

As long as politicians continue to ignore the concerns of the public, satisfaction with democracy will continue to decline

By Democratic Audit UK

*Political disengagement is one of the defining challenges of our time, with multiple theories as to why the public continues to drift away from democracy and the political system. **Stefanie Reher** argues that one factor in advanced democracies is the perceived inability of the political class to pay attention to the actual opinions and concerns of those who elect them.*



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Over the past decades, citizens across many democratic countries have become increasingly dissatisfied with the way their political systems are working. Anti-government protests, declining electoral participation and party affiliation, and support for extremist and populist parties are further manifestations of this trend. One potential cause of declining satisfaction with democracy, which is often brought up in the public debate, is a failure of politicians to pay sufficient attention to the issues that the public is concerned about.

However, whether this link exists had until recently not been empirically shown. Is citizens' satisfaction with their democratic system really influenced by politicians' attention to their policy priorities? And, if yes, does this relationship apply universally, or does it depend on a country's political context? These are the questions that I sought to answer in an article that [recently appeared](#) in the *European Journal of Political Research*.

A number of previous studies suggest that the policy offerings of political parties and governments do indeed matter to citizens' political attitudes. People tend to be more satisfied with the way democracy works in their country if political elites' ideological views are more [similar to their own](#). However, political ideology is a very broad and inclusive measure of political preferences. Voters and parties may hold similar views on the left-right dimension – and they may even agree on what should be done about specific issues, such as nuclear energy or immigration – while completely disagreeing on which issues should be on the political agenda.

Yet, agendas are of crucial importance, because time and attention are limited in the policy-making process. This

forces political decision-makers to prioritise between different political aims and decide which ones to pursue when in government. Issues that do not make it onto their agendas are unlikely to be debated in parliament and legislated on. It may thus happen that the positions propagated by political elites on particular policy issues are perfectly in line with public opinion, but that issues around which the political debate revolves and on which decisions are made are deemed unimportant by the public, while the issues that the people consider most urgent are neglected. Agreement between citizens and elites on which issues should be on the policy agenda is thus a prerequisite for policy to be responsive to public opinion. Consequently, we should expect citizens whose policy concerns are high on political elites' agendas to be more satisfied with the representative process and, as a result, with democracy.

In order to test this hypothesis, I draw upon data from the 2009 European Election Study, which was collected by [the PIREDEU project](#) and includes a voter survey and a survey conducted among candidates running in the European Parliament election in each of the 27 European Union countries. Both citizens and candidates were asked "What do you think is the most/second most/third most important problem facing [country] today?" Linking the data from the two surveys allows me to determine how important the issue concerns of each respondent in the voter survey were considered by the political elites in her country. I call this variable *priority congruence*.

Analysing these data, I find my first hypothesis confirmed: Citizens whose policy priorities are more similar to elites' priorities tend to be more satisfied with the functioning of democracy in their country. However, when looking at each country separately, I observe substantial variation in the strength, and even in the existence, of this relationship. In order to uncover the causes of this variation, it is necessary to take a closer look at the causal mechanisms implied by the hypothesis, and to think about their applicability to different political, historical, and cultural contexts.

The mediating factor that I assume to link democratic satisfaction to priority congruence is the quality of policy representation. Since policy representation is a key element of modern democratic systems, we might expect it to play a role in citizens' evaluation of the functioning of democracy. However, previous research reveals substantial differences in people's understandings of what democracy means across countries. In newer democracies, they tend to define it more in [terms of rights, institutions, and benefits](#) than in terms of processes, such as representation. In Postcommunist societies in particular, people might still link their political to their economic expectations, since the transition to democracy and to a market economy occurred simultaneously. These countries are the youngest democracies in the EU. Thus, we may find that elites' representation of citizens' policy priorities has a weaker effect of satisfaction with democracy in newer democracies.

A second factor that may play a role is the quality of democracy. In countries where fundamental aspects and necessary conditions of democracy, such as freedom of speech and free and fair elections, are wanting, citizens may base their evaluation of their political system more on these basic criteria than on the quality of agenda representation. In addition, citizens in these countries might believe that the elites are trying to promote their own interests rather than the good of society, even if their policy priorities are congruent. Consequently, such congruence might not be seen as a sign of a functioning democracy in deficient democracies.

The analysis offers support for these arguments. The relationship between congruence in policy priorities and satisfaction with democracy is stronger in older democracies and in countries such as Sweden and the UK, which score high on the [World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators](#), a measure of the quality of democracy and governance. It is much lower, if not non-existent, in new democracies and those with a lower quality of democracy and governance, like Romania or Lithuania. I furthermore find that both the link between the priority congruence and perceptions of the quality of representation, and between perceptions of representation and satisfaction with democracy are stronger in countries with more democratic experience.

What can we draw from these findings? It seems that citizens have meaningful opinions about what should be on policy-makers' agendas and that they are aware of what is in on their agendas. In older democracies and in countries where democratic and governance institutions are functioning, people use this information to judge how well the representation process and democracy are working. In countries with less experience with democracy, other criteria of democracy seem to receive more attention by citizens.

The frequently encountered claim that the publics in established democracies have become more dissatisfied because of politicians' neglecting their concerns might thus be valid, although longitudinal data is necessary to confirm whether there the gap between the public's and elites' policy agendas has indeed grown. Pointing towards this possibility are the increasing constraints that governments are facing when deciding which problems to tackle, which come with increasing international integration. This is particularly relevant in Europe: On many issues, national governments have ceded their competencies to the EU institutions and are thus unable to put these issues on their policy agendas.

This also means that advising national elites to pay more attention to citizens' policy concerns in order to avoid dissatisfaction and other consequences, such as support of anti-democratic groups and [declining electoral participation](#), is only useful to a limited extent. Potential solutions include increasing the public awareness of the division of policy competencies between the different levels of governance and improving the democratic legitimacy of supra- and international policy-making bodies. Whether this could alleviate the risk of increasing dissatisfaction with democracy remains to be explored.

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