and more educated individuals are generally less likely to support populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism than the less well off and less educated.

Concerning minorities, we find again mixed results. Historical minorities from eastern Europe are significantly less likely to support illiberalism and authoritarianism, while they accept populism slight more than majorities. Muslim minorities, in line with our expectations, are significantly less likely to support illiberalism, but more likely to support authoritarianism. This highlights our main claim that vulnerable minorities systematically seek liberal redress to majority rule – reducing historical eastern European minority and western Muslim minority support for illiberalism. The specific nature of these minorities, however, alters their views towards other critiques of democracy. Given the – by definition – religious character of Muslim minorities, the authoritarian opposition to democracy on the grounds of social hierarchy and obedience finds resonance among this group. Historical minorities from western Europe are slightly less likely to support illiberalism and authoritarianism, but the effect is not significant. They are slightly more likely to support populism than ethnic majorities. This again likely stems from their more secure position within their more established democratic polities.

Finally, political preferences again influence the views of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism very significantly. Economic right-wingers are significantly less likely to accept populism and to a lesser extent authoritarianism, while they are more likely to support illiberalism than economic left-wingers. Cultural conservatives are highly favorable to authoritarianism, and to a lesser extent to illiberalism. They are slightly less likely to support populism than cultural liberals.

Conclusion

Democratic support is deeply socially rooted. Who we are determines how we approach distinct dimensions of democratic rule. This article assesses the support for diverse aspects of democratic rule, and for distinct critiques of democracy on the basis of core social characteristics of individuals. In doing so, it makes four fundamental contributions to the literature on democratic support.

First, a number of core social characteristics of individuals serve as influential predictors

of the support for or opposition to democracy. The older, the more educated and affluent, and the less religious are more likely to support the electoral, and particularly the liberal components of democracy. The educated, wealthier, and secular are similarly less likely to succumb to especially the illiberal and authoritarian critiques of democracy.

Second, support and opposition to democracy is also strongly associated with political preferences. Individuals with right-wing, market-economic outlooks are less invested in all aspects of democratic governance than individuals holding left-leaning economic positions, but they are less likely to heed populist and authoritarian critiques of democracy. Cultural preferences exert even greater influence. Cultural conservatives support all aspects of democracy less than cultural liberals, and they are much more likely to endorse illiberal and authoritarian oppositions to democracy.

Third, ethnic minority status importantly defines individual relationship to the polity, and thus influences views on democracy. Some ethnic minorities can be described as vulnerable by virtue of being viewed as cultural others with precarious legitimacy in their majority-controlled polities. This is particularly the case of historical minorities in eastern Europe and Muslim minorities in the west of the continent. This article shows that these minorities tend to be especially attached to the liberal aspect of democracy which seeks to blunt the potentially corrosive influence of majoritarian rule by securing rights and liberties for all. Historical minorities in eastern Europe and Muslims in the west thus tend to support liberal democracy significantly more and are significantly less likely to support illiberal oppositions to democracy than majorities. This is not the case for historical minorities in western Europe who are likely more accepted and protected, and thus less concerned by potential majoritarian tyranny. Importantly, this article shows that membership in cultural groups can be as important as individual social or economic characteristics in determining the support for or opposition to democracy.

Finally and ultimately, the article shows that the support for or opposition to democracy is multifaceted, just like democracy itself. Most social features of individuals strengthen their support for some aspects of democracy, while working weakly – or even inversely – on others.

Democratic support is thus in many situations a series of trade offs.

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