

# Book Review: How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy

## edited by Mónica Ferrín and Hanspeter Kriesi

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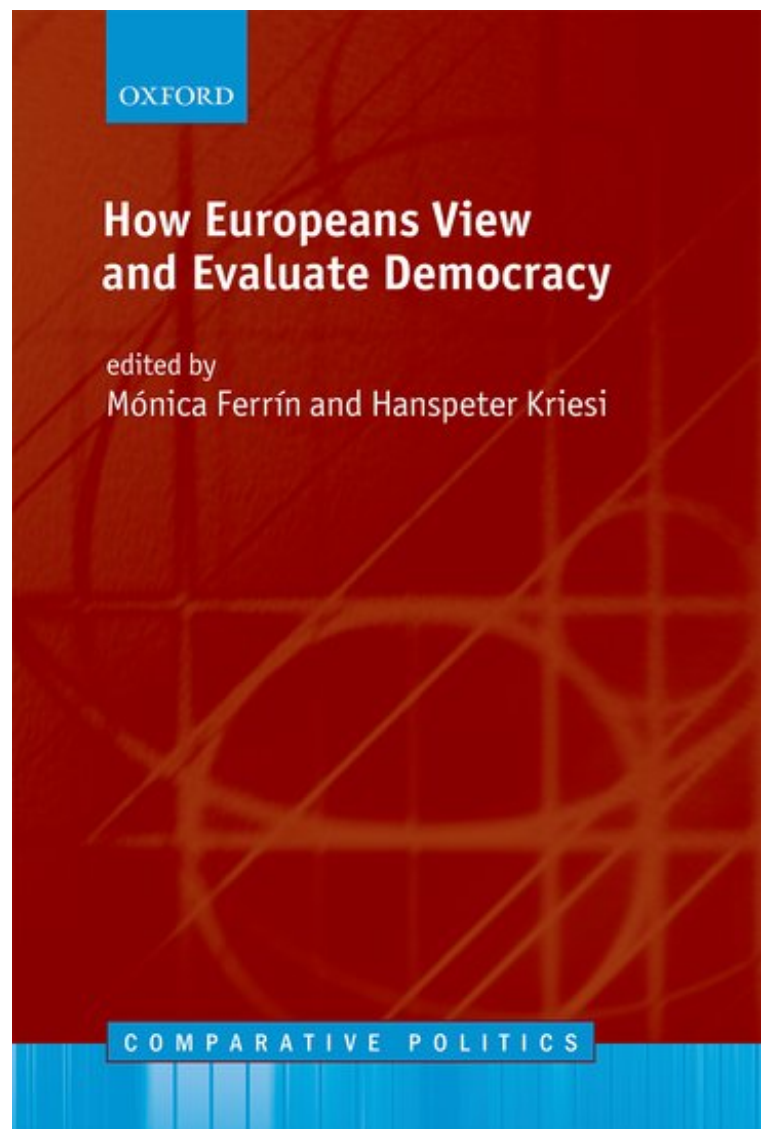
*In **How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy**, editors Mónica Ferrín and Hanspeter Kriesi offer insight into perceptions of democracy across Europe by examining how Europeans evaluate their experience of democracy and assess the legitimacy of current democratic regimes across the continent. This comprehensive study will be an excellent read for political comparativists and Europeanists, finds Simeon Mitropolitski.*

***How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy*. Mónica Ferrín and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds). Oxford University Press. 2016.**

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Two European researchers offer a new edited volume on *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy*. Mónica Ferrín specialises in research on public opinion, political participation, citizenship, immigration and gender studies, while Hanspeter Kriesi's research interests cover political and electoral behaviour, political communication, political participation and social movements. Their book includes fourteen chapters, written by twenty authors including the editors, most of whom are Professors of political science in European universities. The purpose of this edited volume is to show the views of democracy in Europe, how Europeans evaluate their democratic experience and how they assess the legitimacy of current democratic regimes on the continent. To answer these questions, the authors rely on statistical data collected in Round Six of the [European Social Survey](#) (ESS), conducted in autumn 2012. The main premise of the book is that a democratic regime is considered legitimate if normative and descriptive public opinions match: that is, if the views of what democracy should be are identical to evaluations of the way that particular democracy works.

The book exclusively targets an academic audience, those not only familiar with comparative politics and European studies but also trained in descriptive and inferential statistics. It should not be recommended to undergraduate students in comparative and European courses, but it may be a useful didactic tool in methodology classes. Although it is an edited volume, it is not a collection of heterodox chapters dealing with similar topics. Rather, this book represents a comprehensive study in which all chapters are elements in the same



chain. These should therefore be read in the same order that they are presented as the research questions in many of them follow on from the conclusions in the preceding chapters. In addition to fourteen chapters, the book also includes three appendices, in which the editors have summarised useful information regarding the ESS, the source questionnaire in ESS Round Six as well as additional tables and figures that were not included within the chapters.

Although any review will miss the target if it does not cover all the chapters, I will present the main arguments not by following each and every one, but by combining them into clusters that correspond to each of the three analytical parts, focusing on the main questions. The first two chapters deal with the general presentation of the topics and cover methodological challenges regarding the construction of the questionnaire for further statistical analysis. Subsequently, Chapters Three through Seven focus on the general question of how Europeans view democracy or, in other words, what a political regime should look like in order to qualify as a democracy.



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In order of appearance, the answers begin with two elements considered indispensable for any democratic political system across Europe: the rule of law and free and fair elections. In addition, people across the continent consider the freedom of the press and protection against poverty as very important. Press freedom opens the door towards a more participatory model of democracy that builds upon a minimalist liberal approach. However, these normative views of democracy are not equally embraced by all Europeans regardless of their social status. People with higher social status in terms of income are more likely to espouse meanings of democracy that conform to the status quo, and people with lower social status are more likely to espouse meanings that challenge it (110). Furthermore, in young democracies, individuals with higher social status are less supportive of liberal and direct democracy; in established democracies, it is the people with lower social status that are less supportive of liberal democracy (110).

Chapters Eight through Ten summarise how Europeans evaluate their democratic regimes. Here, the conclusions are much more diverse than those regarding normative visions of democracy. European countries are divided into clusters. On the one extremity, in countries like Bulgaria, Albania and Italy, the population is very critical of the performance of their democratic systems; on the other, in nations such as Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland and Finland, people hardly find any failure to report. Interestingly to note, regardless of how Europeans evaluate their democratic regimes, they give higher marks in terms of how they protect basic liberal values such as the rule of law and free and fair elections than in terms of going beyond the basic liberal model to embrace social justice and direct

democracy. Citizens are more dissatisfied with democracy and have more maximalist conceptions of democracy in low-quality democracies.

Chapters Eleven through Fourteen deal with the issue of democratic legitimacy: that is, with the match between the normative and descriptive dimensions of democracy in Europe, arising not from legality but from the judgements of the people. They conclude that the liberal dimension of democracy enjoys substantial legitimacy across Europe. As far as a broader understanding of democracy is concerned, the results are not as good. Regarding direct democracy, in four European countries – Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo and Ukraine – the majority of people do not regard political systems as legitimate. The situation is worse when the social dimensions of democracy are considered. In this case, majorities in more than half of the countries think that systems are not behaving according to their expectations. More developed and older democratic countries show higher aggregate levels of democratic legitimacy. It should be noted, on the one hand, that short-term economic factors in both more and less developed democracies can substantially affect perceptions of democratic legitimacy. On the other hand, however, some intuitive factors, such as trust in other people, party identification and the social status of people, do not substantially affect their perception of democratic legitimacy.

Methodologically, *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy* applies positivist techniques of data collection and analysis. Within this approach facts speak for themselves: they are uni-dimensional and do not allow multiple interpretations. This is the strong side of this approach. As with many things in the natural and social world, the advantages and disadvantages are usually the same. The rigidity in the analysis leads to a lack of flexibility; the obviousness in the conclusions does not allow for alternative interpretations.

That said, the book is a well-written text that asks multiple questions, verifies numerous options and makes firm conclusions within its methodological protocol. Within this approach, I can only make some minor suggestions for further studies on the same topic. First, on the level of conceptualisation, it may be appropriate to think about alternative ways of defining the key concept of legitimacy. Second, in terms of data collection, it will be pertinent to think about other data, e.g. the [World Values Survey](#), that may either confirm or reject the findings from the current study. Third, in terms of analysis, it may be useful to apply non-positivist techniques in order to find multiple meanings for democracy and its legitimacy. However, these minor methodological suggestions notwithstanding, *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy* is an excellent read for political comparativists and Europeanists.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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