

Satisfaction with democracy: Do institutions matter?

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that people in consensual democracies with a proportional electoral system are more satisfied with the functioning of democracy in their country than people in majoritarian democracies. We assess to what extent this relationship can be explained by people's perception of the accountability and representativeness of the political system in their country. Our findings show that people's satisfaction with democracy primarily depends on their perception of the representation function, and to a lesser degree on the accountability function. Surprisingly, perceived accountability rather than representation is enhanced by a proportional-type electoral system. Moreover, our evaluative measure of satisfaction with democracy is negatively related to proportional electoral systems. The macro-level satisfaction with democracy is primarily affected by the age of the democracy one lives in. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction: Elections as instruments of democracy

Elections are instruments of democracy; they are instrumental in linking the preferences of citizens to the behavior of policymakers (Powell, 2000). What exactly 'linking the preferences of citizens to the behavior of policy makers' is supposed to mean, is the subject of normative theories of political representation and representative democracy. Political representation, as much as democracy, is an essentially contested concept (Connolly, 1974) and its meaning and implications differ from one normative view on political representation to the other.

A main point of difference between theories of political representation is the function of elections. Whereas in majoritarian theories the function of selecting a government and government *accountability* is emphasized, consensual theories emphasize the selection of a *representative* legislature. This difference is reflected in the choice of political institutions, in particular electoral systems, which can be ordered according to the degree of proportionality or representativeness and to the degree of accountability they tend to produce.

But in the end the performance of electoral systems cannot be assessed by only examining their mechanics. These mechanics have to be perceived and evaluated by the voters. It is still an open question to what extent different political institutions also produce different voters' perceptions of accountability and representativeness. And what effects does this have for their satisfaction with democracy? These are the general questions addressed here. Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), we are now able to examine the micro-macro link of electoral

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institutions, voters' perceptions and voters' evaluations of democracy.

In the next section, we elaborate the accountability-representativeness distinction. This discussion results in a set of more specific research questions. After a description of the data used for the analysis, and the operationalization of the key concepts, we will answer our research questions.

2. Which instruments for what kind of democracy?

This is not the place to review the extensive literature on theories and models of political representation (but see Andeweg and Thomassen, 2005; Birch, 1971; Manin, 1997; Pitkin, 1967; Powell, 2000; Przeworski et al., 1999; Thomassen, 1994). Instead, we focus on the distinction between majoritarian and consensus models of democracy (Lijphart, 1999). The major difference between the majoritarian and proportional vision is their view on the essence of democratic government and consequently the function of elections. Both visions agree that the very essence of democracy is government by the people, be it directly or indirectly. But the two visions disagree with regard to the question who should do the governing and to whose interests the government should be responsive when the people are in disagreement and have divergent preferences.

According to the majoritarian view the answer to this question is: the majority of the people. In the consensual view the answer should be: as many people as possible (Lijphart, 1999, pp. 1–2). As a consequence these two visions attribute different functions to elections.

In the majoritarian view the single most important function of an election is the selection of a government. It requires that the voters have a clear choice between two competing (groups of) parties. The concentration of power in the hands of an elected majority government brings the government under tight control of the majority of the electorate. Within the majoritarian view two different theoretical perspectives on the precise function of elections can be distinguished. The first one is known as the government *mandate* perspective, the second one as the government *accountability* perspective. These perspectives assume different mechanisms by which the electoral majority can control the government. Government mandate theory can be characterized as saying that the policy preferences of a knowable and coherent majority of voters determine the winner of an election and that winner takes its turn at running the government on the policy line it had promised before the election (McDonald and

Budge, 2005, p. 20). More precisely, according to this theoretical perspective elections can function as an instrument of democracy when the following requirements are met:

1. Voters can choose between at least two (groups of) parties with different policy proposals.
2. Voters do vote according to their policy preferences, i.e. they choose the party that represents their policy preferences best.
3. The party or coalition of parties winning the elections takes over the government.

This is basically the mechanism assumed by the Responsible Party Model (American Political Science Association, 1950; Klingemann et al., 1994; Schattschneider, 1942; Thomassen, 1994). If all conditions are met, the winning party can be said to have a policy mandate from a majority of the electorate (Powell, 2000, p. 8).

However, this model of political representation has been criticized for a number of reasons. First, it is very demanding, in particular with regard to what is required of the voters. Secondly, a single vote can hardly provide a policy mandate for a multiple package of issue-dimensions. Therefore, this model is often claimed to be totally unrealistic and unfeasible (Riker, 1982; Thomassen, 1994). Finally, the claim that in a majoritarian political system the winning party has won a policy mandate from a majority of the electorate more often than not is an illusion. In the United Kingdom for instance, the prototype of a majoritarian system, the party winning a majority of seats in the House of Commons almost never represents a majority of the electorate. Paradoxically, a majoritarian system at the legislative and executive level usually is enforced by a pluritarian rather than a majoritarian electoral system. As a consequence, majoritarian systems perform poorly in representing the median voter compared to consensual systems of democracy with a proportional electoral system (Powell, 2000; McDonald and Budge, 2005).

Therefore, in this article we focus on a perhaps more feasible model, the accountability model, which is based on Schumpeter's idea of a competitive democracy. According to this view "modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens". In this model elections are an accountability mechanism, where the sanctions are to extend or not to extend the government's tenure (Schumpeter, 1976 [1942], Chapter 22; Powell, 2000; Przeworski et al., 1999).

The major difference with the policy mandate model is that voters make their vote choice on the basis of their evaluation of the performance of the incumbent government. If they are satisfied with that performance they will vote for the party or parties in government, if they are dissatisfied, they will ‘kick the rascals out’. Or as Walter Lipmann wrote more than fifty years ago: “To support the Ins when things are going well; to support the Outs when they seem to be going badly, this...is the essence of popular government” (cf. Powell, 2000, p. 10). This model of accountability is far less demanding of the voters because all they need to know is which party, or coalition of parties, is in power and which one in the opposition. Their information about the content of government policy can be limited. Being satisfied or dissatisfied with the government, its policies or the outcomes thereof, is all it takes. In the minimal definition of Riker: “The essence of the liberal interpretation of voting is the notion that voting permits the rejection of candidates or officials who have offended so many voters that they cannot win an election”.

An essential requirement of this model of accountability at the system level is the *clarity of responsibility*. Accountability is by definition close to impossible if it is not perfectly clear who, i.e. which political party or coalition of parties, is responsible for government policy. But not only the incumbent but also the possible alternative future government must be identifiable. A second requirement is that the voters’ sanction of the party or parties in power is effective, i.e. that they really can kick the rascals out without the risk that they (or some of them) will return to power after having lost the elections. This mechanism can only work in a majoritarian system where two (blocks of) parties compete for a majority of the votes and the winner automatically takes (over) government responsibility. Of course, once again it might be argued that in practice this latter mechanism can only be enforced by a pluralitarian rather than a majoritarian electoral system, but this does not necessarily effect the clarity of government responsibility (Powell, 2000; Przeworski et al., 1999). The effects of the clarity of responsibility on the perceptions of the voters are what we are interested in here.

In consensus models of democracies, or proportional systems, the major function of elections is to elect the members of parliament who together should be as representative as possible of the electorate as a whole. The criterion for the democratic quality of the system is how representative parliament really is. There is no coercive relationship between the election outcome and the formation of the government. As a multi-party

system is one of the characteristics of a consensus model of democracy, a coalition of several parties will be needed to form a majority government. Coalitions will usually be broad, making it inevitable that at least some parties will return in government after the elections even if at the elections voters clearly demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the outgoing government. Therefore, usually there is an overlap between the new and the old coalition, blurring the clarity of responsibility and making the sanction of elections as an instrument of accountability into a rather blunt weapon.

Just as in the case of a majoritarian system, we can distinguish between voters basing their vote on retrospective or prospective judgments. However, for our purposes this distinction is not really relevant. In both cases the single most important criterion of the democratic quality of the system is the representativeness of parliament.

Between them, the two models of democracy fulfill the two most important functions which elections in a representative democracy have according to mainstream normative democratic theory. First, elections should allow voters to determine the political color of their government, making government accountable to the judgment of the people. Second, elections should produce a legislature that is representative of the division of political opinion amongst the electorate. However, it may be obvious that there is a certain tension between these two functions. Electoral systems and more generally democratic systems cannot optimally serve both functions at the same time. Majoritarian models of democracy are supposed to optimize the *accountability function*, consensus models of democracy the *representation function*.

The key question then is which model serves democracy best. This, however, is hard to say because the two visions on representative democracy represent two different normative views on democracy and incorporate different electoral institutions which are supposed to serve different purposes or at least different aspects of democracy. As Powell (2000, p. 7) argues: “empirical predictions about the nature of the citizen-policymaker relationship will focus on dissimilar dependent variables and not really be alternative theories about achieving the same goal”.

One way out of this dilemma is to transform these dependent variables into independent variables, and make a comparative assessment of the extent to which majoritarian and consensual systems of government are instrumental for democracy, defined at a higher level of abstraction. This is the approach taken in several major pieces of previous research. Powell for instance

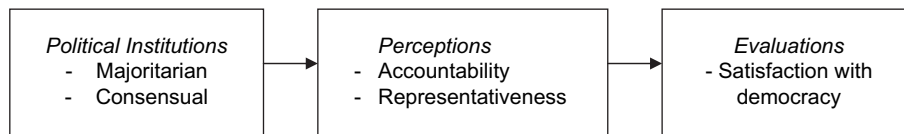


Fig. 1. Research design.

starts from the normative assumption that democratic policy makers should do what their citizens want them to do. The role of elections then is to link the preferences of citizens to the behavior of their policy makers (Powell, 2000, p. 251). His empirical findings prove that if this is taken as the main function of democratic elections “the proportional² vision and its designs enjoyed a clear advantage over their majoritarian counterparts in using elections as instruments of democracy” (Powell, 2000, p. 254).

In a similar vein Lijphart in his *Patterns of Democracy* (Lijphart, 1999) tries to assess whether the distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracy makes a difference for how well democracy works. By comparing majoritarian and consensus democracies on a number of performance indicators he comes to the conclusion that consensus democracies perform better in almost every respect. They score better on the best-known indexes of democracy, women are better represented in parliament, consensus democracies are more egalitarian, turnout is higher, citizens in consensus democracies are significantly more satisfied with democratic performance in their countries than citizens of majoritarian democracies.

Part of Lijphart’s argument is based on people’s *satisfaction with democracy*. Referring to earlier work of Klingemann (1999), he comes to the conclusion that citizens in consensus democracies are significantly more satisfied with democratic performance in their countries than citizens of majoritarian democracies. The difference is approximately 17 percentage points.³

² Powell consistently uses ‘proportional system’ as a synonym for what Lijphart calls a ‘consensus model of democracy’. As the former term often is used in the more limited meaning of a proportional electoral system we prefer to use Lijphart’s terminology even though later on we will operationalize the distinction between a majoritarian and a consensus model of democracy in terms of their respective electoral systems.

³ Lijphart also refers to Anderson and Guillory (1997) who found that in all countries respondents who voted for the winning party or parties were more likely to be satisfied with democracy than respondents who had voted for the losing party or parties. They also found that in consensus democracies the differences between winners and losers were significantly smaller than in majoritarian democracies (Lijphart, 1999, pp. 286–7).

3. Research questions

In this article we take these latter findings as a point of departure. The problem with these findings is that we still do not know how to explain the relationship between an institutional characteristic (type of democracy) and a characteristic at the micro-level (satisfaction with the functioning of democracy). In this paper we will try to assess to what extent this relationship can be interpreted by introducing people’s perception of the accountability and representativeness of the political system in their country. The global design of our approach is depicted in Fig. 1.

The Comparative Study of Electoral System’s second module makes it possible for the first time to unravel the relationship between these three sets of variables. It contains questions on people’s *perception* of both the *accountability* and the *representativeness* of their political system in addition to a question on how satisfied people are with the functioning of democracy in their country.

We will use these questions to explain the relationship found in previous studies between models of democracy and satisfaction with democracy. We will develop our analysis in three consecutive steps. We will start by exploring the relationships at the micro level, i.e. the relationships between people’s perceptions of the accountability and representativeness of the political system and their satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in their country. In this analysis our main analytic instrument will be based on the following scheme (Fig. 2). Entries refer to satisfaction with democracy.

If we assume that both the perception of accountability and of representation have an effect on satisfaction with democracy, we can expect the highest satisfaction with democracy among people who are satisfied with both functions and the lowest level among people who are dissatisfied with both. But the most interesting question refers to the off-diagonal cells. Whereas the lower right cell depicts the interaction effect of perceived representation and perceived accountability, the off-diagonal cells summarize the main effects of these perceptions on satisfaction with democracy. By comparing these two cells (or stated differently: by estimating the main effects) we will be able to assess to what extent

		Perception of political representation	
		low	high
Perception of political accountability	low	low satisfaction	intermediate
	high	intermediate	high satisfaction

Fig. 2. Analytical scheme.

people give different weights to the two functions in their assessment of the quality of democracy in their country.

Secondly, we will analyze the relationship between the type of political system (majoritarian versus consensual) and people's assessment of their political system: are the differences between these two types reflected in people's perceptions of accountability and representativeness, i.e. are people in majoritarian systems more satisfied with the accountability of the system, whereas people in consensual democracies are more satisfied with the representativeness of the system? And are people in consensual systems indeed more satisfied with democracy than people in countries with a majoritarian system?

And if so—and this is the third step in our analysis—can this relationship be explained by introducing people's perceptions of accountability and representativeness as intervening variables?

It would however be naive to suggest that differences in satisfaction are caused exclusively or even predominantly by institutional differences. The CSES data set includes both advanced industrial democracies and newly established democracies. In a new democracy it is difficult for people to distinguish between the performance of the incumbent government and the (new) democratic regime. Only gradually will people learn to make a distinction between the performance of the incumbent government and the performance of the regime and not to blame the regime for a poor performance of the incumbent government. Therefore, we can expect that people who are dissatisfied with government policy will be inclined to extend their dissatisfaction to the system of government, at least more so than in established democracies. If we take into consideration that the (economic) performance of many of the newly established democracies is poor, we should expect that the satisfaction with democracy in these countries, whatever their institutional arrangements, is low. Therefore, we shall take the distinction between old and new democracies into account as well.

4. Data and operationalization of main concepts

4.1. Data

We make use of the final release of CSES module 2.⁴ This release has been compiled from 41 election studies for 40 different elections in 38 countries, between 2001 and 2006. Two studies of the 2002 German Bundestag elections have been included in the release; we will only use one of these two studies, namely the telephone survey. Two Portuguese elections, of 2002 and 2005, have been included and we will use both since the election is the primary unit of analysis in the CSES framework. Finally, four election studies had to be omitted from the analyses because they lack at least one essential variable. These are Korea (2004), the Netherlands (2002), Norway (2001) and Taiwan (2004). The 2001 Taiwan study has been included. Most of our analyses thus employ data from 36 elections in 35 countries.

4.2. Variables at the micro level

Satisfaction with democracy. This concept was measured in CSES, module 2, in the same way as in many previous studies, by simply asking:

Q8. 'On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in {country}?'

Perception of accountability. In the CSES module several questions trying to measure the perception of accountability were asked. The most relevant one for our purposes is:

Q10. 'Some people say that no matter who people vote for, it won't make a difference to what happens. Others say that who people vote for can

⁴ Data and documentation can be downloaded from <http://www.cses.org> (accessed September 24, 2007).

make a difference to what happens. Using the scale on this card, (where ONE means that voting won't make a difference to what happens and FIVE means that voting can make a difference) where would you place yourself?⁵

Perception of representativeness. As in the case of accountability, several CSES questions measure (aspects of) people's perception of the representativeness of the political system. The following question on how well people think voters' views are represented in elections serves our purposes best.

Q15. 'Thinking about how elections in {country} work in practice, how well do elections ensure that the views of voters are represented by MPs: very well, quite well, not very well, or not well at all?'

4.3. Variables at the macro level

4.3.1. Constitutional design and electoral system

In Powell's (2000) view, accountability and representativeness are institutional characteristics of elections. The extent to which an election can be seen as 'accountable' depends on the answers to two questions: can a voter identify the alternative future governments before the election, and does the election produce a majority for one of the identified possible future governments? Powell validates his measures of accountability and effective representation by comparing them with the constitutional design of the country: is it primarily a proportional, a majoritarian, or a mixed design? Pure proportional design is characterized by a proportional electoral rule and facilitation of opposition influence in parliamentary committees. Pure majoritarian design is characterized by single-member electoral districts and government domination of parliamentary committees. Mixed designs include multimember districts and/or weak committees with shared chairs. Constitutional design appears to be a very good predictor of the macro-level measures of accountability and, to a lesser extent, of effective representation.

⁵ The validity of this question as an indicator of the perception of accountability is disputable. What we really want to measure is the clarity of government responsibility and the possibility of voters to sanction government parties they are dissatisfied with. A majoritarian system like the British is almost perfect on both variables, but if the two main parties have learned their lessons from Downsian theory the voters will be faced with a choice between Tweedledee and Tweedledum. What this implies for people's answers to the question whether it makes a difference which party people vote for, we simply don't know. Still, this question is the best indicator for the perception of accountability available in the CSES questionnaire.

Applying Powell's macro-level measures of accountability and effective representation in our analysis poses some serious problems. First, many of the election studies in CSES module 2 have been conducted in relatively new democracies, in which the institutions of accountability and representation are hardly solidified yet. In these new democracies, institutions can relatively easily be changed. Secondly, we already noted that in Powell's definition accountability and representation are characteristics of elections. These measures provide reliable information about a country's institutions only when several and preferably many elections are observed per country. When, in contrast, a single election per country is observed (as is usually the case in CSES), the observed accountability and representation will be subject to serious (non-systematic) measurement error.⁶

Since Powell's macro-level measures of accountability and effective representation cannot be used in this paper, we decided to use a simpler, but effective characterization of countries by their electoral system instead.

In our analyses, we will designate the systems with a majoritarian electoral system as the category of reference. Majoritarian systems are characterized by a 'winner takes all' assignment of seats per district. Proportional systems are characterized by the assignment of seats per district on the basis of proportionality in multimember districts. Proportional systems include, besides the list-proportional systems, also the mixed-member proportional systems (Germany, New Zealand). Mixed electoral systems include parallel systems (Japan, Mexico, Thailand) and mixed-member majoritarian systems with partial compensation (Hungary, Italy) (cf. Shugart and Wattenberg, 2003).

4.3.2. Old and new democracies

We argued that citizens will only gradually learn to distinguish between the performance of the incumbent government and the performance of the democratic regime. In our analyses we will therefore introduce

⁶ Samuels (2004) has questioned the issue of government accountability (for the economy) in presidential systems. Depending on whether elections for the legislature are concurrent or nonconcurrent with presidential elections (i.e., the president is, or is not elected at the same time as the legislature), government accountability will be high (concurrent) or low (nonconcurrent). In our data, only the French election in 2002 was a nonconcurrent presidential contest. We decided to categorize the French 2002 election as a majoritarian case (in agreement with Powell (2000)), even though it was not strictly a (majoritarian) election for the assembly. The other elections in presidential systems in our data were either legislative elections only (Mexico, Taiwan) or concurrent legislative/presidential elections (Brazil, Philippines, United States).

a rough control for the age of the democratic systems. We distinguish between old, established democracies and new, recent democracies.

Most of our cases can easily be classified according to this scheme. Many are classified as old democracies with at least several decades of free and fair elections and other civil liberties. Spain and Portugal, which both regained democracy only in the 1970s, are therefore regarded as ‘old’ democracies. Other cases are among the newer democracies established after the breakdown of the Soviet empire, after a period of dictatorship (Philippines) or after a period of military rule (Brazil). Mexico—for many decades dominated by one single party—was until 2000 rated lower than ‘2’ on the Freedom House index,⁷ meaning that it was ‘partly free’ at the best. The same applies to Taiwan until the late 1990s (‘partly free’ according to the Freedom House index), when the newly formed Democratic Progressive Party and the Chinese New Party gradually increased their impact on Taiwan politics. For these reasons, we have classified Mexico and Taiwan under the ‘new democracies’ as well. Finally, Hong Kong, which did not have free elections before 1984 and was returned to China in 1997, can be regarded as a class on its own, but is classified here as a new democracy. In our analyses, we will treat the old democracies as the reference category.

The classification of our 35 political systems on the two macro-level variables, electoral system and age of democracy, is depicted in Table 1. Obviously, as this table shows, the two variables are not independent of each other:

- There is only a single case with majoritarian electoral system which is also a new democracy (Kyrgyzstan).
- Almost all cases with a mixed institutional design are new democracies (the exceptions being Japan 2004 and Italy 2006).
- All Asian cases in the analysis are instances of mixed institutional design.⁸

The problem encountered here is of course familiar to all comparativists in political science: it is attractive to portray a research problem as a multilevel problem,

⁷ Refer to: <http://www.freedomhouse.org> (accessed September 24, 2007).

⁸ This is a relevant observation because it has been claimed that Asian democracy should be regarded as a class of its own, with a strong emphasis on group harmony and consensus and a correspondingly lower esteem for individual liberty (see Fukuyama, 1992, pp. 235–44).

Table 1
Electoral system and age of democracy

Age	Electoral system			
	Proportional	Mixed	Majoritarian	
Old	Belgium 2003	Japan 2004	Australia 2004	
	Denmark 2001	Italy 2006	Britain 2005	
	Finland 2003		Canada 2004	
	Germany 2002		France 2002	
	Iceland 2003		United States 2004	
	Ireland 2002			
	Israel 2003			
	New Zealand 2002			
	Portugal 2002			
	Portugal 2005			
	Spain 2004			
	Sweden 2002			
	Switzerland 2003			
	New	Brazil 2002	Albania 2005	Kyrgyzstan 2005
		Bulgaria 2001	Czech Republic 2002	
		Chile 2005	Hong Kong 2004	
		Peru 2006	Hungary 2002	
Poland 2001		Mexico 2003		
Romania 2004		Philippines 2003		
Slovenia 2004		Russia 2004		
		Taiwan 2001		

but the data hardly ever show enough macro-level variation to actually treat the problem with multilevel methods. At the macro level, it is generally not feasible to disentangle the impact of different system characteristics because of interdependencies. Instead, we should restrict the model specification to the most crucial variables and/or restrict the empirical domain to those observations for which the model can be expected to make sense (Achen, 2002).

Given the interdependence of our macro-indicators, the two indicators will not be used in a single analysis, as it will be unclear to which extent effects can reliably be attributed to one of them. Instead, we will present analyses which include one macro-indicator at a time, and focus in more detail on the status of the elections included.

5. Methods

Consider again the research design depicted in Fig. 1. The dependent variable, satisfaction with democracy, is an ordinal measure. As a consequence, neither linear regression (which assumes interval measurement) nor multinomial logit or probit regression (which assume nominal measurement) are appropriate methods of analysis. Instead, we will apply an ordered

regression model (Greene, 2000, Chapter 19; Long, 1997, Chapter 5). Ordered regression models have been developed for analyzing ordered response variables as an extension of the simple logit and probit models. The ordinal dependent variable (in our case: satisfaction with democracy) is regarded as a latent variable; we only have observations on the four categories of the indicator variable. It is assumed that the value of the indicator variable depends on the value of the latent variable: when latent satisfaction with democracy is very high, our survey indicator will be ‘very satisfied’. The question is, at which point of the latent metric scale the category ‘very satisfied’ transforms into the category ‘satisfied’ (and similarly for the other bordering categories). This point is called the cutting point. When the survey indicator has four values, three cutting points must be estimated. An important assumption is that the effect of explanatory variables (the regression coefficient) is constrained to be equal over the categories of the dependent variable (proportional odds model). Both logit- and probit-models are available for ML ordered regression estimation; we selected the logit model.

We present graphs showing the distributions of the three micro-level variables per election.

In the first step of our analyses, perceptions of accountability and representativeness serve as explanatory variables. The analytical scheme in Fig. 2 summarizes our expectations. The most interesting question involves the comparison of the two off-diagonal cells in this figure, which refer to the effects of a combination of low accountability and high representativeness, and high accountability and low representativeness. In our simple 2×2 table, this comparison amounts to a comparison of main effects while including their interaction.⁹

In the second step we look at the effect of the macro variables, type of electoral system and age of democracy, on the three micro variables. In this step we will again use ordered logit regression. Finally, we investigate the combined effect of micro- and macro-explanations of satisfaction with democracy.

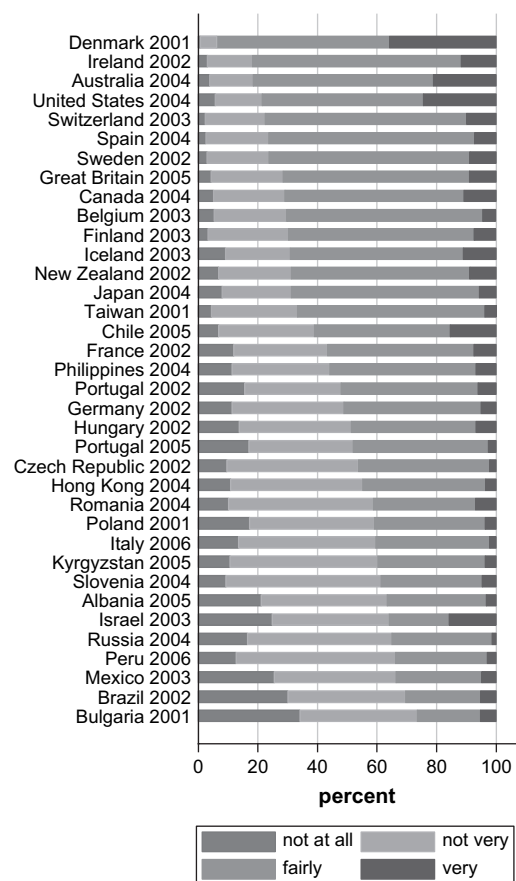
⁹ For interpretation purposes, we collapsed categories in both explanatory variables to create two dummy variables. For perceived accountability (‘Does it make a difference whom one votes for?’), categories 1 through 3 (negative answers), and 4 and 5 (positive answers) have been combined. For perceived representation (‘how well do elections ensure that the views of voters are represented by MPs’), categories ‘not very well’ and ‘not very well at all’, and ‘quite well’ and ‘very well’ have been combined. Negative answers have value ‘0’.

6. Results

6.1. Perceptions of satisfaction with democracy, accountability and representation

Figs. 3–5 show the distribution of the three key variables in this paper. Fig. 3 shows the distribution of the main dependent variable, satisfaction with democracy, in the 36 elections in our analysis. The elections are ordered according to the percentage of respondents who are fairly or very satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. On top are the elections in which people display high levels of satisfaction with democracy—elections in Denmark, Ireland, Australia, the United States and other countries. At the bottom of the figure satisfaction with democracy is relatively low—for example, in Bulgaria, Brazil, Mexico and Peru.

Fig. 3 shows that there is considerable variation across elections in different countries with regard to



Source: CSES Module 2, June 2007

Fig. 3. Satisfaction with democracy, by election.

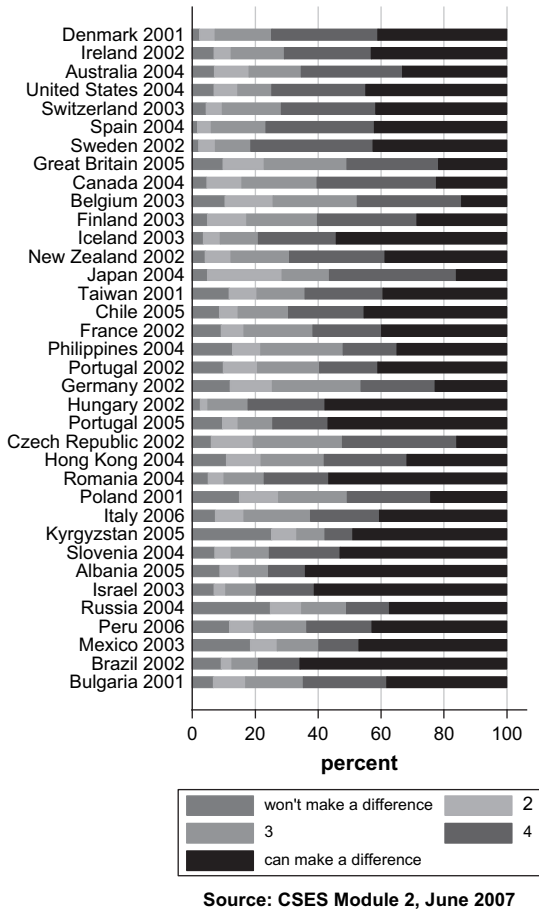


Fig. 4. Perceptions of accountability, by election.

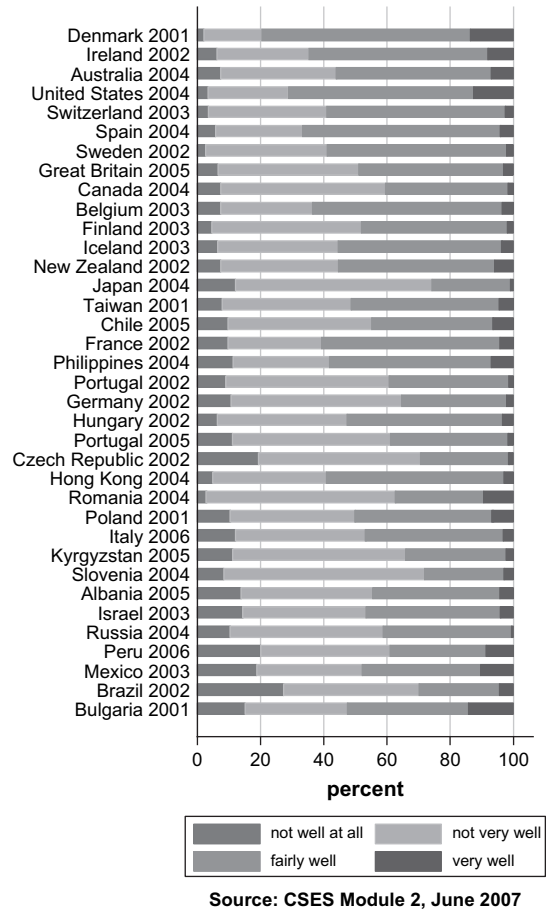


Fig. 5. Perceptions of representation, by election.

the extent that voters are satisfied with democracy in their country. Citizens of countries at the top of the figure are overwhelmingly satisfied with democracy; citizens of countries at the bottom are predominantly dissatisfied. Most of the cases in the figure show a majority of fairly and very satisfied citizens. In the German election of 2002, a very small majority is satisfied; in the case of Hungary and in the eight cases shown below Hungary in Fig. 3, dissatisfied citizens form a majority.

Fig. 4 shows the distribution of the micro-indicator for accountability, the response to the question ‘does it make a difference whom one votes for?’. The order of the elections in this figure and in the following is taken from Fig. 3. On top are cases characterized by a largely satisfied electorate; at the bottom are cases with many dissatisfied citizens.

The larger the categories at the right of each bar in Fig. 4, the more people believe that voting does make a difference. Obviously, at the level of elections the extent to which people believe that voting does

make a difference does not correspond neatly with satisfaction with democracy. If we focus on categories 4 and 5 of this indicator, it appears that the Hungarians show the highest perceived accountability, followed by the Swedes, Israelis, Icelanders and Brazilians. The lowest perceived accountability is found in Germany, Belgium, Poland and Great Britain. Only in Germany and Belgium the respondents in these two highest categories of perceived accountability form a (large) minority.

Finally, Fig. 5 depicts the distribution of the indicator for representation, the answer to the question ‘how well do elections ensure that the views of voters are represented by MPs?’, ordered according to satisfaction with democracy. Again, the correspondence of perceived representation with the satisfaction with democracy is not so clear at all at the level of elections. The cases with the highest degrees of perceived representation are Denmark, the United States, Spain, Ireland, and Belgium. The lowest degree of perceived

representation is found in Japan, followed by Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Brazil, and (surprisingly) Germany. Other countries in which a majority finds itself not very well, or not well at all represented, are Albania, Portugal, Britain, Canada, Chile, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Peru, Finland, and Poland.

This overview of distributions of the three micro-level variables (satisfaction with democracy, perceived accountability, and perceived representation) shows that their variation between cases is considerable, and that at the same time the election-level relationships do not seem to be especially strong. But whether the micro-level variables are interrelated can of course only be determined by a micro-level analysis, to which we turn now.

6.2. Satisfaction with democracy and perceptions of accountability and representation

The first research question to be addressed involves the link between perceptions of accountability and representation on the one hand, and satisfaction with democracy on the other hand. Referring to the research design in Fig. 1, this link connects individual perceptions with individual evaluations, and can thus be examined at the level of individual respondents.

Table 2 summarizes the results from an ordered logit regression of satisfaction with democracy on the two perception variables and their interaction, without further controls. Since the two perception variables have been recoded as dummies, their effects can simply be compared.

As expected, the largest effect on satisfaction with democracy is found when both perceived accountability and representation are high (the interaction effect is positive). While this should not come as a surprise, the interesting comparison involves the main effects of the two perception variables. Clearly, the effect of perceived representation is much more important than that of perceived accountability. This means that satisfaction with democracy is generally higher in the upper right cell of Fig. 2 than in the lower left cell.¹⁰

For the pool of all elections in the data set, the question whether people feel represented by their members of parliament is much more important for their satisfaction with democracy than whether they think it makes a difference who they vote for.

The quality of representation is the central criterion for consensus models of democracy. The line of thought

Table 2

Evaluations and perceptions of democracy at the micro level

	Satisfaction with democracy
Perceived accountability	1.20 (0.02)
Perceived representation	2.00 (0.03)
Accountability * representation	2.33 (0.02)
<i>n</i> = 46,834	Pseudo <i>R</i> ² = 0.09
Cutting point 1	−0.53 (0.02)
Cutting point 2	1.36 (0.02)
Cutting point 3	4.17 (0.03)

Entries are coefficients, cutting points, and associated standard errors from an ordered logistic regression (proportional odds model); the dependent variable is the four-category 'satisfaction with democracy' measure.

summarized in the first sections of this paper, suggests that a high perceived quality of representation is a direct consequence of the institutions of consensus democracy, such as a proportional electoral system. The same reasoning holds for perceived accountability and the institutions of majoritarian democracy. To further investigate the importance of democratic institutions, we thus need to analyze to what extent perceptions can be attributed to institutional context—the left part of the research design depicted in Fig. 1. The next step thus involves the introduction of institutional, macro-level variables.

6.3. The effect of macro-level characteristics

We have already argued that not only institutional design, but also the age of the democracy should be taken into account when the effect of institutional characteristics on people's satisfaction with democracy is analyzed. In the CSES dataset it is unfortunately not possible to include both these macro-variables in a single analysis, since they show too much overlap. We therefore first present analyses of the impact of institutional design, followed by the impact of the age of democracy.

Table 3 shows the results of three ordered logistic regressions, one for each of the three micro-variables (perceived accountability, perceived representation, and satisfaction with democracy). According to the existing theory, a majoritarian electoral system would be associated with a higher level of perceived accountability—majoritarian systems optimize the accountability function of democracy. Similarly, proportional systems would optimize the representation function of democracy. In our analyses, majoritarian design serves as the category of reference. Thus we expect a negative coefficient for the effect

¹⁰ These results are generally robust when the analysis is conducted separately for each election. In only a few cases are the effects of perceived accountability and perceived representation on satisfaction with democracy about equally strong (Brazil, Spain and Israel).

Table 3
Constitutional design

	Perceived accountability	Perceived representation	Satisfaction with democracy
Proportional	0.30 (0.02)	−0.05 (0.02)	−0.41 (0.02)
Mixed	0.09 (0.03)	−0.23 (0.02)	−0.82 (0.03)
<i>n</i>	46834	46834	46834
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.00	0.00	0.01
Cutting point 1	−2.12 (0.02)	−2.27 (0.02)	−2.54 (0.03)
Cutting point 2	−1.36 (0.02)	−0.04 (0.02)	−0.73 (0.02)
Cutting point 3	−0.44 (0.02)	2.86 (0.03)	1.96 (0.03)
Cutting point 4	0.58 (0.02)	—	—

Entries are coefficients, cutting points, and associated standard errors from ordered logistic regressions (proportional odds model); dependent variables are the five-category ‘perceived accountability’ measure and the four-category ‘perceived representation’ and ‘satisfaction with democracy’ measures. Reference category of ‘constitutional design’ is the majoritarian design; see Table 1.

of proportional design on perceived accountability (compared with majoritarian systems, proportionality should lead to lower perceived accountability). And similarly, we expect a positive coefficient for the effect of proportional design on perceived representation. We do not have clear expectations for the effects of mixed institutional design.

However, the results of the analyses in Table 3 hardly offer any support for these expectations. A proportional electoral system is positively, not negatively related with perceived accountability. And there is hardly any relationship between proportional systems and perceived representation. The relationships described in Table 3 are clearly at odds with the theories outlined earlier in this paper.

But that is not all. The third column in Table 3 shows the unmediated effects of institutional design on satisfaction with democracy. Not citizens of proportional systems or mixed systems, but those living in majoritarian systems show the highest level of satisfaction with democracy. Clearly, if the relationships between electoral system, perceived accountability, perceived

representation and satisfaction with democracy conform to theoretical expectations, the results reported in Table 3 must be distorted by omitted variables bias. We suggested that one potential source of such bias is the age of the democracy. Table 4 therefore summarizes the impact of the age of the democracy on the same three micro-variables.

Whether a democracy is old or new, has little impact on its perceived accountability—actually, perceived accountability is slightly higher in new democracies. But perceived representation is clearly lower in new democracies than in the older ones. And, as we expected beforehand, satisfaction with democracy is lower as well in the new democracies.

The age of the democracy thus makes a difference for the perceptions and evaluations of democracy. But the age of the democracy is also strongly related to institutional design (see Table 1), which complicates the interpretation of its effects. For example, all but one of the majoritarian cases in our analyses are old democracies. Rather than including age of democracy as a control variable, we therefore performed our

Table 4
Age of democracy

	Perceived accountability	Perceived representation	Satisfaction with democracy
New democracy	0.12 (0.02)	−0.41 (0.02)	−1.00 (0.02)
<i>n</i>	46834	46834	46834
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.00	0.00	0.03
Cutting point 1	−2.27 (0.02)	−2.37 (0.02)	−2.58 (0.02)
Cutting point 2	−1.51 (0.01)	−0.11 (0.01)	−0.71 (0.01)
Cutting point 3	−0.60 (0.01)	2.79 (0.02)	2.06 (0.02)
Cutting point 4	0.42 (0.01)	—	—

Entries are coefficients, cutting points, and associated standard errors from ordered logistic regressions (proportional odds model); dependent variables are the five-category ‘perceived accountability’ measure and the four-category ‘perceived representation’ and ‘satisfaction with democracy’ measures. Reference category of ‘age of democracy’ is ‘old’; see Table 1.

Table 5
The effect of electoral system, excluding new democracies and mixed systems

	Perceived accountability	Perceived representation	Satisfaction with democracy
Proportional	0.27 (0.03)	−0.00 (0.03)	−0.32 (0.03)
<i>n</i>	25327	25327	25327
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.00	0.00	0.00
Cutting point 1	−2.43 (0.03)	−2.57 (0.03)	−2.76 (0.03)
Cutting point 2	−1.52 (0.02)	−0.19 (0.02)	−1.03 (0.03)
Cutting point 3	−0.48 (0.02)	3.00 (0.04)	1.79 (0.03)
Cutting point 4	0.70 (0.02)	—	—

Entries are coefficients, cutting points, and associated standard errors from ordered logistic regressions (proportional odds model); dependent variables are the five-category ‘perceived accountability’ measure and the four-category ‘perceived representation’ and ‘satisfaction with democracy’ measures. Reference category of ‘constitutional design’ is the majoritarian design; see Table 1.

analyses of the impact of institutional design on the three micro-variables separately for the old democracies only.¹¹ Since Japan and Italy are the only cases of mixed systems among the older democracies, we have also omitted Japan and Italy from the analyses. Thus, Table 5 reports analyses of the same model as in Table 3, but only for eighteen older democracies with a proportional or majoritarian electoral design.

When only old democracies with either a majoritarian or a proportional design are included, we find that citizens in democracies with a proportional electoral system have more positive perceptions of the accountability of elections. This finding again contradicts our theoretical expectations. Table 5 also reports the absence of impact of proportional design on the satisfaction with democracy. This finding contradicts the expectation as well, and contrasts with the (weak) findings of Anderson and Guillory (1997) and Lijphart (1999, pp. 278–9) that citizens in consensus democracies are more satisfied with democracy. We do not find such a relationship. Thus, proportionality seems to go together with positive perceptions of the accountability of democracy, is practically unrelated to representativeness, and is associated with relatively low evaluations of democracy.

Our final analysis combines the micro- and macro-level explanations of satisfaction with democracy. We confine ourselves again to observations in old, majoritarian or proportional democracies. Table 6 reports the regression results. We find again that proportional electoral systems are associated with lower levels of satisfaction with democracy. Furthermore, both perceived accountability and perceived representation do

positively affect satisfaction. Their combined effect leads to the highest levels of satisfaction.

We are now also in a position to answer the question to what extent the relationship between type of democracy and satisfaction with democracy can be interpreted by people’s perceptions of accountability and perception (cf. Fig. 1). The answer is that this interpretation leads to findings opposite to our theoretical expectations. The direct relationship between proportional design and satisfaction with democracy is negative rather than positive (Table 5), and the introduction of the intervening variables perceived accountability and perceived representation does not make any difference in this respect—the negative result is basically replicated.

7. Conclusion and discussion

How do the voters in different political systems perceive accountability and representativeness, and what effects does this have for their satisfaction with democracy? Political systems are often divided

Table 6
Evaluations, perceptions and constitutional design (excluding new democracies and mixed design)

	Satisfaction with democracy
Proportional design	−0.37 (0.03)
Perceived accountability	1.29 (0.03)
Perceived representation	2.17 (0.04)
Accountability * representation	2.61 (0.03)
<i>n</i> = 25,327	Pseudo <i>R</i> ² = 0.11
Cutting point 1	−1.10 (0.04)
Cutting point 2	0.75 (0.03)
Cutting point 3	3.82 (0.04)

Entries are coefficients, cutting points, and associated standard errors from an ordered logistic regression (proportional odds model); the dependent variable is the four-category ‘satisfaction with democracy’ measure.

¹¹ There are no cases of majoritarian design among the newer democracies (see Table 1), which makes an analysis of the impact of constitutional design awkward.

into majoritarian and consensus types, and accountability and representativeness have a quite different importance in these two types. Whereas the consensus type of democracy is believed to maximize the representation function, the majoritarian type enhances the accountability function. Satisfaction with democracy is thought to be greater in consensus type democracies, because the representation function supposedly keeps the voters of opposition parties relatively satisfied.

CSES Module 2 provides the first internationally comparative data needed to put these expectations to a test. We have operationalized the accountability and representation functions at the micro-level by two indicators from the CSES survey. The type of democracy was operationalized in terms of a majoritarian, proportional or mixed electoral system. Our findings, based on a total of 36 elections in 35 countries during the years 2001–2006, show that people's satisfaction with their democracy primarily depends on their perception of the representation function, and to a lesser degree on the accountability function. Surprisingly in view of our theoretical expectations, the accountability perception is enhanced by a proportional-type institutional design, whereas the representation function is not. Our evaluative measure of satisfaction with democracy is also negatively affected by a proportional electoral system. It appears that at the macro-level satisfaction with democracy is primarily affected by the age of the democracy one lives in.

It is of course hardly surprising that people who are relatively satisfied with the representation and accountability functions of their democracy also express satisfaction with democracy in general. It is surprising, however, that citizens of proportional-type political systems think that the accountability function is performed better than do citizens in majoritarian systems. Does this finding imply that political scientists have been mistaken about the nature of accountability in electoral politics?

We have already (in footnote 5) pointed out that our measure of perceived accountability is less than perfect. One possible interpretation of our results could therefore be that our respondents have simply given a different interpretation to the question what difference it makes whom one votes for. They may primarily have thought about the policy range of the political parties, and this is probably wider in proportional than in majoritarian systems. Whether this alternative interpretation of the CSES survey question has occurred, is something we do not know. Obviously, future work in this area should aim at improved measurements.

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