



# Why democracy does not work for everyone: Social status and support for democracy in Europe<sup>1</sup>

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Why do losers like democracy less than winners? Although the fact that social status influences support for democracy is empirically established, it is often overlooked in the literature. This article analyses the effects of subjective and objective social status on citizens' expectations and evaluations of democracy. Results show that low status citizens value democratic dimensions differently - they prefer social justice over liberal criteria. Low status citizens also evaluate the performance of their own democratic system in all dimensions significantly more critically than their higher status counterparts. These two effects combined create a larger 'distance' between low-status citizens' expectations and evaluations, especially in the social dimension, causing them to be more prone to democratic dissatisfaction. Moreover, subjective social position has a significantly stronger effect than objective position, pointing to the relevance of status perceptions for democratic attitudes.

**Keywords:** social status; support for democracy; European Social Survey

## Introduction<sup>3</sup>

Growing concerns over democratic backsliding and the persistent success of right-wing authoritarianism in established democracies have brought renewed attention to popular discontent with democracy. But where does dissatisfaction with democracy come from? This article approaches the question from a socio-economic angle: Based on the widespread notion that 'losers do not like democracy' (Anderson *et al.*, 2005), I try to understand what makes people feel like losers, and how exactly socio-economic status affects support for democracy. Why should we look at status to explain individual-level differences in support for democracy? The question of social status - or social class, as it has traditionally been called - is an old one. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) believed that class-

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<sup>3</sup> Replication data is available at: "Replication Data for: Why democracy does not work for everyone: Social status and support for democracy in Europe" (Heyne, 2024), Harvard Dataverse, V1. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DRJCWI>>. Accessed on: 10 Mar. 2025.

cleavage was essential in determining political behaviour, and while it was long considered a factor with declining importance (Knutson, 2007, p. 457–58), aspects like income, education and occupation (summarized as socio-economic status) are still commonly used to explain political behaviour such as turnout (Leighley; Nagler, 1992; Kasara; Suryanarayan, 2015), political participation (Quintelier; Hooghe, 2013) or vote choice (Werts; Scheepers; Lubbers, 2012), and have been shown to account for substantial variance. As Ceka and Magalhães (2016, p. 92) have observed, the fact that people with higher status tend to support democracy more than their low-status counterparts "has often passed unremarked". Some authors, however, have analysed the relationship between socio-economic status and democratic support. Schäfer (2013) for example finds that satisfaction with democracy is higher among people with higher education and incomes, and that country-level inequality additionally lowers satisfaction. Carlin (2006) argues that higher levels of education and income increase diffuse support for democracy and values of self-expression. But the evidence that losers do not like democracy does not explain why that is the case, which is the objective of this article.

I assume that the perceived social position of citizens influences both their expectations and evaluations of democracy. Theoretically, I take two steps: I first ask, does status explain which democratic dimensions people want more, and which they miss more? And second, in which countries does social status matter more, and in which less? I define social status as relative position in society compared to other citizens, which is a subjective measure, but also consider the three traditional indicators of objective socio-economic status; income, education and occupation. For this analysis I use data for 26 countries from the European Social Survey 6. I also consider country-level variance by testing these effects across different groups of European democracies: I assume that social status matters more in post-communist countries and countries affected by the Great Recession. The article begins by discussing support for democracy and its components, to then present my hypotheses on the effects of social status, and their differences across countries. I then explain how I conceptualize social status and proceed to the empirical analysis. Lastly, I discuss and interpret the results.

## **Support for democracy**

### *Democratic expectations and evaluations*

Pippa Norris' observed that it is essential to distinguish "attitudes that operate at different levels rather than treat political support as though it is all of one piece" (Norris, 2011, p. 241). In this light, and following Ferrin and Kriesi's (2016) as well as Wessels' (2016) work on citizens understandings and evaluations of democracy, this article focuses on two dimensions of support: democratic expectations as a diffuse and normative

dimension of democracy, and democratic evaluations as a specific and evaluative dimension of democracy.

*Democratic expectations* describe citizens value orientations towards democracy, in other words, the normative model of democracy favored by an individual. Expectations, as Seyd (2014, p. 3) has claimed, can refer to two dimensions: The first sense of expectation relates to an anticipatory judgment – a belief that an actor or body will deliver a particular quality or outcome. The second sense relates to a normative or desirability judgment – a belief that a particular quality should exist, or an outcome should be delivered. Expectations of democracy relate to that second sense, a normative ideal: What should a good democracy be like, and what should it do for me? What should democracy mean? This dimension of support is closely related to Eastons' notion of diffuse regime support, that is, support for political principles (Easton, 1975, p. 444). Secondly, *evaluations of democracy* refer to the performance of the respective democratic regime someone lives in, and the assessments of how democratic principles have been implemented in their country (Ferrin; Kriesi, 2016, p. 9). Whereas the objective democratic performance or democratic quality of a regime is an attribute that can be measured on the country-level, subjective evaluations differ across citizens, as they are dependent on individual characteristics such as the socio-economic background and individual values (Mishler; Rose, 2001; van der Meer; Dekker, 2011). These evaluations refer to the perceived system performance, and do not have to coincide with objective democratic performance. Evaluative support is closely related to Eastons' notion of specific regime support for the performance and output of political authorities (Easton, 1975, p. 437).

Following Ferrin and Kriesi (2016), these two dimensions of democratic support are closely related from both conceptual and analytical perspectives: individual democratic expectations serve as a normative yardstick against which reality is evaluated and are crucial in determining citizens assessments of the democratic practices they experience. Democratic legitimacy results from citizens comparing democratic ideals and practices: "If norms and reality match, the regime will be considered legitimate, but if reality falls short of the ideal, there will be [...] a democratic deficit" (Ferrin; Kriesi, 2016, p. 10). Thus, the "gap" between what democracy "should be" and what democracy "actually is" becomes a potential source of a democratic deficit. This approach is in line with recommendations by Classen *et al.* (2023) to "align the measurement of public support for democracy with the measurement of democracy itself". Hence, evaluations of democratic performance are only meaningful when we analyse them in relation to individual views of democracy<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See Wessels (2016) and Heyne (2018) for detailed discussions of the analytical and empirical relationship between democratic expectations and evaluations.

### *Support for which kind of democracy?*

From a normative point of view, the fact that “democracy” can mean different things has long been established - democratic theory offers plenty of different and often opposing conceptions of what ‘government of the people, by the people and for the people’ is supposed to mean and how it is to function. For proponents of the *minimalist perspective*, democracy is merely a means to elect skilled elites who are capable of making public decisions and protecting individual liberties. In a *participatory conception of democracy*, involvement in politics is valued for its own sake and is considered the core of a democracy. A *social democratic approach to democracy* also considers political outcomes like social equality to be essential to fair and meaningful democratic participation. The literature on *varieties of democracy* further assumes established democracies diverge in the way they realize democracy. They implement democratic principles through different formal institutional arrangements as well as informal practices and procedures. As Bochslers and Kriesi have affirmed, “they are all variations on a general theme” (2013, p. 69). In this understanding, democracy consists of several dimensions, and existing democracies emphasize these dimensions differently. For instance, as Lijphart (1984, 1999) has famously stated, some democracies rely more on majoritarian decision-making, whereas others emphasize consensus-oriented forms of power-sharing. Collier and Levitsky (1997) speak of democracies “with adjectives”, Thomassen (2007, p. 423ff) sees democratic models on a continuum between individualism and collectivism, and along which libertarian and socialist models oppose each other.

This research shows that democracy is a multidimensional and multifaceted concept that researchers approach from different angles, and I argue that we should expect citizens to do the same. If researchers can identify differences between democratic models, these differences should also matter for citizens. The European Social Survey 6 (ESS, 2012) offers a set of items on citizens' expectations and evaluations of democracy along a wide range of democratic attributes. Using an exploratory factor analytical approach (EFA), I identify two main dimensions that structure citizens' support for democracy: *Liberal democracy* and *social democracy* (for more details on the Exploratory Factor Analysis, see Appendix B<sup>5</sup>). Liberal democracy refers to democratic inputs and procedures: fair elections, political freedom, a variety of political parties, and transparency. Social democracy, on the other hand, refers to democratic outputs: protection against poverty and redistribution. I assume that individuals vary in their ideas about a ‘good’ democracy, and that this variance can be captured on a scale along two dimensions that refer to two substantially different ways of defining democracy: a procedural and a substantive approach. In the liberal version, democracy is seen as merely a procedure, and social justice as a prerequisite for or a potential outcome of these procedures. Meanwhile, from a social democratic

<sup>5</sup> The Appendixes are available on the Cesop website, in the section “Revista Opinião Pública”, on the page of this article: <[https://www.cesop.unicamp.br/por/opiniao\\_publica](https://www.cesop.unicamp.br/por/opiniao_publica)>.

perspective, social justice is seen as a substantive and intrinsic part of democracy. Support for democracy can thus take place in two dimensions - liberal and social democratic. Additionally, I use *direct democracy* as a third dimension for robustness tests, as it refers to a different democratic model that complements representative democracy.

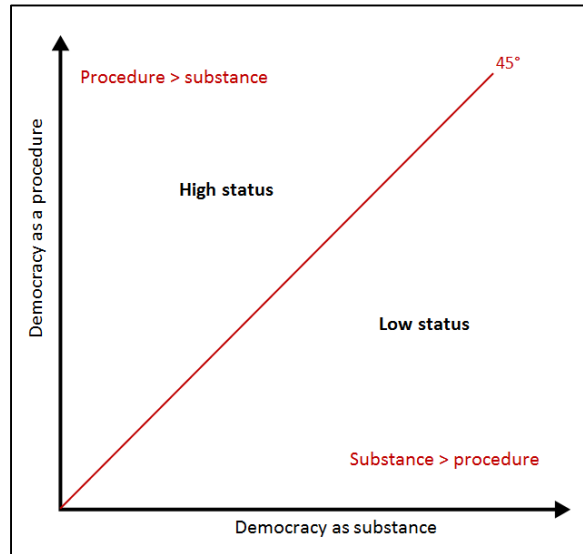
## The role of social status

### *Procedure vs. substance: How social status affects democratic support*

Which groups of people are dissatisfied and for what reasons? And how does this vary across countries? This article wants to answer these questions by analysing how citizens' status matters for their democratic expectations and evaluations. My first argument is that social status influences what citizens want from a democracy: Procedural or substantive fairness. Why would status matter for that? Social dominance theory, which tries to understand how group-based social hierarchy is formed and maintained, suggests that there are behavioural asymmetries between dominant and subordinate groups. The social, psychological and ideological forces that help sustain group dominance work better for people in dominant than in subordinate groups, making them more prone to support these forces (Pratto; Sidanius; Levin, 2006, p. 280). Subordinate groups are consequently more likely to reject the status quo, while privileged groups who benefit from this status quo strive to preserve it (Turner; Reynolds, 2003, p. 201). Ceka and Magalhães (2016) confer this argument to democratic attitudes, arguing that high-status citizens whose social privilege allow them to profit from this status quo should be more likely to support democracy in its current liberal, procedural form than low-status citizens. Low-status citizens, on the other hand, feel that they do not profit from the liberal democratic reality, and should be more likely to want a change of the democratic system (*ibid.*, p. 93ff). A similar argument has been made by Aarts, Thomassen, and van Ham (2014), who claim that citizens with a low socio-economic status are more negatively affected by globalization while simultaneously being less represented by parties, which makes them more dissatisfied with democratic procedures. While the idea that more education and income make citizens more supportive and convinced of liberal democratic and emancipative values is an established part of modernization theory (cf. Inglehart; Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2013), the difference is that social dominance theory is about the relative level of resources, or status, in a society. Modernization theory claims that, independently of context, people with more material and cognitive resources embrace liberal democracy more strongly. Social dominance theory claims that a relatively higher status compared to those in the same society makes dominant groups embrace the political status quo, which, in the case of established democracies, happens to be a liberal one (Ceka; Magalhães, 2016, p. 94).

From the point of view of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954, p. 125), individuals are strongly driven by "comparison concerns" - the desire to achieve or maintain a superior relative position compared to other individuals. Driven by this tendency to self-evaluate by comparing ourselves to others, we aim to reduce status discrepancies and engage in competitive behaviour to protect our superiority (Garcia *et al.*, 2013). This notion is related to the concept of relative deprivation (i.e. Merton, 1938; Gurr, 1970), which affirms that rather than absolute poverty or deprivation, it is the feeling of having an unfavourable social position and being deprived of status, money or other valuable societal assets compared to others that sparks people's discontent and makes them push for social change (Pettigrew, 2002, p. 352). Following both social comparison and relative deprivation theory, a relatively lower social status, should accordingly accompany a desire to change the political status quo - liberal democracy. It should also make citizens more motivated to change that status to a more fair one. Being at the (perceived) lower end of the social hierarchy should lead to more support for substantive aspects of democracy, while dominant groups oppose calls for more social justice, as this would most likely mean a redistribution to their disadvantage (Ceka; Magalhães, 2016, p. 95). This is in line with research showing that welfare and redistribution preferences differ according to socio-economic status (Gilens, 2005; Dion; Birchfield, 2010). Thus, when it comes to democratic preferences, status should determine whether citizens support procedural fairness of democracy, or focus on substantive social justice as an outcome. Indeed, analysing democratic support in sub-Saharan Africa, Bratton (2006) found that while poor people were dissatisfied with the quality of democratic institutions in their countries, they preferred to bypass formal democratic channels and use informal, often clientelist channels to address their economic grievances.

**Figure 1**  
**The effect of social status on democratic expectations**



**Notes:** Prepared by the author.

Based on this theoretical background, I expect perceived social status to play an important role in democratic support. I expect high status to increase support for liberal and procedural elements, and lower status to be associated with favouring substantive, output aspects of democracy, as Figure 1 illustrates.

This leads to the following hypotheses:

*H1: The higher citizens' perceived status, the higher their support for procedural democracy.*

*H2: The lower citizens' perceived status, the higher their support for substantive democracy.*

Moreover, I expect that perceived social position also affects how citizens evaluate their own democracy. The resource model of political participation (Verba; Schlozman; Brady, 1995, p. 271) assumes that participation and accordingly internal and external efficacy increases as socio-economic resources grow. The most crucial determinant of political activity is resources - money, time and civic skills (Blais, 2007, p. 631). High-status citizens are thus better able to use social institutions, and possess the resources to defend their interests, so that they are more likely to also be political winners. This increases their trust in political institutions compared to losers, who lack education, resources, and networks to influence, understand, and profit from societal and political institutions, and hence do not trust them to operate in their favour. This is confirmed by the literature on social and political trust. For instance, Zmerli and Newton (2011, p. 85) find that low social status and low education are generally associated with lower social and political trust, and that 'winners' are more trusting than 'losers'. Interestingly, their results

also show that a citizen's perceived status as a societal winner or loser matters for their levels of trust, not their ascribed status. As Mishler and Rose (2001, p. 54) have stated, effects of national political and economic performance on individual levels of political trust "are indirect and mediated at the micro level by an individual's [...] perceptions".

Hence, individual perceptions seem to play an important role in generating political trust by channelling and mediating the impact of macro-level conditions (cf. Zmerli; Newton; Montero, 2007). These perceptions may also contribute to how citizens evaluate their own democratic system. High-status citizens who possess resources have had more positive experiences with democracy and are more likely to feel their interests represented. They also know how to better use existing political institutions, making them more likely to find them to be working well and to their advantage than low-status citizens. Concretely, I suppose that a perceived low social status leads citizens to systematically evaluate their own democracy more critically than citizens with a perceived high status.

*H3: The lower citizens perceived status, the more negative their evaluations of their own democracy.*

In conclusion, this would also mean that the "democratic deficit" - that is, the gap in legitimacy created by differences between citizens' expectations and evaluations - should be bigger for citizens with a low position in society, especially for the social dimension, which considers the substantive effects of democracy.

### *Social status in Europe: Where do the dissatisfied live?*

Additionally, I want to know if the reasons for democratic support differ across countries. But how would the effect of perceived social status differ according to *where* in Europe people live? First of all, we know that differing socialization experiences in post-authoritarian countries influence attitudes about democracy. In countries democratized in the 'third wave' that began in the 1970s (Huntington, 1991) the concept of democracy was often linked to the idea of economic reforms and development that would allow catching up with Western Europe and North America. This connection between economic wellbeing and democracy led citizens of third wave countries to see political rights and better economic conditions as two sides of the same coin, leading to a more performance-based support for democracy. Economic prosperity is especially important in these countries because it signals the degree to which elites do deliver as promised (Keman, 2014). Magalhães (2017) argues that in younger democracies with less developed institutions, economic outcomes are generally more important for legitimacy, and citizens tend to base their specific support on performance. Liberal democracies, on the other hand, ideally have a more procedural legitimacy, where the perceived fairness of rules leads to support for democracy independently of outputs (Gilley, 2006). The more established a democracy is, the more advanced its level of procedural support should be (Huang; Chang; Chu, 2008).



While this theory applies to all former authoritarian countries, previous research (Ferrin; Kriesi, 2016; Heyne, 2019) has shown that post-communist countries often differ most from their Western European counterparts, while the democratic attitudes of citizens from former authoritarian countries in Southern Europe do not show strong differences with those from Western Europe. Additionally, socialization differed quite strongly in communist countries and liberal democracies, with the former focusing on outputs in the form of social and economic wellbeing rather than procedural fairness. Communist socialization relies on notions of societal unity and solidarity, a penetration of the state into society and a central role of the state in the economy (Pop-Eleches; Tucker, 2014). Consequently, communist regimes gained their legitimacy mostly from policy outputs, by providing welfare, economic growth and security to their citizens. Even after a transition to democracy, citizens may use their experiences under authoritarian regimes as a benchmark for evaluating the democratic regimes, so that citizens in post-communist democracies will expect their state to provide social welfare. Indeed, evidence from Germany shows that citizens in the former Eastern Germany, differently than Western Germans, prefer socialist ideas of democracy over liberal principles (Sack, 2016). While in the West an understanding of democracy close to the liberal model of democracy dominates, in the East the dominating understanding of democracy is one that corresponds to the socialist model of democracy. Other authors have confirmed this result for other post-communist states (Fuchs; Roller, 2006; Pop-Eleches; Tucker, 2014).

In relation to social status, I assume that these particularities of authoritarian, and specifically communist, socialization exacerbate the effect of social status on democratic support. Why would that be the case? Firstly, citizens of post-communist democracies should be more likely to consider social and economic output criteria of a democracy, and to be critical of the liberal 'status quo'. Secondly, this should especially be the case if they compare their current social situation to a status they felt they were promised by democratization, or that they held before democratization. Following the theoretical framework laid out in the previous paragraph, in a political context where democracy is inextricably linked to the promise of a better social and economic status for everyone, those unable to improve their social position should be even more likely to desire a democracy in substance rather than procedure than low-status citizens in Western Europe. On the other hand, citizens who feel they have achieved the high status promised should be more likely to support the political status quo of liberal democracy. In this logic, post-communist socialization should also reinforce the effect of status on democratic evaluations, as any judgement made about democratic practices will be influenced by the notion that democracy should provide a better status for everyone, and be accompanied by a potential comparison of one's own social status not only with other citizens, but also with a past status under an authoritarian regime. As a result, citizens in post-communist countries who feel that they were unable to improve their status will be more likely to blame democracy for this outcome than their counterparts in Western Europe. Based on

this theoretical reasoning, I focus on post-communist countries in this analysis, and assume that living in these countries makes the aforementioned effects of social status on democratic support stronger:

*H4: Living in former communist countries reinforces the effects of social status on democratic expectations and evaluations.*

The data I use was collected in 2012, and thus at the height of the Great Recession. Given the broad political and economic repercussions of the Eurozone crisis on the affected countries and their democratic systems, one could assume that citizens of crisis-stricken countries also differ in their attitudes. Firstly, the economic crisis certainly created more economic 'losers' and sharpened the difference between higher and lower status citizens. From social comparison theory, we know that in times of economic or social uncertainty, concerns about comparative status become even more relevant and increase social competitiveness (Garcia *et al.*, 2013). For example, Grasso *et al.* (2019) show that the crisis exacerbated both relative and absolute economic inequality in Southern European countries, and that within the crisis-hit countries, citizens with a lower social status were especially strongly affected. Research has also found that feelings of social deprivation are more likely to fuel political discontent and protest behaviour under adverse economic circumstances and during crises (Grasso; Giugni, 2016). In sum, economic crises such as the Great Recession not only worsen social and economic inequalities, but also increase the role of social positioning in shaping citizens' political attitudes and behaviour.

Moreover, there is also an established negative relationship between the worsening of economic conditions and citizens' support for democracy. Several countries were even subjected to severe limitations of their democratic autonomy by international institutions (and had changes in government as a direct result, including Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland). Extensive work has shown that the perceived unresponsiveness of political institutions to citizens' needs and the poor management of the crisis by national and European institutions contributed to a decline in democratic support in Europe, and especially in countries with strong intervention from international agencies (Polavieja, 2013; Armingeon; Guthmann, 2014; Ruiz-Rufino; Alonso, 2017). Dotti Sani and Magistro (2016) find that this decline in democratic support was particularly concentrated among economic 'losers' – that is, among citizens who are the most vulnerable to the consequences of the economic crisis. Indeed, Pennings (2017) argues that especially in times of economic upheaval, support for democracy is conditional on the functioning of social welfare and safeguarding of income levels. This is in line with work from Polavieja (2013) who finds that in times of crises, citizens who feel socially and economically vulnerable are more likely to support redistributive policies and tend to be less satisfied with democracy than in normal times.

Based on this literature, we can assume that for citizens living in the countries that were the hardest hit by the economic and political consequences of the Eurozone crisis, social position should play an even stronger role than in their counterparts in Western

Europe. The crisis intensified existing status differences and brought a sudden focus to social and economic conditions, thus making low-status citizens even more aware of their vulnerabilities. As a result, I assume that low-status citizens in crisis-struck countries are more likely to support substantive over procedural democracy than citizens in Western Europe, as they became acutely aware of the relevance of democratic outputs in the form of economic and social welfare. Perceived status should also play a more important role in shaping democratic evaluations, as the crisis has exposed failures of democratic practices that have especially affected its most vulnerable citizens. This leads me to assume the following:

*H5: Living in countries that were exposed to the Eurozone crisis reinforces the effects of social status on democratic expectations and evaluations.*

## Data and operationalization

To test my hypothesis, I use the previously described European Social Survey Round 6 (ESS 2012) for individual-level data. For data on the country-level, I use the Democracy Barometer (Merkel *et al.*, 2016) and the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (Solt, 2016). See Table A1 in the Appendix A for descriptive statistics of all variables.

*Dependent variables:* To measure the two dimensions of democratic support, I use the additive indices from the ESS 2012, which measure expectations as well as evaluations of democracy for liberal, social and direct democracy on a scale from 0 to 10. (For details on the operationalization of the dimensions of democracy see Appendix B). Procedural democracy is measured by the liberal democratic dimension, while substantive democracy is measured by the social democratic dimension. Direct democracy, the third dimension used throughout this article, falls under procedural rather than substantive democracy. I test the same models with this third dimension as a robustness test, and report the results in Appendix A.

*Explanatory variables:* As described in the previous section, I am interested in the effects of social position as predicted by social dominance, social comparison and relative deprivation theories. I want to understand the impact of citizens' perceived status, in comparison to others, on their support for democracy. Socio-economic status is traditionally measured with three indicators: Education, income, and occupation. These indicators, however, measure absolute rather than relative social status - they are about levels. Yet, I am more interested in relative than absolute position in society, and on individual perceptions rather than 'objective' status. This is why I use respondents' self-identified status as a main explanatory variable: their place in society, measured on an

11-point scale (0=bottom of the society, 10=top of the society)<sup>6</sup>. This question is a newer version and replacement of the traditional social class self-assessment and is the most adequate indicator for perceived status the ESS 2012 offers.

To assure that I do not miss the potential effects of objective socio-economic status, I also test the same models with the traditional socio-economic status indicators. The three indicators are total net household income, measured in deciles (1= first decile, 10 = 10<sup>th</sup> decile), education (in years) as well as occupation (9=professional and technical occupations, 8=higher administrative occupations, 7=clerical occupations, 6=sales occupations, 5=service occupations, 4=skilled worker, 3=semi-skilled worker, 2=unskilled worker, 1=farm worker).

*Country groups:* Based on the hypotheses listed in Section 3, stating that effects might differ in former communist countries, I code 11 countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Eastern Germany, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine) as *post-communist countries*. I also assume that being affected by the Eurozone crisis and the austerity measures and government changes that followed increases the effects of social status. Accordingly, I code Cyprus, Ireland, Italy, Spain and Portugal as *Eurozone Crisis countries* - all countries which have had interventions by the ECB and IMF, the implementation of austerity measures, and government changes as a result of the crisis.

*Control variables:* On the individual level, I control for gender and age. On the country level, controls depend on the model. In models in which social democracy is a dependent variable, I use the Gini coefficient as well as the level of redistribution by the state (Solt, 2016) to capture differences in wealth distribution and social welfare that could systematically affect citizens' attitudes towards social justice. Furthermore, I use the age of democracy (Marshall; Gurr, 2016) and democratic quality (Merkel *et al.*, 2016) in the models that test for the effect of residence in former communist countries or Eurozone Crisis countries on attitudes towards democracy.

All models are linear, hierarchical, mixed-effects models, with respondents nested in countries. All models are specified with random intercepts, and for the models containing cross-level interaction terms, random slopes for social status are added. All models are weighted with the ESS post-stratification and population size weights<sup>7</sup>. However, to make sure that the population size weights do not affect the country-level results, I run robustness tests for all models with cross-level interaction terms without population size weights, which are reported in each table (Model 5) and show consistent results.

<sup>6</sup> The exact wording of the question is: "There are people who tend to be towards the top of our society and people who tend to be towards the bottom. On this card there is a scale that runs from top to bottom. Where would you place yourself on this scale nowadays?".

<sup>7</sup> See: <<https://europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/ess-methodology/data-processing-and-archiving/weighting>>. Accessed on: 10 Mar. 2025.

## Results

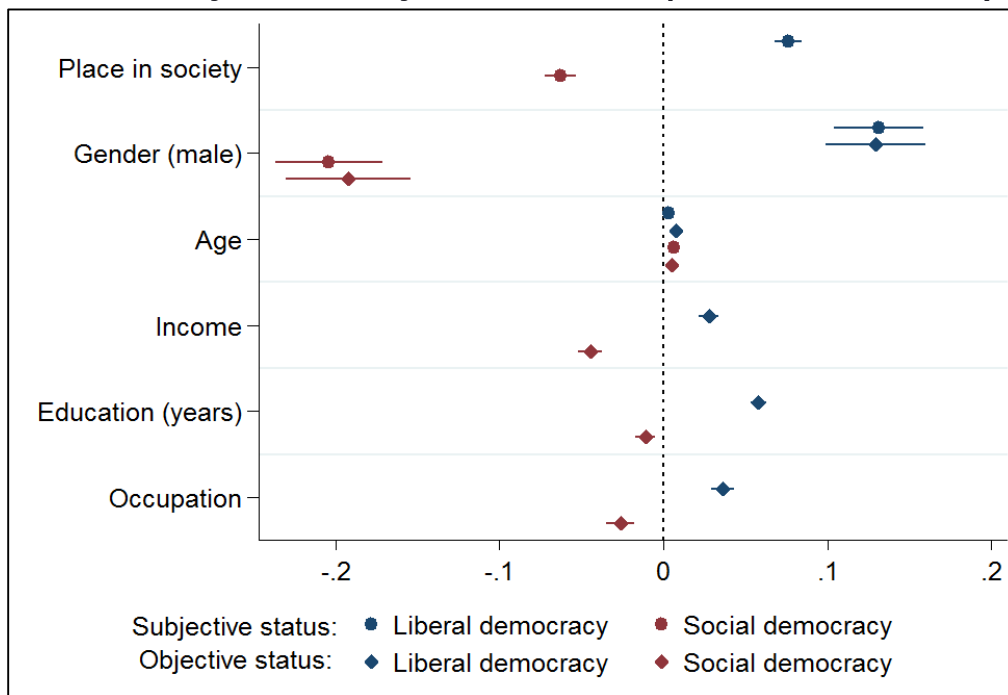
### *Individual-level effects*

To begin, I analyse the effects of subjective as well as objective status on citizens' democratic expectations. Figure 2 shows the individual level results of a multilevel regression model as coefficient plots. We can see that subjective status - citizens' self-assigned place in society - has the expected effects. The higher the perceived status, the higher are liberal democratic expectations, and the lower social democratic expectations. This confirms hypotheses H1 and H2: A low social status goes along with higher expectations for a substantive democracy, and a high status with higher expectations for a procedural democracy. The model with the indicators of objective socio-economic status: income, education, and occupation, shows similar results. All three variables have a positive effect on liberal democratic expectations, and a negative effect on social democratic expectations. Yet, the effects of perceived status are larger than those of objective socio-economic status. An additional model testing the effects of status on direct democratic expectations as a robustness test (Table A4 in Appendix A) interestingly shows that direct democracy follows the same pattern as social democracy, and has stronger support from those with lower status. Lastly, we see a strong effect of the control variable gender. Men support liberal democracy more strongly, while women rather support social democracy<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> This finding can be explained by social dominance theory as well, as gender is another factor creating a hierarchy in society, where women have a systematically lower status position than men (Pratto; Sidanius; Levin, 2006, p. 273).

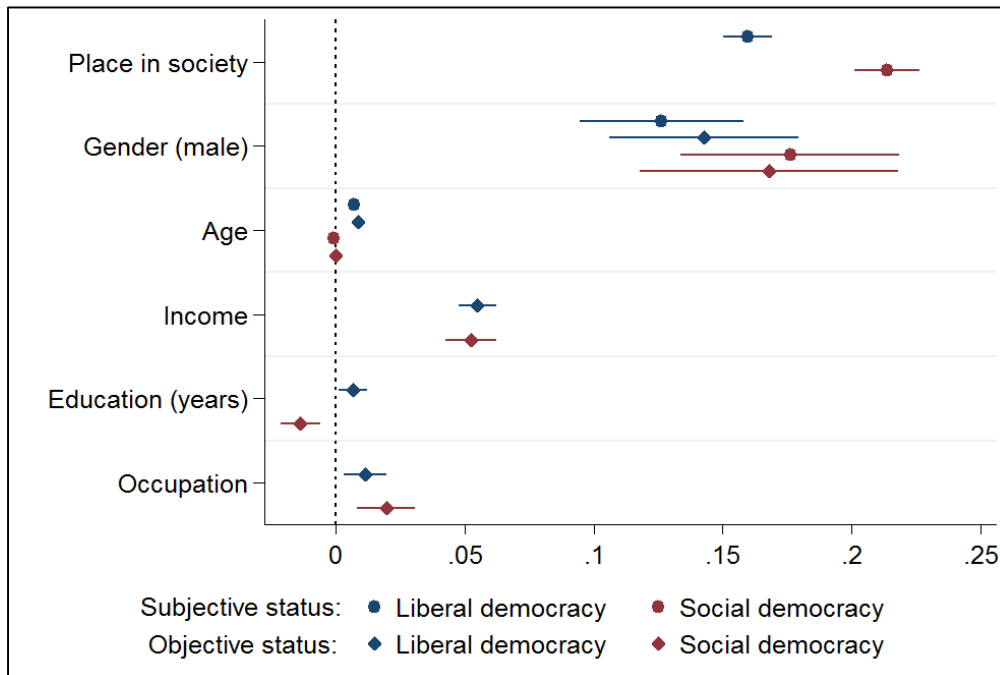
**Figure 2**  
**Effects of subjective and objective status on expectations of democracy**



**Notes:** Prepared by the author. The plots of regression coefficients are non-standardized. For full models see Table A2 and Table A3 in Appendix A. Data source: European Social Survey (ESS, 2012). Weighted with ESS post-stratification and population size weights.

I will now look at how citizens' evaluations of democracy are affected by status. Figure 3 shows the coefficient plots for the models using democratic evaluations as a dependent variable. Subjective status measured by place in society has a strong and positive effect on both liberal and social evaluations, supporting hypothesis H3: The higher a citizens' status, the better their evaluations of their own democracy. Objective socio-economic status shows more mixed results: Income and occupation have a positive, though smaller, effect on evaluations, while education has a mixed effect. Gender, again, is a strong predictor, with men evaluating their own democracies better than women.

**Figure 3**  
**Effects of subjective and objective status on evaluations of democracy**



**Notes:** Prepared by the author. The plots of regression coefficients are non-standardized. For full models see Table A5 and Table A6 in Appendix A. Data source: European Social Survey (ESS, 2012). Weighted with ESS post-stratification and population size weights.

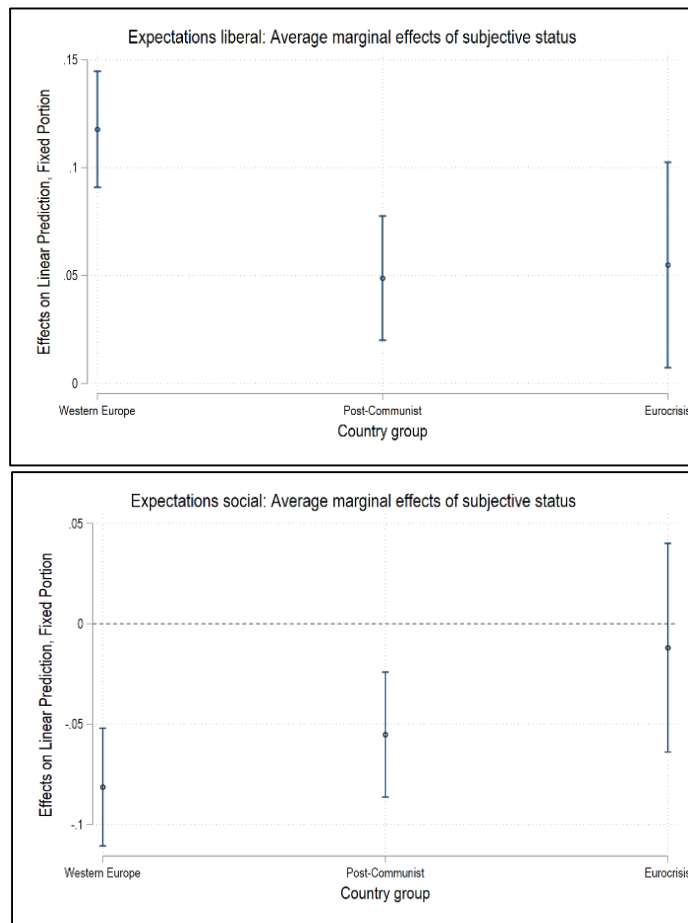
The model with direct democracy as a dependent variable (Table A7 in Appendix A) again supports the results for subjective status, which has a positive effect on evaluations, but shows negative effects for education and occupation, once again giving a less clear picture for objective status.

### *Country-level effects*

So far, the individual level hypotheses have been confirmed, showing that social status - especially perceived status - affects how citizens view and evaluate democracy, and that low-status citizens tend to have a bigger gap between democratic expectations and evaluations, especially in the social democratic dimensions. But how do these effects differ across country groups? Once again I begin with expectations for democracy: Hypotheses H4 and H5 assumed that living in post-communist and Eurocrisis countries reinforces the effects of status on democratic expectations, meaning that citizens of both these country groups should show a stronger positive effect of status on liberal democratic expectations, and a stronger negative effect of status on social democratic expectations. To test these hypotheses, I introduce a cross-level interaction term between the country

group (post-communist countries, Eurocrisis countries, and 'the rest' - Western European countries) and subjective status (citizens' place in society). The full models are in Appendix A (Models 3 and 4 in Tables A2 and A3). To better illustrate the interaction effects, Figure 4 shows plots of marginal effect.

**Figure 4**  
**Marginal effects of subjective status on democratic expectations across country groups**



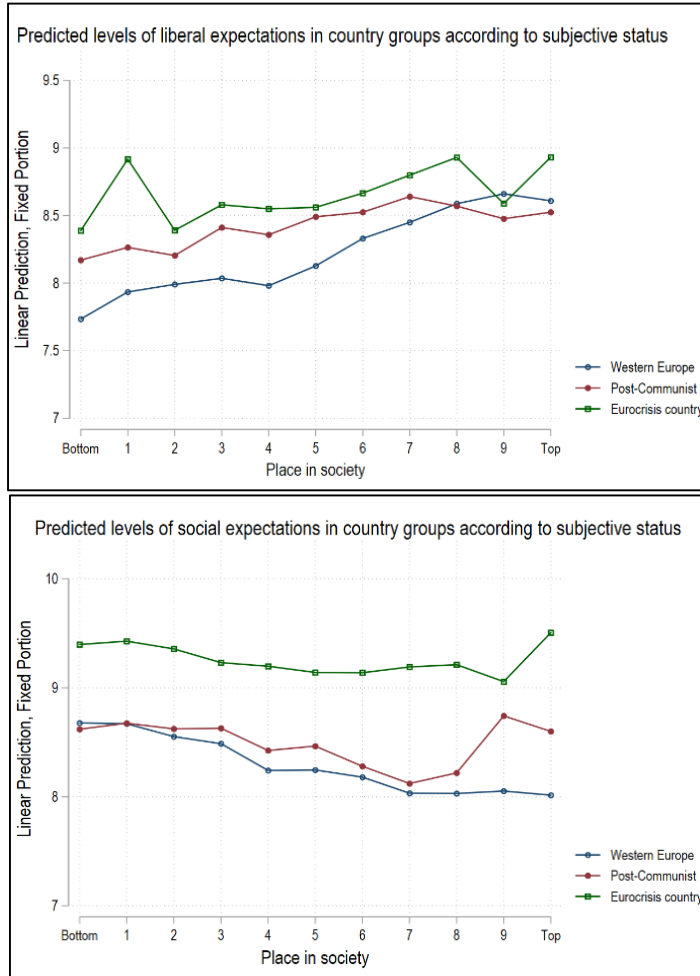
**Notes:** Prepared by the author. Average marginal effects of interaction terms from Table A2 and Table A3 in Appendix A. Other variables are held constant at their mean. Spikes represent 95% confidence intervals. Data sources: European Social Survey (ESS, 2012), Democracy Barometer (Merkel *et al.*, 2016), SWIID (Solt, 2016), Polity IV (Marshall; Gurr, 2016). Weighted with ESS post-stratification and population size weights.



The left panel indicates that there are indeed significant differences between country groups in the strength of the effect of status on expectations for liberal democracy. They are, however, contrary to my hypotheses, the positive influence of status on liberal democratic expectations is slightly weaker in both post-communist and Eurocrisis countries, and stronger in the remaining Western European countries. In the right panel, we see a similar pattern, the negative effect of status on social democratic expectations has a similar effect in Western Europe and in post-communist countries, and is not significant in crisis-struck countries. This proves hypotheses H4 and H5 wrong when it comes to democratic expectations.

To better understand the interaction of macro and micro level variables, I also plot the predicted levels of expectations in both dimensions across the three country groups, which are depicted in Figure 5. They provide several insights. Firstly, we can see that the effect of perceived status is positive on expectations for liberal democracy and negative on social democratic expectations in all groups of countries, in line with previous results. But interestingly, the slope – that is, the strength of this effect – is steeper in Western European countries than in the two other country-groups. For example, while there is an average of almost 1 point on a 10-point scale between Western European low-status and high-status citizens in both democratic dimensions, the difference in the other country-groups is less than 0.5 point. Status thus matters more in Western-European countries than it does in the rest of Europe.

**Figure 5**  
**Predicted levels of democratic expectations according to status across country groups**



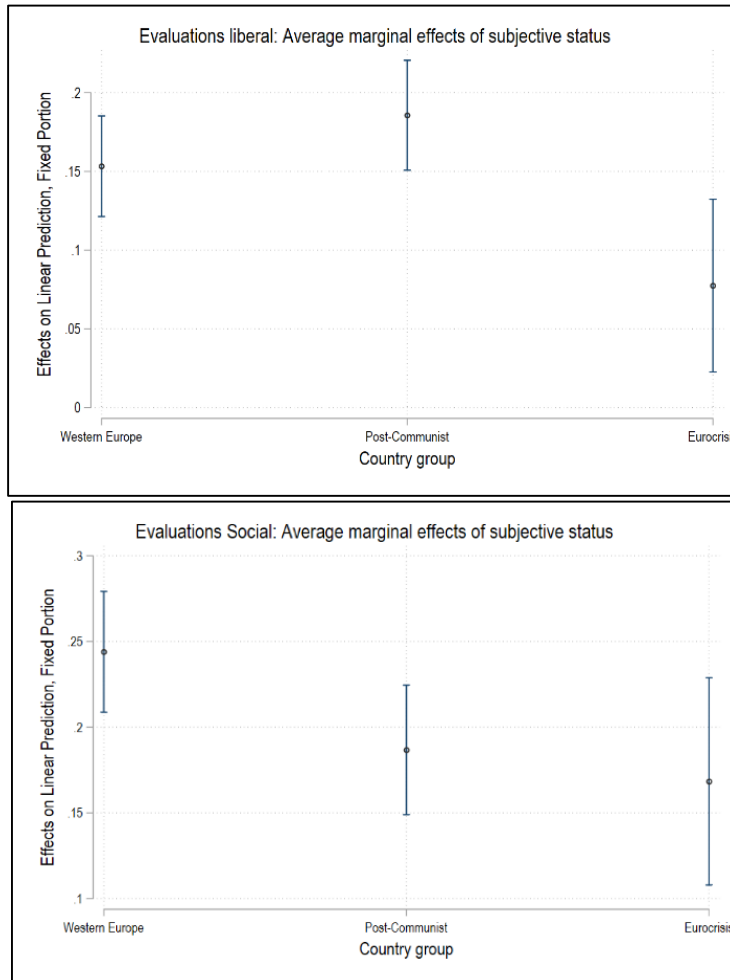
**Notes:** Prepared by the author. Predicted marginal effects of place in society and country group on the level of democratic expectations. Other variables are held constant at their mean. Full models see Table A2 and Table A3 in Appendix A. Data sources: European Social Survey (ESS, 2012), Democracy Barometer (Merkel *et al.*, 2016), SWIID (Solt, 2016), Polity IV (Marshall; Gurr, 2016). Weighted with ESS post-stratification and population size weights.

Simultaneously, we also see that the *levels* of expectations in both dimensions, but especially in the social dimension, are substantially higher in both post-communist and Eurocrisis countries. Most notably, citizens in Eurocrisis countries have substantially higher levels of social expectations, as the right panel shows. While Western European citizens have average levels of 8-8.5 on a scale from 0 to 10, citizens from crisis-hit countries show levels of 9 out of 10 or higher across all status groups. Interestingly, very high-status

citizens (“top of society”) in both post-communist countries and Eurocrisis countries have higher social democratic expectations than medium-status citizens, pointing to the fact that societal elites in these countries are favourable to more substantive visions of democracy, a potential result of the authoritarian legacies. This finding implies that post-communist socialization as well as the experience of the crisis has impacted not just low-status citizens, but also those that hold a high position in society.

Next, I look at the effects of the same cross-level interaction on evaluations of democracy. In hypotheses H4 and H5, I also assumed that the effect of social status on evaluations of all dimensions of democracy – that is, the higher someone’s status, the better their evaluations of democracy – is stronger for citizens of post-communist and Eurocrisis countries than for others. Again, I illustrate the effects using marginal effect plots. Figure 6 shows the plots of the marginal effects of subjective status, measured by place in society in three country groups, on evaluations of liberal democracy (left) and social democracy (right). The full models are in Tables A5 and A6 in the Appendix A (Models 3 and 4).

**Figure 6**  
**Marginal effects of subjective status on democratic evaluations across country groups**



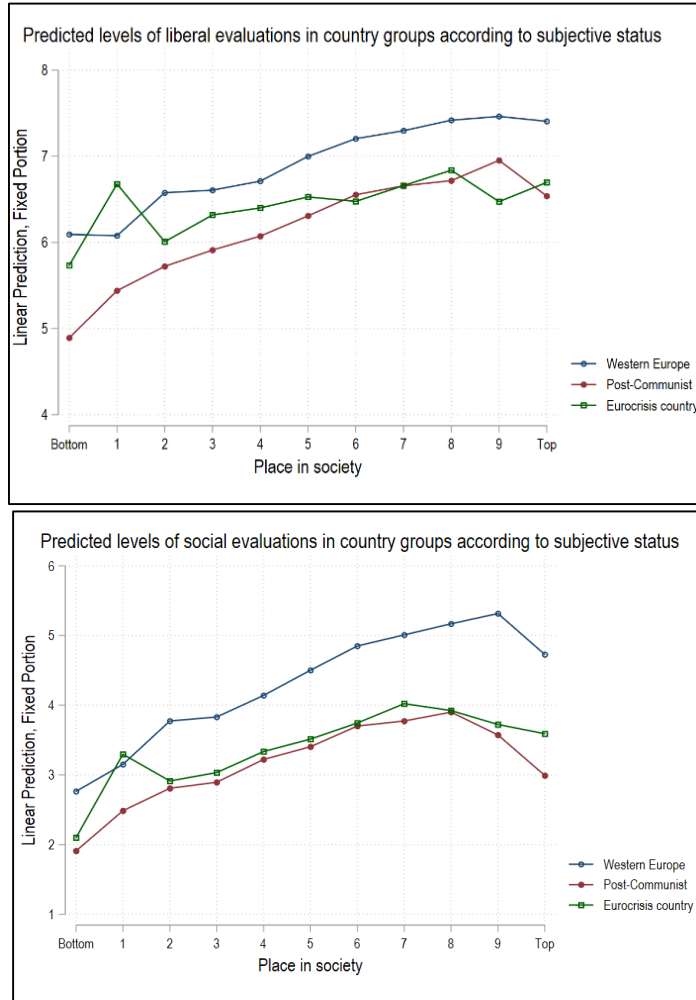
**Notes:** Prepared by the author. Average marginal effects of interaction of terms from Table A5 and Table A6 in Appendix A. Other variables are held constant at their mean. Spikes represent 95% confidence intervals. Data sources: European Social Survey (ESS, 2012), Democracy Barometer (Merkel *et al.*, 2016), SWIID (Solt, 2016), Polity IV (Marshall; Gurr, 2016). Weighted with ESS post-stratification and population size weights.

We can see that, once again, the hypotheses cannot be fully confirmed: The left panel shows that the positive effect of status on liberal democratic expectations is indeed stronger in post-communist countries, but substantially weaker in Eurocrisis countries. The right panel shows that the positive effects of status on social democratic evaluations are comparable in Western Europe, Post-communist and Eurocrisis countries. This partly

confirms H4 - the effects of status are stronger in post-communist countries, but only for liberal, not for social expectations - and contradicts H5.

As previously, in Figure 7 I plot the predicted levels of democratic evaluations according to status in both dimensions for all three country groups to better understand these findings. Once again we see a similar pattern. As the marginal effects plots have confirmed, the slopes of the positive effect of status are generally not less steep for Western Europe than for the other two country groups. Especially in Eurocrisis countries, the relationship is actually somewhat weaker. But as the left panel shows, perceived status does have a significantly stronger effect on liberal democratic evaluations in post-communist countries, where low status citizens have average evaluations of around 5 points, and high-status citizens average 7 out of 10 points. This makes the status-induced difference more substantial than in Western Europe, where the difference between low- and high-status citizens is just about 1 point. On the social democratic dimension, however, the effect of status is strongest in Western Europe, with a difference of over 2 points on a 10-point scale between lowest- and highest-status citizens. We also see that once again levels differ. In the case of evaluations, the levels of liberal, and most strongly of social expectations, are consistently lower in post-communist as well as Eurocrisis countries, with a consistent gap of at least 1 point between the groups. In other words, while the combined effect of status and country group is not much stronger in post-communist and crisis-hit countries, country-level has a direct and negative effect. Again, we can conclude that the experience of a democratization linked to the promise of economic and social welfare, and the impact of an economic crisis that made socio-economic issues highly salient, has affected citizens across all status groups, including societal elites.

**Figure 7**  
**Predicted levels of democratic evaluations according to status across country groups**



**Notes:** Prepared by the author. Predicted marginal effects of place in society and country group on the level of democratic evaluations. Other variables are held constant at their mean. For full models see Table A5 and Table A6 in Appendix A. Data sources: European Social Survey (ESS, 2012), Democracy Barometer (Merkel *et al.*, 2016), SWIID (Solt, 2016), Polity IV (Marshall; Gurr, 2016). Weighted with ESS post-stratification and population size weights.

Lastly, additional models using direct democratic expectations and evaluations as a dependent variable for robustness tests (Model 4 in Table A4 and Table A7 in Appendix A) confirm the previous results. The negative effect of status on direct democratic expectations and the positive effect on direct democratic evaluations are less strong in both post-communist and Eurocrisis countries. Levels of direct democratic expectations,

like social democratic evaluations, are generally higher in these country groups. Interestingly though, as Table A7 shows, direct democratic evaluations are substantially higher in both post-communist and Eurocrisis countries as well. Apparently, Southern and Eastern European citizens (perceive that they) have more opportunities for direct participation.

## Conclusions and outlook

What can we learn from these results? To start, the assumption that social status is systematically linked to citizens' expectations and evaluations of democracy is confirmed. While the finding that status affects citizens support for democracy is not new, my analysis sheds some light on the reasons why this is the case. Firstly, perceived social position influences the demands that citizens make to their democracies. A low social status causes them to prefer substantive over procedural democracy, to value outputs in the form of social justice more strongly than liberal democratic criteria. This confirms the expectations derived from social dominance theory, which affirms that the status quo of liberal democracy is more strongly supported by those in high status positions. Secondly, status also systematically affects how citizens evaluate democracy: The higher their status, the more positively people judge the functioning of their own democracy, both in procedural and substantive terms. Democratic quality is thus not an objective measure, but depends on citizens' position in society. High-status citizens have more positive experiences with democracy than their lower-status counterparts.

Moreover, my arguments based on social comparison and relative deprivation theory which affirm that subjective status - the perceived position we hold in society compared to others around us - matters for democratic support, were confirmed. Perceived social positioning is indeed a strong predictor of attitudes towards democracy. While citizens' objective social position, measured by socio-economic variables, has the same effects, subjective social position has a stronger explanatory power, especially when it comes to democratic evaluations. The feeling of having an unfavourable social position makes citizens more prone to support substance over procedure, and more likely to be critical of their own democracy.

While the individual level results were in line with the theoretical expectations, the country-level results were more surprising. Contrary to what I assumed, social status does not matter more in post-communist countries and countries affected by the Eurocrisis. The effect of status on both expectations and evaluations is strongest in the remaining Western European countries. I also found that levels of expectations, especially social democratic expectations, were generally higher in post-communist and Eurocrisis countries, while evaluations were substantially lower. Hence, we are observing two different effects: On the one hand, citizens have substantially higher social democratic expectations in former communist countries, but also in countries affected by the crisis, independently of their

perceived social position. This effect could be interpreted as the influence of authoritarian socialization and crisis-experiences on all social groups, including elites. These expectations are then also more likely to be disappointed by the democratic reality in their countries, which they evaluate substantially more critically than do people in Western Europe. On the other hand, social status matters more for citizens of Western European democracies, where democratic expectations and evaluations differ more strongly depending on the subjective social position.

This brings us back to the question posed at the beginning of this article: Which groups of people are dissatisfied on what grounds? And how does this vary across countries? First of all, the common finding that people of low status have lower levels of support for democracy (Carlin, 2006; Schäfer, 2013) can be explained by higher expectations for substantive democracy, and lower evaluations in both dimensions. These two factors combined lead to a bigger “democratic deficit” between low-status citizens' expectations and evaluations, especially in the social dimension, causing them to be more prone to democratic dissatisfaction. This also offers some support for Schäfer (2013, p. 154) who claims that dissatisfaction in Europe is not necessarily a sign of people being against democracy as a principle, but rather of being unhappy with the outcomes it provides. Interestingly, this effect is most pronounced in established, Western democracies, supporting the idea that developed countries are moving towards a democracy in which the less well-off part of society is exceedingly excluded from the public and political sphere. Variance across countries, then, is also a matter of levels. While social status is less important for democratic attitudes in former communist and Eurocrisis countries, the levels of attitudes differ. Citizens in Southern and Eastern Europe have higher expectations for democracy, although they evaluate their own democratic systems more negatively, which creates larger gaps in legitimacy than found in Western Europe - again, this effect is most pronounced in the social dimension of democracy.

Accordingly, the cause for low levels of support for democracy does not necessarily seem to be a lack of (liberal) democratic quality. Rather, dissatisfied citizens find that democratic mechanisms and institutions do not produce the output they expect it to: social justice and redistribution, which is especially important for those on the lower end of the social strata. This is even more relevant in the (mostly younger) democracies in Eastern and Southern Europe, which were not only more affected by the Eurocrisis but also tend to have lower quality democratic institutions and welfare states in general. Secondly, these results point to the importance of perceptions for democratic support. Apparently, social positioning, and the feeling of being less well-off in society compared to others, strongly affects how Europeans judge macro-level conditions. Democracy, in other words, is not the same for all its citizens, but is evaluated differently according to one's social position and in comparison to others.

At the same time, the fact that perceived social status matters more than 'objectively measured' status is another interesting result. A perceived low social



positioning, even if not objectively confirmed, strongly influences individual political attitudes. This recalls Honneth's (2004) social recognition theory, which affirms that social justice is not (only) about the classic elimination of inequality, but also about the avoidance of 'humiliation' or 'disrespect', and that social injustice is measured by the withholding of some kind of recognition that individuals strive for. Of course, one could ask if this dissatisfaction is actually still about democracy itself, or if it is rather about socio-economic grievances that bias citizens' views on democracy, but are beyond its reach or responsibility. The answer eventually depends on one's definition of democracy - is democracy important for its procedural aspects or its substantive effects? Apparently, as this article has shown, for many citizens democracy is (also) important for its substantive effects, and a perceived lack of them is a reason for dissatisfaction. These citizens tend to live in Southern and Eastern Europe, and on the (perceived) lower end of the social strata in Western Europe.

If there is a way for established democracies to address low levels of support for democracy, it would thus be via an improvement of social justice, and a focus on democratic outputs rather than procedures. Further, the importance of not underestimating individual grievances, perceived status, which is not necessarily the same as ascribed status, affects citizens' political views and behaviour. The issue of (real, relative or perceived) social exclusion in European democracies is a serious problem that liberal democracies should tackle if they want to persist against populist, authoritarian and illiberal agendas.

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## Resumo

*Por que a democracia não funciona para todos: estatuto social e apoio à democracia na Europa*

Por que os perdedores gostam menos da democracia do que os vencedores? O fato de o estatuto social ter um impacto no apoio à democracia é, embora empiricamente estabelecido, frequentemente ignorado na literatura. Este artigo analisa os efeitos do estatuto social subjetivo e objetivo nas expectativas e avaliações da democracia por parte dos cidadãos. Os resultados mostram que um estatuto baixo leva os cidadãos a valorizar as dimensões democráticas de forma diferente - preferem a justiça social aos critérios liberais. Além disso, os cidadãos com baixo estatuto também avaliam o desempenho do seu próprio sistema democrático em todas as dimensões de forma significativamente mais crítica do que os seus homólogos com estatuto mais elevado. Estes dois efeitos combinados criam uma maior "distância" entre as expectativas e as avaliações dos cidadãos de baixo estatuto, especialmente na dimensão social, tornando-os mais propensos à insatisfação democrática. Além disso, a posição social subjetiva tem um efeito significativamente mais forte do que a posição objetiva, apontando para a relevância das percepções de estatuto para as atitudes democráticas.

**Palavras-chave:** estatuto social; apoio à democracia; European Social Survey

## Resumen

*Por qué la democracia no funciona para todos: estatus social y apoyo a la democracia en Europa*

¿Por qué a los perdedores les gusta menos la democracia que a los ganadores? El hecho de que el estatus social influya en el apoyo a la democracia, aunque está demostrado empíricamente, a menudo se pasa por alto en la bibliografía. Este artículo analiza los efectos del estatus social subjetivo y objetivo en las expectativas y evaluaciones de la democracia por parte de los ciudadanos. Los resultados muestran que un estatus bajo lleva a los ciudadanos a valorar de forma diferente las dimensiones democráticas: prefieren la justicia social a los criterios liberales. Además, los ciudadanos de estatus bajo también evalúan el rendimiento de su propio sistema democrático en todas las dimensiones de forma significativamente más crítica que sus homólogos de estatus más alto. Estos dos efectos combinados crean una mayor «distancia» entre las expectativas y las evaluaciones de los ciudadanos de bajo estatus, especialmente en la dimensión social, lo que les hace más propensos a la insatisfacción democrática. Además, la posición social subjetiva tiene un efecto significativamente mayor que la posición objetiva, lo que apunta a la relevancia de las percepciones de estatus para las actitudes democráticas.

**Palabras clave:** estatus social; apoyo a la democracia; European Social Survey

**Résumé**

*Pourquoi la démocratie ne fonctionne pas pour tout le monde : statut social et soutien à la démocratie en Europe*

Pourquoi les perdants aiment-ils moins la démocratie que les gagnants ? Le fait que le statut social ait un impact sur le soutien à la démocratie, bien qu'établi empiriquement, est souvent négligé dans la littérature. Cet article analyse les effets du statut social subjectif et objectif sur les attentes et les évaluations de la démocratie par les citoyens. Les résultats montrent qu'un statut social peu élevé conduit les citoyens à évaluer différemment les dimensions démocratiques – ils préfèrent la justice sociale aux critères libéraux. En outre, les citoyens à faible statut social évaluent les performances de leur propre système démocratique dans toutes les dimensions de manière beaucoup plus critique que leurs homologues à statut social plus élevé. Ces deux effets combinés créent une plus grande « distance » entre les attentes et les évaluations des citoyens de statut inférieur, en particulier dans la dimension sociale, ce qui les rend plus enclins à l'insatisfaction démocratique. En outre, la position sociale subjective a un effet significativement plus fort que la position objective, ce qui souligne l'importance des perceptions de statut pour les attitudes démocratiques.

*Mots-clés* : statut social ; soutien à la démocratie ; European Social Survey

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