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What is a good democracy? Citizens' support for new modes of governing

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## chapter four | what is a good democracy? citizens' support for new modes of governing

*Didier Caluwaerts, Benjamin Biard, Vincent Jacquet and Min Reuchamps*

From the beginning of the 1990's onwards, political analysts in all Western countries discovered the contours of a widespread crisis of democratic representation. The alleged decline of political trust and public participation, the increasing dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy, and the rise of electoral volatility pointed out that the gap between politicians and citizens had never been wider. This idea of a deep-rooted crisis of democratic legitimacy offered an excellent breeding ground for critical reflection on the role, shape and function of democracy in modern societies.

It is in this turbulent period that a quest for new ways of governing have arisen (Geissel and Newton 2012). Established conceptions of democracy were challenged, and innovative democratic disruptors – be it deliberative, direct or participatory modes of governing – entered the political market place. Even though each of these challengers claimed to be capable of generating political decisions that receive broad public support, even when there is strong disagreement on the aims and values a polity should promote, we know surprisingly little about the actual support among the citizenry for these new modes of governing.

In this chapter, we look at these profound democratic transformations from the perspective of citizens. More specifically, the research question of this chapter is: who supports these new (deliberative and participatory) and old (representative, technocratic and business) models of democracy or modes of governing? And can these preferences be explained by differences individuals' attitudes and resources?

We will answer these questions with the data of the 2014 PartiRep Voter Survey. Belgium is a particularly interesting country to study citizens' preferences for different models of democracy for two reasons. On the one hand, Belgium with its strong consociational characteristics, has been a very elitist type of democracy since the 1950s. Because of its deep ethno-linguistic divides, its democratic infrastructure is shaped on the two premises of

prudent elites and deferent citizens (Lijphart 1968). In other words, it is a democracy in which the demos generally plays second fiddle (Caluwaerts and Deschouwer 2014). On the other hand, Belgium too has witnessed a strong political debate on the state of democracy since the early 1990s, but no fundamental changes to the political system have been implemented, and Belgium's closed political system has hindered the implementation of democratic innovations (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2015). As such, it is interesting to study the preferences of Belgian citizens on new and old types of democracy.

Our findings suggest that citizens hold very complex preferences when it comes to democracy, and that these preferences are strongly related to levels of educational attainment and political trust.

## CITIZENS AND DEMOCRACY

Western representative democracies are nowadays put under pressure. For three decades, political science analysts have continuously highlighted the growing distrust of citizens in standard institutions of representative democracy (Dalton 2004, 2005, Norris 1999, Rosanvallon 2006). In fact, actors at the heart of the representative mechanism, elected officials and political parties prevail increasingly lower trust from their constituents. In addition, a steadily increasing number of citizens does not identify with most political parties, which find it increasingly difficult when it comes to attracting supporters (Mair and van Biezen 2001, Wattenberg 2000). In short, if one believes these indicators, confidence in the players and the institutions of representative democracy is shrinking.

Given this situation, a series of theorists and activists have been promoting new ways of conducting politics. These alternatives are numerous and it would be misleading to gather behind a single and specific notion. However, the first set of alternatives clearly emphasizes the need for more participatory institutions (Barber 1984, Pateman 2012). They revisit the republican ideal emphasising the importance of active citizenship of all members of the community. Other researchers suggest to regain democratic legitimacy through deliberative democracy (Chambers 2003, Cohen 1989, Elster 1998). Unlike the standard procedure in an election of aggregating individual preferences, deliberative democracy is considered a discursive process, i.e. an exchange of arguments and justifications in the process of shaping public policy (Manin 1985). Basically, policies should be based on decisions following the deliberations of all (or a diverse subset of) members of the community (Cohen 1989: 67).

Both are essential here: the deliberative nature of interactions and decision making methods on the one hand and the inclusion of all stakeholders in the decision on the other.

In recent years, the theoretical ideal of deliberative democracy has been put into practice throughout the world (Fung 2006a, b), with the most standardised procedures being deliberative polls (Fishkin 2009), participatory budgeting (Baiocchi 2005, Herzberg, Röcke and Sintomer 2005), planning groups (Garbe 1986), consensus conferences (Joss 1998) or more recently constitutional assemblies (Reuchamps and Suiter 2016). In each case, the aim is to allow a great diversity of citizens to meet, exchange views and give their opinion on a public problem, bring new problems to the agenda or even adopt binding decisions. The purpose of these initiatives varies greatly from one experiment to another, ranging from just informing the public to decision making as well as communication and consultation (Arnstein 1969, Rowe and Frewer 2005).

Paralleling the rise of the deliberative model of democracy, we also witnessed a growing appeal of directly democratic mechanisms which allow citizens to vote for one decision or another, or to put issues on the agenda via a popular initiative. The development of the internet has also helped to establish mechanisms for citizens to have greater input in discussions on virtual platforms (e.g. Janssen and Kies 2005, Smith, John, Sturgis and Nomura 2009).

Because of this injection of innovations, contemporary democracies can be characterised by a process of hybridisation, where direct citizen participation and indirect processes of representation have to find new ways of productively coexisting. However, it is obvious that this process of hybridisation has mainly been implemented in a top-down manner by officials wishing to involve citizens in matters of public interest. Processes of hybridisation thus reflect more what elites desire of democracy, and how much power they are willing to transfer, than what citizens actually want from their democracy. This leads us thus to the question what kind of democratic models the citizens want.

Research in political science has brought forward some answers to this question. In the United States, the work of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) opened the discussion with the following provocative thesis: 'The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision making: They do not want to make political decisions themselves; they do not want to provide much input to those assigned to make their decisions; and they would rather not know all the details of the decision-making process'. (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002: 1).

Through surveys and focus groups, the authors claim that citizens are in favour of a 'stealth democracy', i.e. that they want a democracy with mechanisms of minimal control that make elected officials accountable to the people but this should be a last resort when the rulers have lost the trust they once enjoyed. For these authors the growing distrust of parties, politicians, parliaments and governments is mistakenly interpreted for a call for direct participation. Even though citizens did develop a strong distrust towards politicians, this should not be interpreted as a call for citizens to step in their place. Instead of the current situation where citizens believe elected officials act for their own agenda or under the influence of private lobbies, the ideal system would be to give power to more empathetic, less lazy people closer to the population and that act in the interest of the highest number (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). By creating an antagonistic view of society between the people and the elite, populist leaders propose to embody these 'ideal politicians' (Mudde 2007).

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's study encouraged the development of other research with often contradictory results. For instance, Neblo and his colleagues (2010) argue that a much larger share of the population wishes to deliberate than that claimed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse. However, this desire is conditional. After all, citizens want a genuine say in politics, but are now reluctant to take part in deliberative experiences due to their distrust of politicians and the limited opportunities that are available to them.

Some European studies (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009, Bornand et al 2017, Donovan and Jeffery 2006, Font, Wojcieszak and Navarro 2015, Webb 2013) also attempted to measure the levels of support for different models of democracy. Webb (2013) has shown that different democratic models are not considered to be mutually exclusive and that British citizens support different – often contradictory – models of democracy at the same time. He also shows that many people support the transfer of power to a range of different actors (experts, elected officials, business leaders). This might seem contradictory from the democratic theory perspective but these diverse preferences make sense in a general climate of distrust towards traditional democratic institutions. These often contradictory results beg the question what Belgian citizens' preferences for democratic models are, and whether they also hold complex views of different democratic models.

## SUPPORT FOR VARIOUS MODELS OF DEMOCRACY

Inspired by previous work we constructed five indicators corresponding to five possible models of democracy with each one corresponding to a question asked to respondents in the voter survey.

1. Direct democracy: The government should seek the opinion of its population much more often.
2. Technocratic democracy: We should leave the important decisions to experts.
3. Deliberative democracy: Male and female politicians must often make decisions based on discussions among citizens.
4. Representative democracy: Since politicians are the ones responsible they have to make the decisions themselves.
5. 'Business' democracy: The government would work better if decisions were made by people who have succeeded in business.

For each question respondents were asked to position themselves on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

*Table 4.1: Opinion of the Walloon and Flemish population in relation to the five models of democracy (in percentage)*

	<b>Direct democracy</b>	<b>Technocracy</b>	<b>Deliberative democracy</b>	<b>Representative democracy</b>	<b>Business democracy</b>
Strongly agree	42,5	19,1	27,5	12,2	8,6
Agree	41,9	43,4	49,8	40,5	24,2
Neither agree nor disagree	8,9	22,0	14,5	23,6	36,4
Disagree	6,1	12,4	7,5	19,9	28,2
Strongly disagree	0,8	3,2	0,8	3,7	8,6
Total	100	100	100	100	100

The appreciation for these five models of democracy is shown in Table 4.1. Immediately, we notice strong support for more direct forms of democracy as 84.4 per cent of the population studied is in favour of this option. Citizens would widely welcome their opinion being taken

more often into account by the government. Further, a majority – albeit slightly smaller – also agree with a technocracy with no less than 62.5 per cent of respondents believing that independent experts would be better able to make good decisions. The deliberative option, meanwhile, also seems to interest a large part of the Flemish and Walloon citizens. 77.3 per cent of them would like politicians' decisions to be more strongly rooted in discussions held between citizens. This type of democracy aims for instance for the creation of panels of citizen or organised areas that would give them the opportunity for discussion. However, the final decision would remain in the hands of political authorities. A small majority (52.7 per cent) supports representative democracy namely supporting the idea that decisions should be made by politicians given that they are effectively the ones responsible. Finally, only a minority supports a business model of democracy where businessmen make the decisions. This model studied by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse based on the idea that the strategic management of corporate managers could inspire policy-making processes found little backing among the Flemish and the Walloons. In fact, only 32.8 per cent of the citizens surveyed supports this proposal.

These results show that the highest support goes in the first place towards more participatory democracy and secondly to deliberative democracy. This might indicate a demand for more participatory types of democracy. However, it seems important to emphasize that our results do not mean that citizens would want to participate themselves in citizen panels or participatory budgets when faced with concrete opportunities. It is not because a person wants more consultation with citizens that she will show enthusiasm towards concrete acts of political participation (McHugh 2006). After all, the survey measured the abstract attitude of individuals towards possible democratic orientations, not their actual willingness to actively participate.

#### DIFFERENT MODELS OF DEMOCRACY?

The first interpretation of the results seems to point out that citizens overwhelmingly support a diverse set of democratic models. This raises the question whether the support for the different models of democracy is mutually exclusive? In other words, do citizens back several models at the same time or can groups clearly be distinguished? One answer to this question is given by an analysis of the correlation between the support for different

democratic models (Table 4.2). This analysis offers the possibility to determine whether the backing of models is negatively or positively interconnected. Whereas some links may seem conceptually obvious – such as the fact that the more a person supports direct democracy the more she will support a form of deliberative democracy – others are more unusual. For example, support for the business model is positively correlated with all other models. Additionally, no negative correlation was observed between the different models.

*Table 4.2: Spearman correlations between the five democratic models*

	Direct	Technocratic	Deliberative	Representative	Business
Direct	1	,082***	,531***	-0,016	,141***
Technocratic	,082***	1	,039	,162***	,250***
Deliberative	,531***	,039	1	,028	,075***
Representative	-0,016	,162***	0,028	1	,179***
Business	,141***	,250***	,075***	,179***	1

\*\*\*. *The correlation is significant at 0.001 (bilateral).*

This leads to a multi-layered approach to the support of the various models of democracy. While political science textbooks generally have different models based on distinct philosophical traditions (Held 2006), it is clear from the analysis of the correlations that this segmentation is not found in citizens' preferences. Citizens support different democratic models that can conceptually and theoretically appear as opposites. Therefore, it is not possible to clearly distinguish groups of citizens who would support only clear and precise type of democracy. Indeed, 69.1 per cent of the electorate studied supports at least three models of democracy and 36.9 per cent at least four models. This is not new in the literature on democratic preferences (Coffe and Michels 2014, Donovan and Jeffery 2006, Webb 2013) but previous studies have often studied this phenomenon in terms of inconsistency and contradiction. However, as shown by other authors democratic preferences can be understood in terms of dimensions that are potentially independent from each other (Font et al. 2015). A pluralistic view of the support for various modes of democracy must thus be



developed by identifying trends and orientations present in society and not exclusive categories of democratic models of preferences (Jacquet and Reuchamps 2016). For example, one person may wish that citizens have more influence on the political system while emphasising the importance of making certain decisions based on the verdicts of experts.

## HYPOTHESES

To explain which citizens hold which democratic preferences and why, we will look at the impact of individual-level resources and attitudes. Previous studies have shown that the most highly educated and privileged individuals in society are the ones who take part in politics, especially when the method of participation requires a significant investment of time and effort (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995). Moreover, research on changing values and attitudes of citizens (Dalton 2005, Inglehart and Catterberg 2002) shows that the most advantaged social groups are also the ones who are most critical of traditional political authorities and demand a more direct involvement of their part. This is the combined effect of cognitive mobilisation and change in post-materialist values described by Inglehart (1997) which explains the reason behind the support for this model. This first body of research allows the assumption that it is the most socially privileged who develop greater political interest and are more confident in their ability to act in the political arena. These individuals are more demanding of a more participatory democracy. The first hypothesis is therefore that support for more participatory types of democracy (direct and deliberative) will be higher among citizens with higher SES.

A counterhypothesis, however, is that the desire for a more participatory governance is mainly the result of a feeling of discomfort towards the traditional political world and feelings of ineffectiveness of the mechanisms of a representative government. According to Neblo et al. (2010) the most deprived people are the ones who do not identify with traditional politicians and who are more likely to seek a direct participation of citizens. Support for a more participatory model is then the result of social exclusion. The most disadvantaged categories, critical of conventional modes of participation, tend to call for the use of a more direct model of participation. This second hypothesis suggests that support for more participatory types of democracy is higher among lower SES groups. There are thus two conflicting hypotheses about the relationship between education and citizens'

preferences for democratic models (Coffé and Michels 2014). One assumes that the most privileged want more direct citizen participation, the other suggests that this is the case of the most vulnerable groups. This chapter should attempt to bring light on that question. Regarding the support for more delegate-type models emphasising the importance that decisions are made by elites (representative, technocratic and business models), the literature provides fewer hypotheses. According to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) the motivation for participation comes from the most advantaged social categories, who are not interested in politics and does not want to take up a more active role in the political process. They prefer to delegate this authority. We can therefore put forward the hypothesis that the people least interested in politics, less confident in their personal capacity to intervene in politics and who have the most confidence in the elites are the ones who will support representative, technocratic and business models of democracy.

## VARIABLES

To determine whether political resources and attitudes impact citizens' preferences for democratic models, we conducted multivariate analysis in the form of five binomial logistic regressions, one for each of the five models. We therefore dichotomised the initial Likert item scales into two values (0= neutral, disagree or strongly disagree; 1= agree or strongly agree). The independent variables are grouped into two large categories. First, the standard sociodemographic variables are included in our multivariate analysis: age, gender and level of education. We divided the last into three categories (none or primary, secondary and higher education). We also integrated regions (Flanders and Wallonia, with a dummy variable) which in the context of this book on the Belgian elections should let us determine whether there are different political cultures in the north and south of the country. Second, regarding the intermediate political attitudes four variables should be taken into account: political trust, political interest, internal political efficacy and external political efficacy. The level of political trust is measured with the score of the only dimension emerging from a principal component analysis of the responses to the question 'can you on a scale from 0 to 10 assess your personal trust in the following institutions: for political parties, politicians, the federal and national government and the federal and regional government (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.917$ )?' Political interest is measured on a scale from 0 to 10 offered to respondents with 10 meaning a very high political interest.

Internal political efficacy is measured by scoring in the first dimension of the analysis of the main matches of the four scales related to the following statements: 'I feel competent enough to participate in political life'; 'I think I would do as good a job as most politicians we elect'; 'I think I'm better informed about politics and government than most other people'; 'I think I understand the important issues facing our society well enough'. The percentage of variance explained by the dimension is 50.820 (Cronbach's alpha = 0.676). This allows us to determine whether the fact of considering oneself competent to act in the political field, to understand the issues, influences the propensity to support a specific democratic model. For the sense of external political efficacy, we are using the score of the first dimension of the analysis of main matches of the three scales related to the following statements: 'An average citizen has a real influence on politics and on the authorities' action'; 'Before elections, the parties promise a great deal, but ultimately very few promises are carried out'; 'Going to vote is meaningless, the parties do what they want anyway'. The percentage of variance explained by the dimension is 55.120 (Cronbach's alpha = 0.575). This allows us to determine whether support for a democratic dimension is related to the assessment of citizens of their influence in the representative political system.

## RESULTS

Who supports different types of democracy? The binomial logistic regression analysis of which the results are presented in Table 4.3 shows that there are no real gender differences in the support of different models of democracy, but that men do hold significantly more positive opinions about representative democracy. The age differences are also obvious. Generally, older generations are more supportive of elitist types of democracy in which power is delegated to representatives, business owners and technocratic experts. Younger generations, however, who are generally assumed to hold more post-materialist value orientations (Inglehart 1997), are more supportive of directly involving citizens in politics. In addition, we do see strong regional differences in preferences for democratic models among the respondents. Flemings are much more in favour of indirect, elitist types of democracy, whereas recent innovations such as deliberative democracy are much more strongly supported in Wallonia. This lends some support to the thesis that there exist different democratic cultures and preferences in the two regions (Abts et al. 2012). Educational differences are also very clear from the results. Even though there are no educational

differences in support for the technocratic model of democracy, we do find that the lower educated have a higher tendency to support all other types of democracy. The level of education seems here to be negatively correlated with support for direct, deliberative, representative and business types of democracy. These results refute the first hypothesis that support for more participatory types of democracy (direct and deliberative) will be higher among citizens with higher SES. Our findings might indicate that the higher educated are generally more critical of all democratic models, and are more aware of the limitations of different democratic processes, be they more participatory or more elitist.

*Table 4.3: Binomial logistic regression predicting support for different models of democracy*

	Direct democracy		Technocratic democracy		Deliberative democracy		Representative democracy		'Business' democracy	
	B (SE)	Sign.	B (SE)	Sign.	B (SE)	Sign.	B (SE)	Sign.	B (SE)	Sign.
Gender (ref.= woman)	-0.258 (0.140)	0.064	0.125 (0.098)	0.216	0.021 (0.121)	0.859	0.253 (0.101)	0.012	-0.067 (0.107)	0.531
Age	-0.012 (0.004)	0.004	0.015 (0.003)	0.000	0.002 (0.004)	0.524	0.026 (0.003)	0.000	0.015 (0.003)	0.000
Education (ref.= higher)										
Primary	0.865 (0.182)	0.000	-0.049 (0.135)	0.718	0.507 (0.160)	0.002	0.405 (0.135)	0.003	0.600 (0.145)	0.000
Secondary	0.712 (0.158)	0.000	-0.088 (0.121)	0.469	0.432 (0.139)	0.002	0.145 (0.122)	0.232	0.345 (0.135)	0.010
Region (ref.= Flanders)	0.199 (0.133)	0.136	-0.303 (0.098)	0.002	1.192 (0.122)	0.000	-0.517 (0.098)	0.000	-0.468 (0.104)	0.000
Political interest	-0.068 (0.032)	0.031	-0.044 (0.022)	0.043	0.015 (0.026)	0.570	0.036 (0.022)	0.098	-0.031 (0.022)	0.169
Political trust	-0.014 (0.006)	0.018	0.016 (0.004)	0.000	-0.005 (0.005)	0.280	0.016 (0.004)	0.000	0.002 (0.004)	0.566
Internal political efficacy	0.051 (0.040)	0.205	-0.015 (0.029)	0.600	-0.026 (0.035)	0.452	0.003 (0.029)	0.907	0.139 (0.031)	0.000
External political efficacy	-0.206 (0.036)	0.000	-0.079 (0.026)	0.003	-0.088 (0.031)	0.004	0.024 (0.026)	0.350	-0.141 (0.028)	0.000
Nagelkerke $r^2$	0.137		0.046		0.123		0.118		0.097	

Regarding the effects of political attitudes, the feeling of external political effectiveness is negatively correlated with support almost every model. The more respondents argue that the current representative model gives citizens the opportunity to influence politics, the less they support alternatives to the representative model of democracy. Political trust also yields interesting results. Those respondents with higher levels of trust in the current political actors and institutions, are generally more supportive of representative and technocratic models of democracy, whereas lower levels of political trust lead to a higher support of direct citizen involvement in politics. Those who are more distrustful of the current political elites are more in favour of direct democracy in which the decision-making powers of elites are bypassed in favour of more direct political engagement. Satisfaction thus breeds support, whereas dissatisfaction incentivizes citizens to look for alternatives and roll up their sleeves. And finally, political interest has only a limited effect. Those who are more politically interested tend to be less supportive of technocratic and direct types of democracy.

Even though these are interesting results, we should be cautious when generalising the results. After all, the questionnaire assesses the support for different models of democracy, but this does not imply that these people, if faced with the actual opportunity to take part in a vote or discussion would actually get involved. We should thus be wary of overstretching the implications of our finding.

## CONCLUSION

Our results lead to different conclusions. First, they suggest that it is useful to study not just democracy as a container concept, but to also distinguish between different models of democracy. Such a multi-dimensional view allows us to more clearly study the social and attitudinal basis of the support for different democratic processes. Secondly, in terms of resources, one of the most important findings is that respondents with low levels of education attainment are generally more positive of all types of democracy than those who completed higher education, even though the differences are not that great with regard to representative democracy. This might suggest two conclusions. On the one hand, the higher educated are generally more critical of the different democratic models than the lower educated. They might be more aware of the limitations of each model. On the other hand, the much stronger support for direct, deliberative and business democracy among the lower

educated indicates that the most disadvantaged social categories tend to desire a change of democratic model, regardless of its form. This supports Webb's hypothesis (2013) according to which this type of question is more of a rejection – which he calls populist – of the current situation than the specific desire of another political model. Thirdly, one of the interesting findings of our analysis is the existence of regional differences in democratic preferences. Flanders seems to favour more elitist types of democracy, whereas deliberative democracy finds strong support in Wallonia. Finally, in terms of political attitudes, external political efficacy, political trust and political interest are all strong indicators of citizens' preferences for democratic models. Those who trust the current political elites and institutions, are likely to support them, and are likely to have doubts about more participatory alternatives. And those who think the current political system allows them to make a difference, are less likely to support alternatives to representative democracy.

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