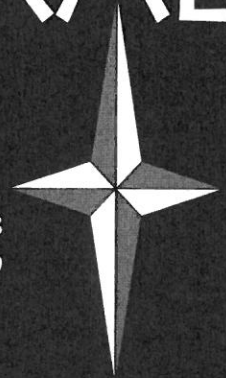




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Democracy Confused: When People Mistake the Absence of Democracy for Its Presence

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Abstract

A widely neglected phenomenon consists in the fact that large population segments in many countries confuse the absence of democracy with its presence. Significantly, these are also the countries where widespread support for democracy coexists with persistent deficiencies in the latter, including its outright absence. Addressing this puzzle, we introduce a framework to sort out to what extent national populations overestimate their regimes' democratic qualities. We test our hypotheses applying multilevel models to about 93,000 individuals from 75 countries covered by the cross-cultural World Values Surveys. We find that overestimating democracy is a widespread phenomenon, although it varies systematically across countries. Among a multitude of plausible influences, cognitive stimuli and emancipative values work together as a psychologically activating force that turns people against overestimating democracy. In fact, this psychological activation not only reduces overestimations of democracy; it actually leads toward underestimations, thus increasing *criticality* rather than *accuracy* in assessments. We conclude that, by elevating normative expectations, psychological activation releases prodemocratic selection pressures in the evolution of regimes.

Keywords

cognitive mobilization, democracy assessments, emancipative values, political support, regime legitimacy

Introduction

The literature on support for democracy is huge and still growing (cf. Ferrin & Kriesi, 2016; Norris, 2011). Much of this literature stresses the fact that support for democracy is widespread all over the world, and, oftentimes, even more so in autocracies than in democracies (Dalton, 2007; Diamond, 2008; Klingemann, 1999; Norris, 2011). The dominant interpretation of this evidence seems straightforward: People who say that they support democracy in an autocracy express with this response their desire for a regime change—away from their authoritarian form of government toward Western-style liberal democracy (Dalton, Shin, &

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Jou, 2007; Shin & Tusalem, 2007). If so, the share of democracy supporters in autocracies tells us how illegitimate autocratic rule is in the eyes of its subjects (Maseland & van Hoorn, 2012).

This widely shared view involves strong assumptions, most obviously that people who express support for democracy in nondemocratic regimes understand democracy perfectly well as the liberal alternative to their authoritarian type of regime. This premise resonates with the idea that basic democratic freedoms—including civil liberties and political rights—constitute a universal value for which people across all cultures aspire (Fukuyama, 1992; Sen, 1999). Should it indeed be true that human nature infuses in people all over the globe an invariant desire for democratic freedoms, autocracies never feed themselves from genuine mass support but are kept alive by repressive elites alone (cf. Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006).

This decidedly *a*-cultural view of democracy is influential. It informed foreign policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and other places where Western powers acted under the premise that removing the tyrants automatically paves these countries' way to democracy, in fulfillment of people's ubiquitous longing for freedoms (for a critique, see Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

Prominent as this *a*-cultural view is in the support for democracy literature, it ignores decades of research on cultural values. Writings in the tradition of Inglehart (1973, 1990, 1997) agree that people in all cultures value freedoms to some extent. But which priority a culture attributes to freedoms depends on the existential conditions under which the culture evolved—in line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Cultures evolving under existential pressures breed submissive orientations that make people value authority higher than liberty (Welzel, 2013). An emancipatory reversal of this order of priority has happened over the generations, but only where mass-scale improvements in existential conditions have turned the nature of most people's life from a source of threats into a source of opportunities (Welzel, 2013). The ensuing cultural shift is visible in a generational rise of emancipative values, which reorder priorities from authority to liberty (Welzel, 2013). But the uneven progression of this emancipatory shift has created a world in which emancipative values have become a prime marker of today's cultural differences (Welzel, 2013).

After all, we face an intriguing contrast: While mass support for democracy shows surprisingly little cross-cultural variation, emphasis on emancipative values varies massively across cultures, and does so predictably depending on where the culture's existential conditions settle on the threat–opportunity continuum (Welzel, 2013). This contrast raises suspicion that levels of support for democracy are incomparable across cultures because the cultures' different emphases on emancipative values alter what people actually mean when they say that they support democracy.

Analyzing World Values Survey data, Kirsch and Welzel (2018) confirm this proposition. The authors examine questions addressing people's notion of democracy, and find that these notions vary on an authoritarianism–liberalism spectrum—alongside the nature of the surrounding culture. In *liberal* cultures, where emancipative values are widespread, most people internalize a correspondingly liberal notion of democracy, seeing in democracy a system that grants people basic freedoms. By contrast, in *authoritarian* cultures, in which emancipative values are rare, people adopt respective authoritarian notions of democracy, viewing democracy as a form of “guardianship” by “wise” rulers whom people owe obedience because the rulers govern in people's best interest.

When notions of democracy are so contradictory, they alter what people's outspoken support for democracy means. Indeed, there are many countries in which authoritarian notions of democracy are so prevalent that the meaning of support for democracy reverses into the exact opposite of what intuition suggests: support for autocracy, that is. In these countries, autocratic rule has more legitimacy in the eyes of the people than these people's seeming support for democracy pretends.

Kirsch and Welzel's insights challenge the literature. This is a serious challenge but it is based on a single study. To strengthen the credibility of this challenge, it is important to cross-validate Kirsch and Welzel's results with an alternative analytical design, using other variables and a different conceptual framework that is clearly distinct from, and yet complementary to, the Kirsch-Welzel approach. Our study serves this purpose. To anticipate the result, we reenforce Kirsch and Welzel's conclusion: Outspoken mass support for democracy is a misleading indicator that masks deeply encultured differences in how people evaluate democracy.

Kirsch and Welzel address people's explicit notions of democracy. By contrast, we pursue an implicit approach to reveal the *normative expectations* against which people evaluate their regimes' democraticness. We understand normative expectations as the evaluative standards that people use in grading their regimes as more or less democratic—in other words, what *norms* people *expect* a regime to fulfill to be graded high in matters of democracy. These standards are subjective in nature and can be more or less demanding. Exactly how demanding people's evaluation standards are reveals itself when we compare (a) their subjective democracy ratings with (b) standardized ratings by scholars of democracy. Doing so, we find populations in which large majorities rate their regime as much more democratic than it is due to well-defined scholarly standards.

Clearly, support for democracy implies the acceptance—if not outright appreciation—of autocratic rule when people confuse autocratic realities with democratic ones. In conclusion, we claim that looking at democratic overratings is an implicit, albeit effective, method to unmask the legitimacy of autocratic rule, especially in the face of seemingly widespread support for democracy.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section one unfolds our conceptual framework. Section two derives testable propositions from this framework. Section three describes the data, variables, and methods used to test our propositions. Section four presents the evidence, followed by a series of plausibility tests. Finally, the concluding section discusses the broader implications of our findings.

Theory

Conceptual Framework

Much of the literature on in-equivalences in people's views of democracy focuses on how people define democracy (e.g., Al-Braizat, 2010; Bratton, 2009; Cho, 2014; Dalton et al., 2007; Ferrin & Kriesi 2016; Shin, 2015). A less frequent approach examines questions asking people *how democratic* they believe their country is. A pioneer in this field, Norris (2011) relates layperson assessments to scholarly judgments from Freedom House and Polity, which supposedly indicate how democratic a country *really* is, due to normed academic standards. Relative to these standards, Norris interprets layperson assessments of democracy from a cognitive point of view: judging how *accurately* people evaluate their countries' democraticness.

Moreno-Alvarez and Welzel (2014) follow the idea of "reality-checking" laypeople's democracy assessments. Yet, they apply a different criterion, not asking how *accurate* but how *critical* people assess their countries' democraticness—distinguishing *overraters* who see their country as more democratic than it is, and *underraters* who see it as less democratic than it is (compared with scholarly standards). Moreno-Alvarez and Welzel point out that the subjective standards against which people evaluate their countries' democraticness are below the scholarly norm in the case of overratings and above it in the case of underratings. Low evaluation standards involve low expectations as concerns the democratic qualities that a country must have to be graded highly democratic. High evaluation standards, by contrast, involve high expectations in this regard. Accordingly, the degree of over- and underratings indicates to what extent people's democratic expectations fall short of or surpass the scholarly norm.

We characterize the two ways of mapping laypeople's democracy assessments on scholarly standards as the *democratic knowledge* and the *democratic expectations* approach. Of the two, *democratic knowledge* is the preferable good if one idealizes an *educated* public that *understands* democratic realities as they are. Evidently, the criterion to judge democratic knowledge is *accuracy* in people's democracy assessment. *Democratic expectations*, for their part, are the preferable good if one idealizes an *ambitious* public that *aspires* for better democratic realities than it faces. To judge the level of democratic expectations, *criticality* rather than accuracy in people's democracy assessments is the yardstick.

The two approaches agree in their negative judgment of democratic *overratings*, albeit for different reasons: The knowledge approach judges overratings as undesirable because they are an indication of *inaccuracy*; the expectations approach judges overratings as undesirable because they are a sign of *uncriticalness*.

Besides this nuanced difference, the two approaches differ principally in their judgment of democratic *underratings*. From the knowledge point of view, underratings are as undesirable as overratings because both indicate inaccuracy. The expectations point of view, however, sees underratings as desirable because they signify criticality.

In the latter perspective, over- and underratings are not to be seen as equal deviations from accuracy but as opposite standards of expectation—with underratings indicating a demanding public and overratings an undemanding one. This is a relevant difference because mobilizing mass pressures for democratic improvements can only be expected from a demanding public, not from an undemanding one whose members are satisfied with what they have.

Observational Propositions

We are interested in characteristics of national populations that enculture normative expectations so low that people rate their countries' democraticness higher than it is, or so high that they rate it lower than it is, relative to normed scholarly standards. So, what are the features that most plausibly exert such an influence?

An obvious point of departure is institutional learning (e.g., Jennings, 1996; Rohrschneider, 1994). Conventional wisdom holds that education and the media instill in people the norms that are implicit in a regime's power structure (cf. Inkeles & Smith, 1974). Depending on whether the regime is democratic or autocratic, its institutions enculture the corresponding norms. However, Marquez (2016) demonstrates that today almost all regimes depict themselves as democracies, including the many autocracies in the world. To reconcile the self-portrayal as a democracy with autocratic norms, the propaganda in autocratic regimes redefines democracy as some form of "enlightened guardianship," which reduces the notion of democracy to having wise leaders who rule the country with a strong hand in the people's best interest. Socialized under the imprint of such propaganda, people in nondemocratic regimes learn that all it needs for a country to be regarded as a democracy is having a wise leader. Such a simplistic understanding implants an undemanding evaluation standard in people's mind, which settles their expectations of what norms a regime needs to fulfill to count as democratic on a low level.

In democracies, by contrast, people learn that having wise leaders is by no means enough and that instead, for a country to be considered a democracy, power itself needs to be checked by horizontal controls and electoral contestation. This understanding is more complex and establishes a demanding evaluation standard in people's mind, which elevates their expectations of what norms a regime needs to fulfill to count as democratic.

In short, normative expectations should be higher in nations with richer democratic traditions and lower in those with poorer or no such traditions. Hence, our first proposition is as follows:

Proposition 1: People's democracy assessments lean less toward overrating, and more toward underrating, in national cultures with richer democratic traditions.

In the perspective of institutional learning, people internalize normative expectations as passive recipients of regime-controlled socialization processes. This is different in Welzel's (2013) theory of emancipation. According to this theory, education and information release cognitive stimuli that inadvertently train people to think for themselves. This gain in mental agency naturally activates in people a drive toward emancipation, that is, freedom from domination in what to believe and to do (cf. Inkeles & Smith, 1974; Lerner, 1958; Pinker, 2011). Growing aspirations for freedom give rise to emancipative values. These values represent an advanced stage of mental agency known in development psychology as "self-authorization" (Kegan, 1982). Inspired by emancipative values, people judge reality under higher normative expectations. As a consequence, democratic expectations too turn more ambitious.

Thus, the second proposition suggests the following:

Proposition 2: People's democracy assessments lean less toward overrating, and more toward underrating, in personal situations (individual level) and in national cultures (country level) in which cognitive stimuli and emancipative values are stronger.

Kuran's (1993) *Private Truths—Public Lies* offers a different perspective, due to which surveys in nondemocratic countries are incomparable with those in democratic ones. The reason is straightforward: In nondemocratic countries, state-sponsored repression breeds fears that prompt people to judge their country's democraticness as rosier than they really think it is—the case of "public lies."

Alternatively, overratings in repressive regimes might not be blatant lies but, instead, reflect genuine beliefs, for a similarly plausible reason: Repressive regimes control the media, exert censorship, and curtail freedom of expression, all with the aim to indoctrinate people, so as to make them believe to live in a democracy, even though they do not. If this indoctrination works, people have learnt to evaluate political realities under a low normative standard and expect little more than "wise" leadership, or just the claim for it, to consider a regime as a democracy. In this case, democratic overratings in repressive regimes express what people truly believe.

Regardless of whether the mechanism is breeding public lies or cultivating low expectations, both lead to the same conclusion, which is our third proposition:

Proposition 3: People's democracy assessments lean less toward underrating, and more toward overrating, in national cultures in which the state is more repressive.

Apart from outright repression, there are more subtle methods of manipulation. These methods, too, might lower democratic expectations and, accordingly, breed widespread overestimations. Because state-sponsored manipulation is costly, a regime's ability to engage in it depends on the influx of revenues, especially revenues that exempt the state from taxing its citizens. Extra revenues outside taxation reduce pressures on a regime to rule with popular consent. In fact, a regime in the possession of such revenues has the means to subsidize its supporters and punish the opponents. The clearest example of such extra revenues are oil and gas rents. Indeed, oil and gas revenues represent the most lucrative source of rent-seeking economies. Consequently, the fourth proposition holds:

Proposition 4: People's democracy assessments lean less toward underrating, and more toward overrating, in national cultures with a larger rent-seeking economy.

Some authors suggest that economic performance—visible in economic growth and material well-being—generates regime support (Przeworski et al., 2000). The nature of the expected

effect is psychological: Economic performance generates regime support insofar as it enhances people's material satisfaction. If material satisfaction indeed makes people see their regime more favorably, it should inflate their democracy assessment. Thus, the fifth proposition postulates the following:

Proposition 5: People's democracy assessments lean more toward overrating, and less toward underrating, in personal situations (individual level) and in national cultures (country level) in which material satisfaction is greater.

A particular economic performance aspect, however, might show a more immediate psychological impact: unemployment. Scores of studies argue that unemployment, whether as a personal experience or as a contextual sign of policy failure, delegitimizes regimes (cf. Reiss & Perry, 2011). Consequently, the sixth proposition states the following:

Proposition 6: People's democracy assessments lean less toward overrating, and more toward underrating, in personal situations of unemployment (individual level) and in national cultures (country level) in which unemployment is more widespread.

Inspired by Max Weber, a large literature reasons that the liberal values underlying democracy originate in the individualistic–egalitarian ethos of Western Protestantism (cf. Dahl, 1973; Lal, 1998; Lipset, 1960). For this reason, cultures that define their identity in explicit opposition to the West, most notably Islam, might oppose liberal values as an alien marker of Westernness (cf. Huntington, 1996). If so, democratic expectations should be high in countries with a Protestant heritage, weak in those with an Islamic heritage, and somewhere in between in countries with none of these legacies. The seventh proposition, accordingly, maintains the following:

Proposition 7: People's democracy assessments lean less toward overrating, and more toward underrating, in national cultures with a stronger imprint from Protestantism and a weaker imprint from Islam.

We phrase the latter proposition as a culture-level hypothesis (and not as an individual-level one) because we assume that people do not tend to over- or underrate due to their own religious denomination but due to the extent to which the surrounding country's *culture* is imprinted by Protestantism or Islam.

Empirics

Method and Data

To examine cross-cultural variation in people's democracy assessments, we use data from the fifth and sixth World Values Survey (henceforth WVS), conducted between 2005 and 2014 (Inglehart et al., 2014). The WVS interviews nationally representative samples of adult residents with a minimum sample size of 1,000 respondents per country. The survey fields a standardized questionnaire in face-to-face interviews using the prevalent local languages. Details on question wording, fieldwork organization, sample design, and data collection are available online at www.worldvaluessurvey.org.

The WVS provides the broadest country coverage when it comes to popular assessments of democracy. The assessment question is included since the fifth WVS. To avoid giving countries more weight that have been surveyed in both the fifth and sixth WVS ($N = 33$), we only take the latest available survey from each country, weighting national samples to equal size ($N = 1,000$).

We document question wordings, response formats, coding procedures, descriptive statistics, command syntaxes, alternative model specifications, and supplementary findings in an online appendix (henceforth OA), available at *JCCP*'s and the *WVS*'s websites (under the menu "publications" on the latter). The OA also includes a "Discussion Points" section, which elaborates in more detail on various conceptual and analytical aspects of our study.

The data cover some 93,000 respondents from 75 countries. Figure 3 (further below) documents the country set, showing a balanced coverage of developed and developing economies, democratic and nondemocratic regimes, as well as Western and non-Western cultures. Because the sample includes the largest populations from each region of the globe, it represents more than 90% of the world population.

Tapping attitudes in surveys is vulnerable to two types of error: A respondent has an attitude but refuses to reveal it; a respondent does not have an attitude but reveals one (Alwin, 2007). A possible indication of the first error is missing response in questions that are delicate in certain contexts, precisely such as asking residents in nondemocracies to assess their countries' democraticness. A possible indication of the second problem is respondents who give ostensibly contradictory answers to simple questions appearing twice in slightly different format, such as the *WVS* questions on the centrality that politics takes in one's personal life and one's subjective interest in politics.

To get a sense of the magnitude of these problems, we calculate per country (a) the percentage of respondents not answering the democracy assessment question as well as (b) the percentage of respondents answering the questions on the centrality of politics in their personal lives and their subjective interest in politics in outright contradictory ways, as explained in OA-Table 34. The analysis there shows that these problems are of minor proportion: Including the percentages of missing and contradictory responses among the country-level predictors in our models does *not* alter our results.

Another type of measurement error are responses that have been faked by either the interviewer or the polling company (Kuriakose & Robbins, 2016; Slomczynski, Powalko, & Krauze, 2015). To treat this problem, the OA replicates our analyses by (a) eliminating "perfectly" duplicate respondents and (b) downweighting "nearly" duplicate respondents in proportion to their proximity to perfect duplication (OA-Table 27). These treatments, too, do not change the results.

The outcome variable: Over- versus underrating democracy. The *WVS* asks people "how democratically is this country governed? Again using a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means that it is 'not at all democratic' and 10 means that it is 'completely democratic,' what position would you choose?" Like every other variable, we rescale this measure into a range from minimum 0 to maximum 1, with decimal fractions indicating intermediate positions.

The question asks laypersons to assess the reality of their country under an aspect—democracy—that has a preset scholarly definition, evident in professional ratings such as those by Polity, Freedom House, or Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). Unlike the laypersons' assessments, the professional ratings operate on a normed standard to measure the countries' democraticness in a comparable manner. Like a vignette, the normed scholarly ratings provide an objective standard to gauge the laypersons' subjective democracy ratings. The key question then is to what extent and in which direction the citizens' democracy ratings deviate from the normed scholarly standard, and why.

We calculate to what extent the citizens over- or underrate their countries' democraticness by subtracting the normed scholarly ratings of a country's democraticness from each respondent's subjective rating. This subtraction is performed after forcing both types of ratings into the same 0 to 1 scale range. Doing so, we obtain an *over- versus underrating index*, as illustrated in Figure 1. We aggregate individual-level scores on this index (see Figure 2) to obtain population averages in *over- versus underrating* for each country. Differences between the population averages are highly

Because all these democracy indicators are closely correlated (OA-Table 10), they yield small differences in results. For this reason, deciding on the basis of which democracy index to present our results seems like rolling a dice. However, there are reasons to opt for the EDI. For one, the EDI associates more closely with each of the V-Dem measures than do either Freedom House or Polity. Next, among all democracy measures, the EDI correlates strongest with the respondents' democracy ratings (OA-Table 10). Hence, in opting for the EDI, we select the expert measure with the closest link to lay-perceptions of democracy. Doing so, we hold people's democracy ratings against the scholarly standard that is least alien to them. OA-Table 15 documents the results based on the other scholarly measures.

Before treatment, people's democracy ratings are incomparable because even numerically identical ratings hide differences in subjective evaluation standards. To make the ratings comparable, one needs to bring the hidden evaluative differences to the surface and map them on a scale on which the different positions obtain a clear meaning. This is exactly what our treatment does: Measuring laypersons' ratings of democracy relative to a normed standard makes the lay ratings comparable in a precise sense, namely, in terms of the extent to which the norms that the laypersons use to grade the democraticness of a regime are less or more demanding than the scholarly norm.

Our treatment reveals differences in evaluation standards without asking people *directly* to explain their evaluation standards. In that sense, we obtain an "implicit" measure of evaluation standards. As is well established in cognitive psychology, implicit measures have the advantage over explicit ones that they avoid social desirability effects, because respondents are unaware of the *posterior* treatment that reveals their implicit attitudes (cf. Wittenbrink & Schwarz, 2007). For public opinion researchers, it might appear more logical to ask people directly what their criteria are in judging a regime. But this approach would not pick up people where their cognition works easiest: People judge situations at much greater ease than they are able to narrate the underlying criteria of their judgments (Kahneman, 2011).

Treatment variables. Our first proposition refers to the countries' *democratic traditions*. The best measure of democratic traditions in our eyes is Gerring, Thacker, and Alfaro's (2012) "democracy stock" index. As with all country-level treatments, we take data from the year of the survey in a country.

To capture *cognitive stimuli* at the individual level, we use three variables: educational achievement, information intake, and political interest. Educational achievement is a 9-point ordinal scale, ranging from *no completed education* at the low end to a *university degree* at the high end. Information intake summarizes the usage frequency of 10 different sources of information, including various media types and the Internet. Political interest proxies a person's openness to cognitive stimuli and is measured on a 4-point scale, from being *not at all interested* to being *very interested* in politics. At the country level, we measure cognitive stimuli using Dreher et al.'s (2008) globalization index, which indicates a population's exposure to transnational flows of communication, embedded in cultural, social, and economic exchange. Exposure to such transnational exchange flows means an influx of multiple cognitive stimuli.

To capture *emancipative values*, we rely on Welzel's (2013) operationalization. Rebutting criticism by Alemán and Woods (2016), repeated by Sokolov (2018), Welzel and Inglehart (2016) demonstrate the cross-cultural validity of the emancipative values index (for a detailed elaboration, see OA, pp. 12, 60-61). At the individual level, emancipative values comprise 12 items, which cover four domains of emancipation: child autonomy, sexual liberation, gender equality, and public voice. At the country level, we calculate arithmetic population means of the emancipative values index.

To measure *state repression*, we use the "political terror scale" by Gibney, Cornett, Wood, Haschke, and Arnon (2015), which covers state-sponsored violations of human rights, including

freedom of expression. Hence, state repression regularly includes censorship but goes beyond it in covering a broader range of means to silence opposition.

We proxy the strength of a country's *rent-seeking economy* taking the World Bank's (2016) estimates of the per capita value of a country's oil and gas exports.

To tap *material satisfaction*, we use a WVS question asking people how complacent they feel about their "financial household situation," on a scale from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*entirely satisfied*). At the country level, we calculate the arithmetic population mean on this variable.

To cover *unemployment* at the individual level, we rely on a WVS question that categorizes the respondents' employment status. We code an answer 1 when a respondent reports to be unemployed and 0 otherwise. At the country level, we use unemployment rates from the International Labor Organization (2016).

To measure the extent to which the Protestant heritage in a country outweighs that of Islam, we use La Porta, López-de-Silanes, Shleifer, and Vishny's (1999) estimates of the percentage of Protestants and Muslims, measured in decimal fractions of 1. Like Inglehart and Welzel (2005), we subtract the fractions of Muslims from that of Protestants and label the index *Protestant-vs.-Islamic Heritage*. Doing so, we capture the adversarial effects of Protestantism and Islam in a single variable. We ignore the individuals' own religious denominations after having checked that individual-level denominations exert a negligible influence on people's democracy ratings.

As a final remark to our variables, we include gender and age as routine demographic controls in the individual-level part of our multilevel models.

Main Findings

Figure 3 displays national averages in over- versus underrating for 75 countries. The averages vary massively. At the high end, we find drastic overratings of democracy in Vietnam (+0.55) as well as Rwanda, China, and Kazakhstan (+0.40 each). At the low end, we find pronounced underratings in Slovenia and the United Kingdom (-0.45 both), followed by Finland, Estonia, and Canada (-0.40 each).

Juxtaposing countries at the over- and underrating ends reveals several clear patterns. Countries at the overrating end are less developed, have little or no democratic tradition, and include many Islamic populations but not a single Protestant population. Countries at the underrating end represent an almost perfect mirror image of these features: They are economically developed, can usually be characterized as mature democracies, and do not include a single Islamic, yet many Protestant, populations.

Table 1 correlates the prevalence of over- versus underratings per country with its proposed country-level influences. Obviously, cognitive stimuli and emancipative values correlate by far strongest with over- versus underratings, at $R = -.79$ (cognitive stimuli) and $-.77$ (emancipative values). The negative sign of these correlations indicates that these suggested influences associate with under- rather than overrating. Democratic traditions ($R = -.66$) and a Protestant vs. Islamic heritage ($R = -.54$) relate to the publics' democracy ratings in the same manner, but less strongly so. As expected, the unemployment rate as well associates with underratings, but the correlation is weak and insignificant ($R = -.14$). The same holds true for material satisfaction ($R = -.18$), although in this case, the negative sign of the correlation is counterintuitive (we assumed an association of material satisfaction with over- rather than underratings). However, the counterintuitive direction of this correlation is spurious: It only exists because material satisfaction also correlates with cognitive stimuli ($R = .37$) and emancipative values ($R = .45$). As we will see, partialing out this collinearity reverses the direction in the association between material satisfaction and over- versus underratings. Among the hypothesized influences that associate positively with overrating, we find state repression ($R = .68$) and rent-seeking economies ($R = .42$).

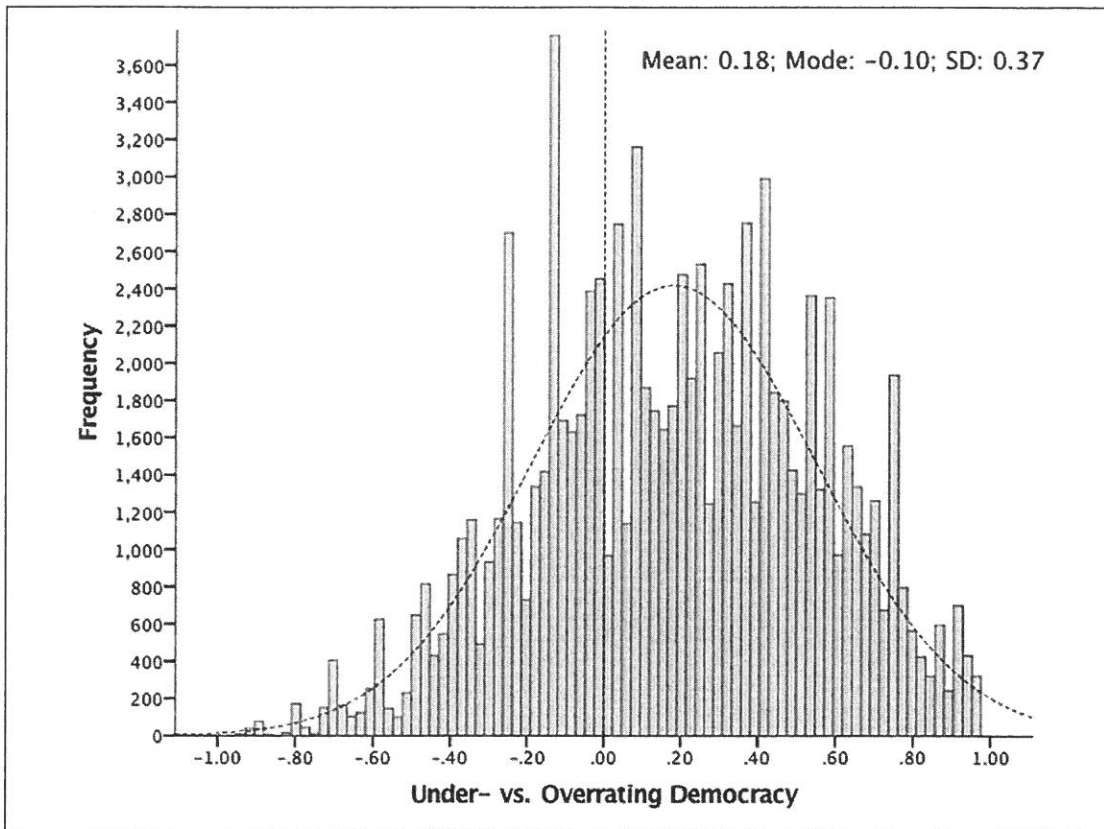


Figure 2. Over- versus underratings (country-pooled individual-level data).

To visualize the strongest country-level correlations, Figure 4 shows a couple of scatterplots, always with over- versus underratings on the vertical axis and the alternate influences on the horizontal axes.

Table 2 documents country-level, multivariate regressions of increasing complexity. As a rule, the models only include either cognitive stimuli or emancipative values because these two variables are collinear and belong both into the category of psychologically activating influences. Model 1 controls the effect of cognitive stimuli against all other influences. Model 2 does the same for emancipative values. Model 3 replicates Model 1 with only the significant influences. Model 4 replicates Model 2 in the same manner. Against all controls, cognitive stimuli and emancipative values retain a highly significant and strong underrating effect, with emancipative values showing the by far steepest slope. Democratic traditions, for their part, show a consistently significant underrating effect, although it is weaker than the underrating effects of cognitive stimuli and emancipative values. In this multivariate setting, the effect of material satisfaction now turns significant and switches sign, exhibiting the expected overrating effect, which is actually quite strong. State repression as well shows a consistently significant overrating effect, albeit less strongly so than material satisfaction. The effects of all other variables are either not consistently significant (Protestant vs. Islamic heritage, unemployment rate) or they are not significant at all (rent-seeking economies).

In summary, emancipative values provide the strongest antidote against overrating, whereas material satisfaction provides its strongest catalyst. Overall, however, the effect of emancipative values trumps the adversarial effect of material satisfaction: Holding the other influences constant, an increase in material satisfaction by one unit associates with an increase in overrating by

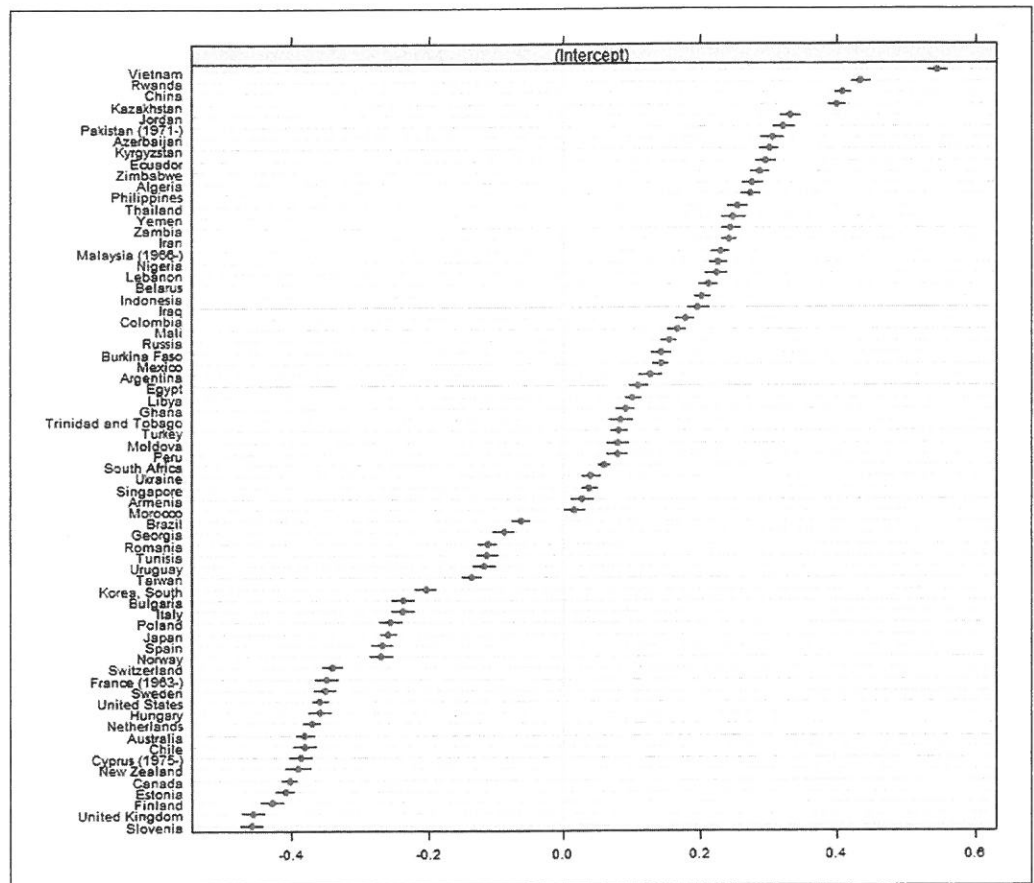


Figure 3. Over- versus underrating democracy (country means).

Note. Countries are either from Round 5 (2005-2009) or 6 (2010-2014), taking whichever was most recent. See OA-Table 1 (OA, p. 4) for details.

1.25 units, whereas a one-unit increase in emancipative values associates with a decrease in overrating by 1.78 units. So, if both material satisfaction and emancipative values increase by one unit, the net effect is a decrease in overrating by 0.53 units.

As OA-Table 5 shows, country-level influences with an individual-level manifestation operate in the same direction at this level, although at much lower strength (as usual). Among the individual-level influences, emancipative values correlate strongest with underrating ($R = -.37$).

The hierarchical-linear models in Table 3 examine the country- and individual-level influences simultaneously. As concerns the country-level influences, we only include those that proved significant in Models 3 and 4 of Table 2. By and large, Table 3 confirms in a simultaneous country-/individual-level setting the purely country-level results from Table 2. This confirmation is important because when country-level effects replicate themselves under inclusion of the same variables' individual-level manifestation, it is clear that the country-level effects are not an artifact of aggregation but represent truly contextual influences in their own right. Thus, we learn from the country-level part of Table 3 that individuals tend to overrate the more, the more widespread material satisfaction in their surrounding culture is, and that they tend to overrate less, the more widespread emancipative values in their surrounding culture are—*independent* of how much these individuals *themselves* are materially satisfied and value emancipation.

Table 1. Correlations Among Country-Level Predictors of Over- Versus Underratings.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) Over- vs. underratings	1.00								
(2) Democratic traditions	-.66***	1.00							
(3) Cognitive stimuli	-.79***	.63***	1.00						
(4) Emancipative values	-.77***	.76***	.74***	1.00					
(5) State repression	.68***	-.43***	-.65***	-.62***	1.00				
(6) Rent-seeking economies	.42***	-.39***	-.39***	-.41***	.30***	1.00			
(7) Material satisfaction	-.18	.49***	.37***	.45***	-.26***	.14	1.00		
(8) Unemployment rate	-.14	-.14	-.04	-.03	.05	.02	-.41***	1.00	
(9) Protestant vs. Islamic heritage	-.54***	.64***	.52***	.78***	-.46***	-.51***	.19	-.07	1.00

Note. N varies from 64 to 75 countries due to occasional missing data. Using z-scored over- vs. underratings does not change these results (see online appendix-Table 7).
 * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

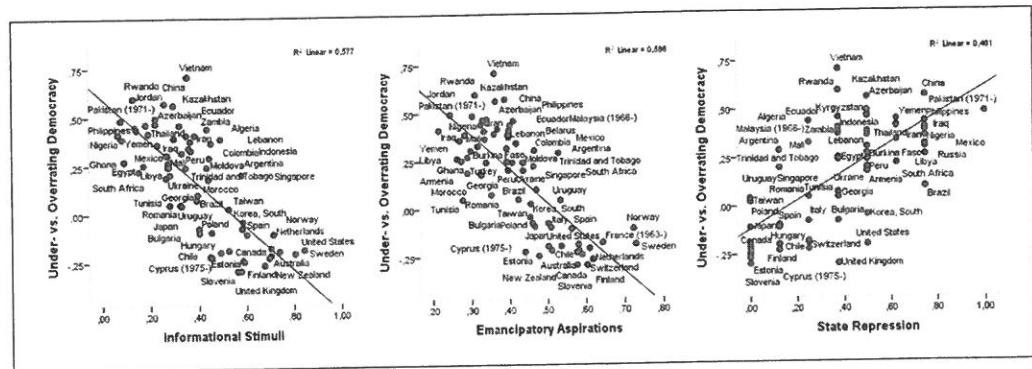


Figure 4. Cognitive stimuli, emancipative values, state repression, and over- versus underrating democracy.

Table 2. Country-Level Regressions Explaining Cross-National Differences in Over- Versus Underratings.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Democratic traditions	-0.44*** (0.13)	-0.45*** (0.12)	-0.45*** (0.11)	-0.42*** (0.11)
Cognitive stimuli	-0.68*** (0.20)		-0.67*** (0.16)	
Emancipative values		-1.55*** (0.36)		-1.78*** (0.34)
State repression	0.31** (0.12)	0.30*** (0.11)	0.30*** (0.10)	0.24** (0.09)
Rent-seeking economies	-0.01 (0.19)	0.13 (0.18)		
Material satisfaction	0.58* (0.31)	1.11*** (0.32)	0.64** (0.27)	1.25*** (0.25)
Unemployment rate	-0.22* (0.12)	-0.15 (0.11)	-0.22* (0.11)	
Protestant vs. Islamic heritage	0.01 (0.12)	0.30** (0.13)		0.31** (0.11)
Constant	0.47* (0.24)	0.24 (0.19)	0.45** (0.18)	0.23 (0.14)
Countries	51	51	54	68
Adj. R ²	.77	.79	.79	.74

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with their standard errors in parentheses. Tests for collinearity (variance inflation factors), heteroskedasticity (White test), and influential cases (DFFITs) reveal no violation of OLS assumptions. Results are similar when using a z-scored version of over- vs. underratings as the dependent variable (see OA-Table 11). OLS = ordinary least squares.

* $p \leq .1$. ** $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .01$.

The independent existence of country-level influences does not foreclose the additional presence of individual-level influences. Instead, as the individual-level part of Table 3 illustrates, such influences are present as well. Specifically, we see that—bar of how widespread material satisfaction and emancipative values are in people's surrounding culture—these people tend to overrate more than their compatriots when they are materially more satisfied than them. And,

Table 3. Multilevel Regressions Explaining Over- Versus Underratings.

	(1)	(2)
Individual level		
Educational achievement	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Information intake	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.00)
Political interest	0.04*** (0.00)	0.05*** (0.00)
Emancipative values	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)
Material satisfaction	0.15*** (0.00)	0.15*** (0.00)
Unemployment status	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)
Female gender	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Biological age	-0.02*** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Country level		
Democratic traditions	-0.46*** (0.10)	-0.43*** (0.11)
Cognitive stimuli	-0.67*** (0.15)	
Emancipative values		-1.78*** (0.32)
State repression	0.31*** (0.09)	0.24*** (0.09)
Material satisfaction	0.65** (0.26)	1.26*** (0.24)
Unemployment rate	-0.21* (0.10)	
Protestant vs. Islamic heritage		0.31*** (0.11)
Constant	0.61*** (0.10)	0.18*** (0.02)
Individuals	68,631	86,333
Countries	54	68
χ^2	16,416	24,384
AIC	587.7	4,514
BIC	752.2	4,673
Log-likelihood	-275.9	-2,240
Variance intercept	0.0158	0.0201
Variance slope (emancipative values)	0.0254	0.0223
Variance residual	0.0586	0.0613

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with their robust standard errors in parentheses. Intercepts and slopes are allowed to vary and individual-level variables (except gender) are country-mean centered. National samples are weighted to equal size ($N = 1,000$). Results are similar when using a z-scored version of over- vs. underratings as the dependent variable and when using a trimmed sample that excludes the top and bottom 10 % of the observations. Controlling for objective indicators of economic performance does not change the results either (see OA-Table 18). AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

* $p \leq .1$. ** $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .01$.

they tend to overrate less than their compatriots when they value emancipation more than them. Hence, the person-level effects operate in addition to, and in the same direction as, the culture-level effects, although—due to the social nature of human existence—the culture-level effects are much stronger. Indeed, by coefficient size, the overrating effect of material satisfaction is 1.26 at the country level compared with 0.15 at the individual level. For the underrating effect of emancipative values, the comparison is -1.78 to -0.07 . Interestingly, although at the country level, the underrating effect of emancipative values trumps the overrating effect of material satisfaction (-1.78 to 1.26), at the individual level, we find the opposite constellation (0.15 to -0.07). Still, because influences are much stronger in their cultural than in their personal manifestation, the greater country-level impact of emancipative values outmatches the greater individual-level impact of material satisfaction.

By comparison, all other individual-level effects are negligible in size, albeit significant and pointing in the expected direction, except for political interest. We have no intuitive explanation of its overrating effect. But because the effect is small, it defies far-reaching generalizations. The same holds true for the consistent but very minor overrating effect of female gender.

Plausibility Tests

The supplementary analyses in the OA confirm the robustness of our findings against a myriad of alternative model specifications, such as (a) the inclusion of standard indicators of economic development, (b) a split sample test that runs the same regressions separately for over- and underraters only, (c) a truncated sample test that runs the same regressions under exclusion of cases at the floor and the ceiling of our over- versus underrating index, and (d) using a variant of the over- versus underrating index that recalculates the difference between subjective lay ratings and normed scholarly ratings after z -transforming both variables.

Do we obtain stronger results when examining people's subjective democracy ratings under an accuracy perspective? To answer this question, we transform the over- versus underrating index into an *accuracy index* that treats both over- and underratings as deviations from a correct assessment. OA-Table 17 replicates the country-level regressions from Table 2 while exchanging the outcome variable, now using the accuracy index. The bottom line is that—in comparison with Table 2—the explained variance drops by fully 30 percentage points. Furthermore, under mutual controls, *nothing* shows up as a significant influence on accuracy. In a multilevel framework, this conclusion repeats itself (OA-Table 20). The superior performance of the over- vs. underrating index compared with the accuracy index reveals that people's democracy ratings are better understood as normative expectations than as factual knowledge.

The distributional features of the over- versus underrating index suggest that most respondents do not make a random guess when asked to assess their regime's democratic quality (OA, pp. 56-59). But we can test more directly to what extent our findings are affected by random chance. To illustrate the idea, Vietnam's actual democraticness is close to 0, so a Vietnamese who simply guesses how democratic her country is, has a random chance to overrate of almost 1. When the country's actual democraticness is close to 1, as in Norway, the probabilities of randomly over- and underrating just turn upside down. In light of this consideration, a nagging question is whether our findings are contaminated by random guesses. Linked to this question is the issue that—if people's democracy ratings are indeed mostly random—then the fact of whether they turn out as over- or underraters is merely a matter of their country's actual democraticness. Plausible as these concerns are theoretically, empirically they turn out to be invalid: The likelihood that people's democracy ratings turn out as an over- or underrating merely by chance exerts by no means the main influence on their actual over- or underrating (OA, pp. 57-59, and OA-Table 21).

We argue that over- versus underratings reveal how legitimate people consider autocratic and democratic rule. More specifically, we suggest that—when people rate political realities as much

more democratic than they are—these people have low democratic expectations, which lends legitimacy to autocratic rule. Vice versa, when people rate political realities as much less democratic than they are, they have high democratic expectations, which lends legitimacy to democratic rule.

This reasoning involves two implications that we have not yet directly addressed. One implication is that the word “democracy” represents for most people indeed a highly valued good that they readily use to judge political realities. The second implication is that—despite its universal approval—people define democracy differently, even to the point that they completely redefine it in authoritarian ways, especially where democratic overratings are prevalent.

As for the first implication, it is indeed the case that most people associate with the word “democracy” a highly desirable good, no matter what good exactly they associate with the term. This is obvious from a WVS question asking people “*How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?*” on a scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 10 (*absolutely important*). Across all our roughly 93,000 respondents, the average rating on this scale is as high as 8, with a standard deviation of only 2. The median is 9 and the mode is 10, a score that more than 40% of the respondents select. Moreover, there is not the tiniest difference between over- and underraters in these distributional features. In light of these numbers, it is clear that the word “democracy” represents a highly valued good that overwhelming majorities of people all over the world use readily to grade their countries.

But the universal appeal of the word democracy masks drastic differences in how people define democracy. As Figure 5 illustrates, these differences in definition map tightly on democratic over- versus underratings. Specifically, what Kirsch and Welzel (2018) characterize as “authoritarian notions of democracy” prevails in countries with widespread democratic overratings. Moreover, Kirsch and Welzel find that the main influence on our democratic overratings, namely, lack of emancipative values, also explains their authoritarian notions of democracy, which indicates a confounding of both phenomena in non-emancipatory cultures. This conclusion implies that democratic overratings and authoritarian notions of democracy are two flip sides of the same coin—appreciation of autocratic rule. Indeed, when people misunderstand democracy as authoritarian rule, it is logical that they mistake the absence of democracy for its presence. The inherent logic of this finding lends further credibility to our interpretation that, when people in an autocracy say to live in a democracy, they mean it.

Kuran’s “public lies—private truths” framework offers the main alternative explanation of why people overrate democracy. Accordingly, people in repressive regimes know perfectly well that their countries are undemocratic but say the exact opposite to avoid punishment. In light of the plausibility checks just mentioned, this explanation seems rather implausible. But our data nourish further doubts. If the biggest concern of people in repressive regimes was indeed to avoid punishment for saying something that the officials might consider suspicious, and if people knew perfectly well that their regimes are undemocratic, they should by all means hide any desire for democracy and respond to have no such desire when asked about it, or avoid a response altogether. Consequently, smaller shares of people should express a desire for democracy in repressive regimes.

However, our data show hardly any difference in democratic desire levels between the most and the least repressive regimes: Democratic desire levels are above 80% under both conditions. Moreover, respondents in more repressive regimes do not refuse answering the democratic desire question in much larger proportions than respondents in less repressive regimes (OA-Table 34). Instead, the proportion of respondents avoiding to answer the democratic desire question is 2.9% in more repressive regimes compared with 2.6% in less repressive regimes—an altogether negligible difference. In light of this evidence, it seems implausible that people in repressive regimes are aware of their countries’ non-democraticness and lie when assessing them as democratic. Instead, it seems more plausible that most people who assess an authoritarian regime as

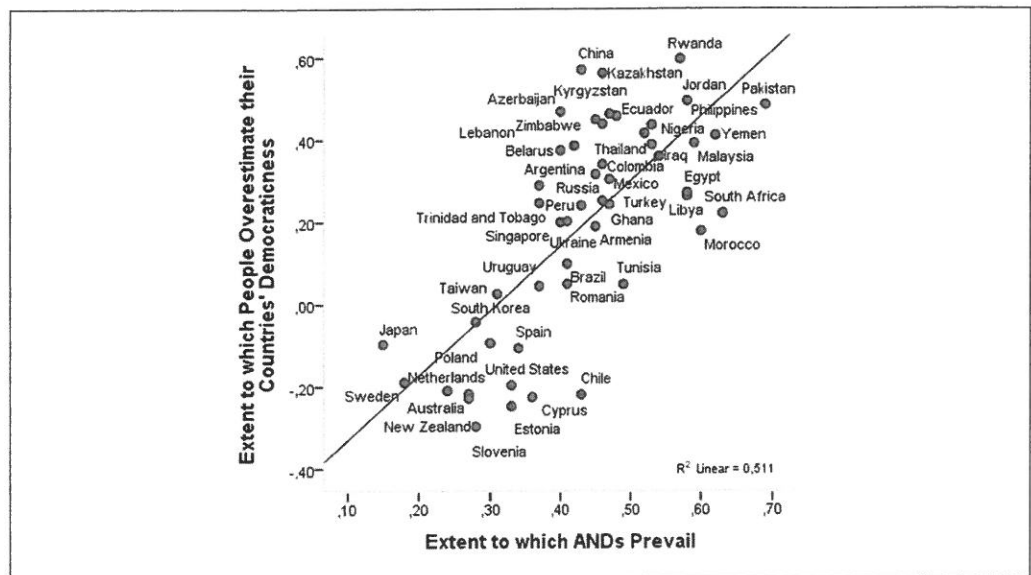


Figure 5. Authoritarian redefinitions of democracy (Kirsch & Welzel, 2018) and democratic overratings. Note. ANDs = Authoritarian Notions of Democracy.

democratic really think that way. The fact that most people who overrate their countries' democraticness are also those who exhibit an authoritarian understanding of democracy further supports this conclusion.

Finally, the "public lies" thesis maintains that democratic overratings are false responses in which people do not really believe. Logically, overratings that are belief-free cannot be linked with such a firmly belief-based variable as emancipative values. In fact, however, emancipative values are linked with overratings, in that they strongly disfavor them and favor underratings instead. The underrating effect of emancipative values is equally powerful in both autocratic and democratic regimes, although these values are less widespread in autocracies, which explains where autocracy prevails (Brunkert, Kruse, & Welzel, 2018). In any case, democratic overratings are not as belief-free as the public lies thesis insinuates.

Conclusion

Since decades, cross-national surveys measure widespread support for democracy all over the world, including some of the most autocratic places. The standard interpretation sees this observation as a testimony that autocratic rule is illegitimate in the eyes of most of its subjects. Inadvertently, this view implies that—unlike democracies—autocracies do not need legitimacy to persist because they are able to silence opposing majorities.

Recently, Kirsch and Welzel presented evidence suggesting that these thoughts about the role of legitimacy in autocracies are flawed. Indeed, the authors demonstrate that, when people say that they support democracy in an autocracy, they often misunderstand democracy as autocratic rule. Such misunderstandings reverse the meaning of support for democracy into its own contradiction: support for autocracy, that is.

Our findings reinforce this conclusion from a complementary angle, examining as how democratic people rate their regimes relative to normed scholarly standards. We find that many people in autocratic regimes mistake the absence of democracy for its presence and overrate their regimes as fairly, highly, or completely democratic, when scholarly ratings tell us the contrary.

That is another indication of autocratic legitimacy because people who say that they support democracy actually express with this response support for autocratic rule when they mistake the latter for democracy. The fact that overratings of democracy coincide with authoritarian misunderstandings of democracy cross-validates these two indications of autocratic legitimacy, which exists under the disguise of seeming support for democracy.

Examining the roots of autocratic legitimacy, we note a strong negative correlation of both authoritarian misunderstandings and overratings of democracy with emancipative values. In other words, autocratic legitimacy is synonymous with a non-emancipatory culture. However, the non-emancipatory outlook of a culture is subject to gradual change. As WVS data show, there is a generational ascension of emancipative values in most countries around the globe. Despite authoritarianism's momentary successes, the rise of emancipative values over the generations nourishes expectations of a glacial meltdown of autocratic legitimacy in most parts of the world.

Material satisfaction, by contrast, appears to be the strongest preservative of autocratic legitimacy. This evidence may be taken to indicate that economically successful autocracies safeguard their survival by satisfying people's material needs. Many observers might point to China and Singapore in support of this conclusion. Yet, there are as many counter-examples of economically successful autocracies that seemed to generate lasting legitimacy but, after prolonged periods of modernization, quickly turned into stable democracies at one point. Prominent examples include Germany, Japan, Spain, South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, and Uruguay.

Hence, the historical record suggests that material satisfaction generates autocratic legitimacy in the short run but undermines it in the long run. A plausible reason of why this might indeed be so is that satisfying material needs elevates people on Maslow's motivational hierarchy to higher levels of aspiration at which the human drive for freedom turns on. As plenty of evidence in *Freedom Rising* demonstrates, this psychological activation makes people find appeal in emancipative values (Welzel, 2013). And, as we have seen, the tendency of emancipative values to delegitimize autocratic rule outmatches the counter-tendency of material satisfaction. Consequently, the long-term result of economic progress is the delegitimization of autocratic rule via the activation of people's emancipatory drives. In a nutshell, the prospects of democracy are bright where emancipative values shine light.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online at www.worldvaluessurvey.org.

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