CONFERENCE "DEALING WITH COMPLEXITY IN SOCIETY: FROM PLURALITY OF DATA TO SYNTHETIC INDICATORS"

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ABSTRACT

What is the quality of democracy? A citizens’ perspective from Europe.

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Keywords: Understanding of democracy; Quality of democracy; Measurement equivalence; European Social Survey.

Background: Democratic theory and empirical research have been debating on what democracy is and is not (Schmitter and Karl 1991). Recent contributions to the literature have tried to depart from “baseline” conceptualizations of democracy, including aspects that allow assessing democracy as “good” or of “quality” (Munck 2014). Within this debate, some scholars have investigated what democracy is to the eyes of citizens, i.e. the citizens’ “cognitive orientations” towards democracy (see Almond and Verba 1963). In fact, citizens seem to have a multifaceted understanding of democracy (Dalton, Shin and Jou 2007; Canache 2012). This means that citizens may not have a coherent and well-defined opinion of the structure of what elements make up democracy. This is a complex matter that can be influenced by historical legacies, modes of organization of social life, and, in general, by models of democracy. Indeed, the relevance of the constitutive elements of democracy may be different in different contexts, and also depends on the availability and choice of indicators.

Objectives: Often, survey research focusing on citizens’ opinion on democracy has been limited to specific areas due to the lack of indicators measuring beliefs about democracy. The recent round of the European Social Survey included a special module on “Europeans’ understandings and evaluations of
This module was designed to investigate what citizens think democracy should be and allows understanding what they deem the components of the latent construct of democracy are. This module, therefore, includes a battery of indicators aiming at measuring, according to the recent literature on the “quality of democracy” (see Morlino 2011), how important some aspects are for democratic regimes. In brief, this battery of indicators allows assessing the extent to which several components of democracy are important for citizens. Furthermore, as this battery includes indicators going beyond “minimalist” conceptualizations of democracy (Dahl 1971; Przeworski, 1999; Morlino 2008), it allows assessing what citizens mean by “good democracy”. The final goal is to understand whether the citizens’ construct of democratic quality is the same across different European countries, that is, whether citizens see a “good democracy” as built of the same aspects in Europe.

Methods: At first, as goal of the paper is testing the citizens’ construct of “democratic quality”, and as it is not easy to be identified an a priori model, the items forming this construct will be selected using an exploratory strategy (Brown 2006). In a second step, the construct is tested using single-country and multi-group Confirmatory Factor Analysis (see Jöreskog 1971; Bollen 1989). Single-country CFA will provide a preliminary assessment of equivalence, helping in achieving the best model specification. Multi-group CFA will allow assessing whether the latent variable can be measured using the same set of items across European countries, thus allowing testing whether the construct is similar in different countries (Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998; Vandenberg and Lance 2000).

Results: After a preliminary descriptive and exploratory analysis showing how important citizens in Europe consider the several components of democracy, the single-country and the multi-group CFAs indicate that the indicators measuring the citizens’ conception of the “quality of democracy” form a unidimensional construct, although with some caveats. In fact, it appears that not all indicators measuring this construct appear to be part of it in all contexts. Indeed, it could be argued that some elements are more important that others, but that overall the conception of “democratic quality”, with the due modifications, is quite similar across the contexts analyzed.

Conclusions: Assessing how citizens see a democracy of quality allows understand what aspects they deem important. This can provide useful information on what are the elements that could (and should) be improved in European democracies. Very often “good democracy” is measured at an aggregate level, in terms of, for instance, how well institutions performs, freedoms are guaranteed, the laws are enforced, it responds to citizens requests, and so on. However, it is also important to look at what citizens consider constitutive of a democracy of quality, that are its principles, as it might suggest what is missing from the “real democracies” they live in.

Main References


