

Voters do not improve their evaluations of the political system simply because the government is behaving well

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Established political parties across the democratised world are struggling to regain their previous levels of popularity, with scandal, voter fatigue, and an inability to tackle the issues that motivate voters proving a toxic combination for both parties and the political systems they operate within. But when parties are seen to be behaving well in government, do voters correspondingly improve their views about the system as a whole? Here, **Debra Leiter** and **Michael Clark** show that this is not the case, and that any variation usually relates to the other parties in the system.*

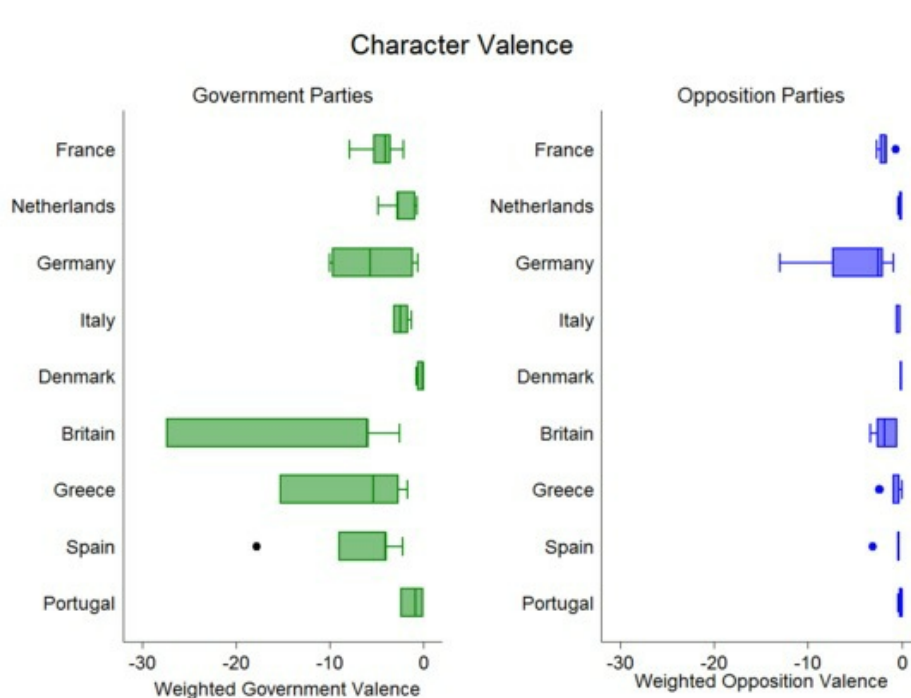


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Politicians, and the parties to which they belong, are not particularly popular at the moment. In a number of European countries, and indeed elsewhere in the world, political elites find themselves faring poorly in opinion polls, and sorely lacking the public's confidence. Of course, there are a number of reasons for this state of affairs, including the inability to adequately address pressing societal issues, the oft-perceived failure to follow through on campaign promises, and the sense that politicians "just don't get it." However, another plausible reason for the public's disaffection relates to the behaviour of politicians, who often violate social and professional norms (and in some cases, the law) in various ways, putting themselves, and by extension the parties they are affiliated with, in the news for all the wrong reasons. For example, in both Germany and Hungary, political elites embarrassed themselves and their parties in plagiarism cases, in Spain leading politicians resigned after receiving illegal payments, in Portugal the interior minister was forced to step down after being connected to a money-for-visas scheme, and in the UK all the main parties were shamed by an expenses scandal that implicated numerous MPs in wrongdoing.

Such events, and the damaging media coverage they generate, plausibly affect politicians and their parties, by impacting characteristics that voters intrinsically value such as competence and integrity. Indeed, extant research has shown that on both sides of the pond voters electorally punish those candidates and parties who fare poorly in terms of what we (and others) refer to as ‘character valence.’ However, is it possible that there are broader implications for political behaviour beyond the connection between parties’ character valence and electoral performance? Our ongoing research into this topic suggests that the answer to this question is ‘yes.’

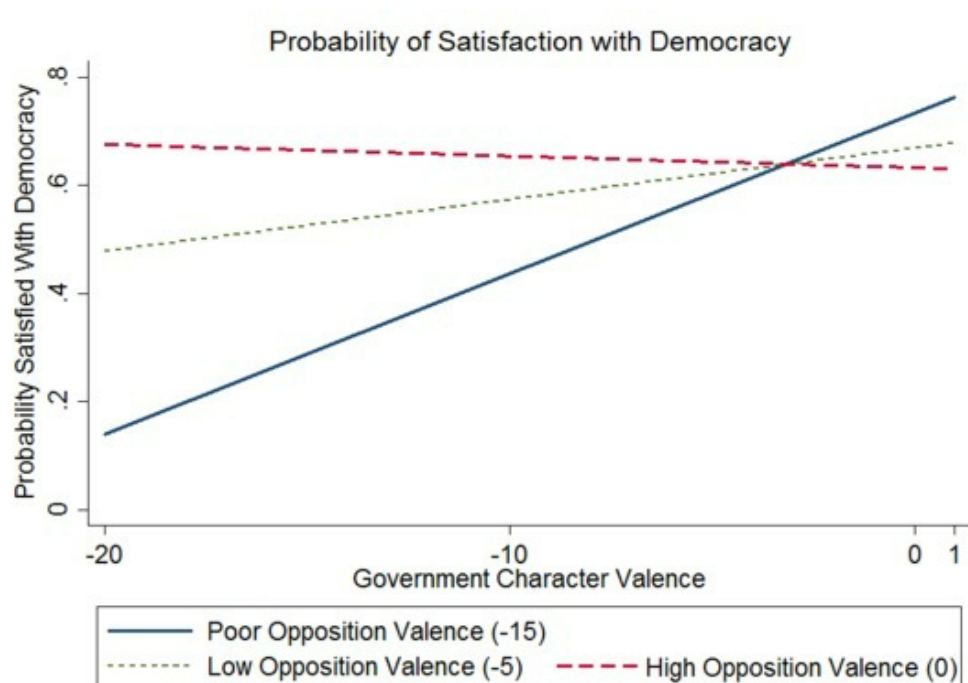
In a recent study, we examined whether voters’ evaluations of the political system were systematically undermined by events that would affect parties’ character valence, such as involvement in scandals, poor handling of crises, publicised disputes over key decisions, and so on. Employing a widely used measure of political system support – satisfaction with democracy – we investigated whether voters’ satisfaction with democracy was affected by changes in parties’ character valence. To carry out such an investigation required two main pieces of information – questions addressing satisfaction with democracy have been frequently included in cross-national surveys (in this case the Eurobarometer surveys), whilst evidence of events affecting parties’ character valence were drawn from analysis of news reports appearing in Keesing’s Record of World Events. As readers will likely suspect, the coverage received by political elites and their parties is overwhelmingly negative in nature, and in this respect the old adage of “no news is good news” certainly rings true. But does ‘bad behaviour’ on the part of elected officials translate into lessened support for the political system?



Given that they actually hold political offices and other important positions which can be abused, we assumed that governing parties’ character valence in particular would affect satisfaction with democracy. In other words, when politicians from the governing party (or parties) were involved in events that highlighted their lack of competence, integrity, and/or unity, voters would express their concerns by stating greater dissatisfaction with the political system. However, evaluations of governing parties are not conducted in a vacuum, since voters must also consider the potential alternatives to the current government, i.e. those in opposition. To this end, we also considered how the character valence of opposition parties factored into voters’ satisfaction with democracy.

The results of statistical analyses on nine European countries over a roughly 30-year period demonstrate a surprising finding. As one might expect, when the character valence of governing parties improves, so does the probability that an individual will say that he or she is satisfied with democracy. However, this relationship is contingent on the character valence of those parties in opposition. Put another way, when the opposition

experiences low character valence, an improvement in the character valence of the government from very negative (incompetent, mired in scandals, and riddled with infighting) to positive (relatively competent, undivided, and displaying integrity) results in an individual being a full 60% more likely to claim that they are satisfied with democracy. Conversely, when the opposition has high character valence, the same type of improvement in the government's character valence has virtually no effect on the likelihood that an individual will be satisfied with democracy.



Additionally, we find that satisfaction with democracy is at its nadir when both the government and the opposition have poor character valence. When voters are faced with a choice between two poorly performing options, their chance of being satisfied with democracy is incredibly low, indicating that voters' most pessimistic evaluations of their political system stem, in part, from the inept or corrupt behaviour of those elected, whether in government or not.

Voters do not improve their evaluations of the political system simply because the government is doing well. Voters, in fact, have reason to expect that members of the parties in government should be behaving themselves and showing respect for the power that comes with office. It is only when the opposition is performing poorly that the contrast between the alternatives is strong enough to affect voters' satisfaction with the political system. We believe that the implication for democratic accountability is an important one – the character valence of those in government can have a notable impact on how much confidence the public has in the political system. But good behaviour on the part of the government is important only when the opposition is behaving badly. In the end, as we might expect, when both the government and opposition are behaving as they ought, character valence doesn't appear to matter at all for evaluations of the political system.

[This piece is based on this article from the European Journal of Political Science Research.](#)

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