

# Political Culture, Political Satisfaction and the Rollback of Democracy

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## Abstract

This article addresses the alleged rollback of democracy by looking at the development of political cultures and the quality of democracy at the institutional level in three groups of European countries: longstanding democracies of western Europe, the first third-wave countries (Portugal, Spain and Greece) and the new democracies of the 1990s in central and eastern Europe. Political culture and political structures are examined by bringing in two aspects: the actual performance of democracy and the normative foundations of the democratic order. Pulling in a range of empirical evidence – comparative population surveys, macro-level data on the quality of democracy and contextual factors – the findings show that the normative foundations of democracy have not been negatively affected over the last decade, either in terms of political culture or with regard to political structures. In contrast, performance-related measures of democratic practice and subsequent support for democracy reveal significant negative developments. Thus, if there is a rollback of democracy it is in its practice, not in its normative foundations. However, the alarm is set: Europe cannot afford a continuing performance crisis if it wants to avoid a legitimacy deficit of democracy that goes beyond dissatisfaction with performance to eroding the support for the normative base of democracy.

Recent years have provided mixed outcomes regarding democratization processes in the world as well as in the European region. While several events clearly mark the demand for democracy, like the so-called Arab Spring, other developments point to a tendency towards autocracy or autocratization. Freedom House could report a gain of three new democracies from 2011 to 2012, but no change in this direction from 2013 to 2014. Rather, 54 countries experienced an overall decline in political rights and civil liberties in comparison to 40 that showed gains. In 2013, Freedom House reported more declines than gains in democracy worldwide for the eighth consecutive year (Freedom House, 2014).

Thus, is there a rollback of democracy? On the one hand, we can observe quite clearly tendencies towards, or the realization and strengthening of, autocracy if we look at the Gulf region, to Russia, or further East to Kazakhstan or Tajikistan. In addition, the balance between freedom and security has been largely tilted towards security in all western democracies since September 11. On the other hand, a large number of advanced democracies work on further improvements in many ways, introducing more opportunities for direct participation, referenda, direct elections of public officials, and the like. There was a huge increase in fully developed democracies ('embedded democracies' (Merkel, 2004)) during the second half of the 1990s.

Embedded democracies are characterized by fully developed civil liberties, political rights, democratic elections, horizontal accountability and an effective power to govern without intervention from political actors that are not democratically legitimized. On the other hand, the only political system categories that have been growing since the 2000s are those of defective and electoral autocratic regimes. Democracies become defective if one of the dimensions of embedded democracy shows shortcomings; electoral autocratic regimes meet minimum electoral standards but lack constitutionalism. This process happens partly at the expense of embedded democracies, 11 of which are now labelled defective (Schmotz, 2014).

Europe is not excluded from negative developments. Although most negative changes took place elsewhere in the world, Freedom House reports a further decline for Russia and Ukraine from 2013 to 2014. Russia had changed from partly free to non-free from 2004 to 2005, Ukraine from free to partly free from 2011 to 2012. Hungary also faced a decline from 2011 to 2012 due to Viktor Orbán's illiberal approach to policy. In 2011, Hungary recorded the best values for civil liberties and political rights but by one year later it had lost one point on civil liberties. The same happened to Turkey from 2012 to 2013, although it had only been rated partly free beforehand (Freedom House, 2014).

Does this imply that democracy is no longer the 'only game in town' (Linz and Stepan, 1996, p. 6) in European polities? Is there a rollback of democracy in terms of its legitimacy as a political regime, or do we witness institutional deficits that will be healed in the future? Is there a change in political culture affecting the legitimacy of democracy as political order? Are there changes in the structure of institutions that make polities less democratic and less legitimate? Linz and Stepan (1996) regard both the cultural and the institutional dimensions as crucial for a consolidated democracy. Democracy has to be the only game in town as a basic attitude, meaning a normatively positive appreciation of democratic core institutions by the political society. And it must be constitutionally the only game in town in order to prevent factual violations of democratic norms (Linz and Stepan, 1996, pp. 5, 8). Consolidation of political culture – which entails building political support for the regime – is the last and most difficult step of democratic consolidation. It means building the legitimacy of the political order. Diamond (1994) and Merkel (1999) regard legitimacy as the crucial variable for evaluating consolidation. This key variable entails a clear direction: the greater the level of legitimacy, the more consolidated a political order is. The more consolidated a democracy is, the more persistent it may be. Where democracy is the only game in town, 'even in the face of severe political and economic crises, the overwhelming majority of the people believe that any further political change must emerge from within the parameters of democratic formulas' (Linz and Stepan, 1996, p. 5).

Given the relevance of the two dimensions – the attitudinal or cultural and the constitutional or structural – this article will attempt to answer the question of to what extent democracy is in rollback in the European region by looking at two aspects of the two dimensions: norms of democracy and performance of democracy. Regarding political culture, norms refer to support for basic democratic ideals and the rules of the game; performance relates to satisfaction with the practices of democracy. The mirror elements in the dimensional structure are democracy in law and democracy in practice. These distinctions lead to a fourfold table (Table 1), which can inspire a number of questions. One refers to levels regarding political culture and political structures in performance and norms, another to the development of political culture and political structures.

Support for the performance and norms of democracy in the political culture and the performance of democratic institutions in practice and their shape in law may have quite different consequences. A decline in support for performance or in the democratic performance of institutions does not necessarily lead to a rollback of democracy as long as political culture and institutions keep up democratic norms. Generalized support for

**Table 1.** Performance and norms in political culture and political structure

	Political culture	Political structure
Performance	(1) Support for authorities and performance of the system	(3) Institutions in practice
Norms	(2) Support for democratic ideals and principles	(4) Institutions in law

democratic 'rules of the game' can be regarded as a buffer against performance deficits. However, if support for democratic norms is decreasing or institutional norms become less democratic, the consequences may be more severe as the very foundations of the democratic regime are challenged. Support builds on continuous positive experience; therefore, continuous negative experience with performance may spill over to the support for democratic norms. In such a situation, legitimacy of democracy is in decline and democracy may experience a rollback.

The rest of this article will explore the question of a rollback of democracy regarding perceptions of performance and democracy in practice, as well as norms and democracy in law.

First, the development of performance-related political support for authorities, institutions and the regime is investigated. This section thus covers the first of the four cells of Table 1. Second, this article explores support for democratic values and norms, dealing with the second aspect of political culture. Third, it turns to political structures and analyses the development of democratic quality in practice and law (cells three and four). Lastly it draws some careful conclusions, claiming that Europe cannot afford a continuing performance crisis if it wants to avoid a rollback of support for the normative base of democracy.

## The performance of democracy in Europe

Democracy in Europe is manifold. It builds on different histories, trajectories and, most importantly, different ages of democracy. Looking at global trends across Europe may hide more specific developments; looking at each country separately may block the view of the bigger picture. Time is an important dimension for democracy. How long a democracy has existed is often related to the degree of democratic consolidation. Regarding the length of democratic experience, Europe falls into three groups of countries: those with continuous democratic

experience since the end of the Second World War at the latest; the first countries of the third wave of democratization (Spain, Portugal and Greece); and the latter part of the third wave, eastern European nations that made the transition from communist rule to democracy around 1990, including countries from Albania to Ukraine (for the list of countries under investigation in the analyses, see Appendix 1). The so-called third wave started in Portugal with the 'Carnation Revolution' in April 1974, spread to Greece a few months later and reached Spain a year later. These countries are the oldest 'new' democracies in the EU. Research results have shown that in the mid-1980s support for democracy was already as high in these countries as in most western and Northern European democracies (Morlino and Montero, 1995). Torcal and Magalhães confirmed that democracy was as much the 'only game in town' in Greece, Portugal and Spain as elsewhere in Europe at the end of the 1990s (Torcal and Magalhães, 2010). Thus, these democracies are fully consolidated, but still about a quarter of a century younger than the other postwar democracies. In contrast, the countries of the latter part of the third wave of democratization have about one and a half decades' less democratic experience.

However, of all countries in Europe Portugal, Spain and Greece have been struck most severely by the crisis in the financial markets, resulting in a significantly negative impact on the fortunes of their national economies. The increase in public debt as percentage of GDP from 2007 to 2013 was steeper in these three countries than in any other nation. Portugal, Spain and Greece reported the highest levels of public debt within the EU (Eurostat, 2015).

Such negative developments put political systems under stress. Throughout history, economic crisis has quite often proven to be a trigger for regime change. Political support theory argues that instability of democracy can be an outcome of shrinking diffuse or generalized support. Because generalized support rests on enduring and repetitive positive concrete experiences with the political system, a decrease in support may result from significant and rather enduring negative experiences, leading to shrinking specific support and, in the end, the vanishing of generalized support for the regime (Easton, 1965a, 1965b).

Why is political support so important? Democracy is the only regime that allows for contestation of its own rules. Thus, it can be questioned, its legitimacy can vanish, and the acceptance that the majority rule will create binding decisions for all can disappear. If this happens, democracy is in question. Theories of political support relate the degree of political support to political stability. It is evident that a decrease in support can never be regarded as a good sign, but there are no clear thresholds defining the level of support below

which the stability of democracy is in danger. However, it clearly matters which kind of support is in decline. Taking the well-known concept of Easton (1965a), orientations toward political objects must be conceptualized hierarchically. Easton differentiates between three object levels: the authorities, the regime and the community. Even if the regime dimension is not affected immediately, there may be spillover from the other two dimensions. The theory of political support suggests that enduring specific positive experiences with political objects translate into generalized (Fuchs, 1993) or, in Easton's terms, diffuse support. Positive spillover implies that there can also be negative spillover: bad performance of authorities may lead to decreasing support for the regime.

Thus, the first question regarding the political culture concerns the performance-related support for authorities and political institutions. Evaluations refer either to what political objects (actors, institutions) do or to the way they do it. Regarding political authorities and institutions, the most frequently used indicator is trust. As the definition of trust as an 'output affect' (Gamson, 1968; Easton, 1965b) suggests, trust is somewhat in between or a mixture of both instrumental and moral standards of evaluation. Trust can be regarded as a resource or an asset of a political system, allowing for relative autonomy of governance. By its very nature, trust is a kind of advance payment resulting from the expectation that political actors or institutions will do proper work or function properly in the future (Preisendorfer, 1995; Luhmann, 1968). In this sense, trust is a buffer against temporary output fluctuations (Kaase, 1979). It is based on retrospective evaluations that are translated into expectations for the future. Theoretically, and within the Easton framework of political support, one can argue that trust is a generalized political attitude resulting from repeated concrete positive experiences with the performance of authorities and institutions. An even more generalized attitude, regime support, is the degree to which people feel satisfied with how democracy works in their country.

This article provides a descriptive account of these attitudes across time, differentiating between the longstanding democracies, countries of the first third wave, and the new democracies in central and eastern Europe. The data sources are the standard Eurobarometer data and East Eurobarometer surveys on behalf of the European Commission. Data cover 16 western European longstanding democracies, the new democracies of the first third wave (Portugal, Spain and Greece) and 14 new democracies in central and eastern Europe for different time periods depending on country and issue (see Appendix 1).

Given the economic crisis (sometimes called the banking crisis or the euro crisis), one may expect a decline in

performance-related support as the crisis started to take hold around 2007. Because of the differences between country groups in terms of time and, thus, the length of democratic experience, the general expectation would be that the 16 longstanding western European democracies should show the least effect of the crisis and the newest democracies the strongest. Compared to the latter third-wave democracies in central and eastern Europe, the three democracies of the first third wave are certainly less fragile in terms of challenges. At the same time they are democratically young enough to be not particularly stable. In this sense, they are 'intermediaries'. But the crisis did not hit all countries equally. As already mentioned, no other countries have experienced such a huge effect in terms of the severity of crisis symptoms as Greece, Portugal and Spain. Those countries are relatively young democracies and should thus be more vulnerable than older ones. Considering the strength of the crisis, it may well be that the effects of negative performance on political support are stronger among those first third-wave democracies than on democracies from the latter wave in the 1990s.

Looking at two types of political support measures (i.e. trust and satisfaction, both strongly performance-related) shows that there is a kind of hierarchy: trust is generally lower than satisfaction with the working of democracy in one's own country. The lowest level of trust is in relation to political parties. Parliaments and governments receive medium support with a huge covariation; satisfaction with the working of democracy receives the highest level of support. Secondly, results indicate quite big differences across the three groups of European countries. In general and on average across time, the longstanding democracies of western Europe fare best, the new democracies in central and eastern Europe worst, and the three first third-wave countries figure in the middle. From a very general point of view, this makes some sense: the oldest democracies had more time to generate generalized attitudes that are somewhat resistant to day-to-day politics; as expected, the first new democracies of the third wave are in the middle and the last new democracies at the lower end of the scale. However, looking at the most recent years reveals a different picture: from 2010 on, Greece, Portugal and Spain show the lowest level of support for political authorities (i.e. parties, parliament and government) and the lowest satisfaction with the working of their democracies.

Contrary to the west, the new democracies in central and eastern Europe also experienced a decline in political support between 2004 and 2013. However, the decline is much steeper in the three Southern European countries, particularly from 2007 onward: there was a huge decrease in satisfaction with the working of democracy from close to 60 per cent of citizens to

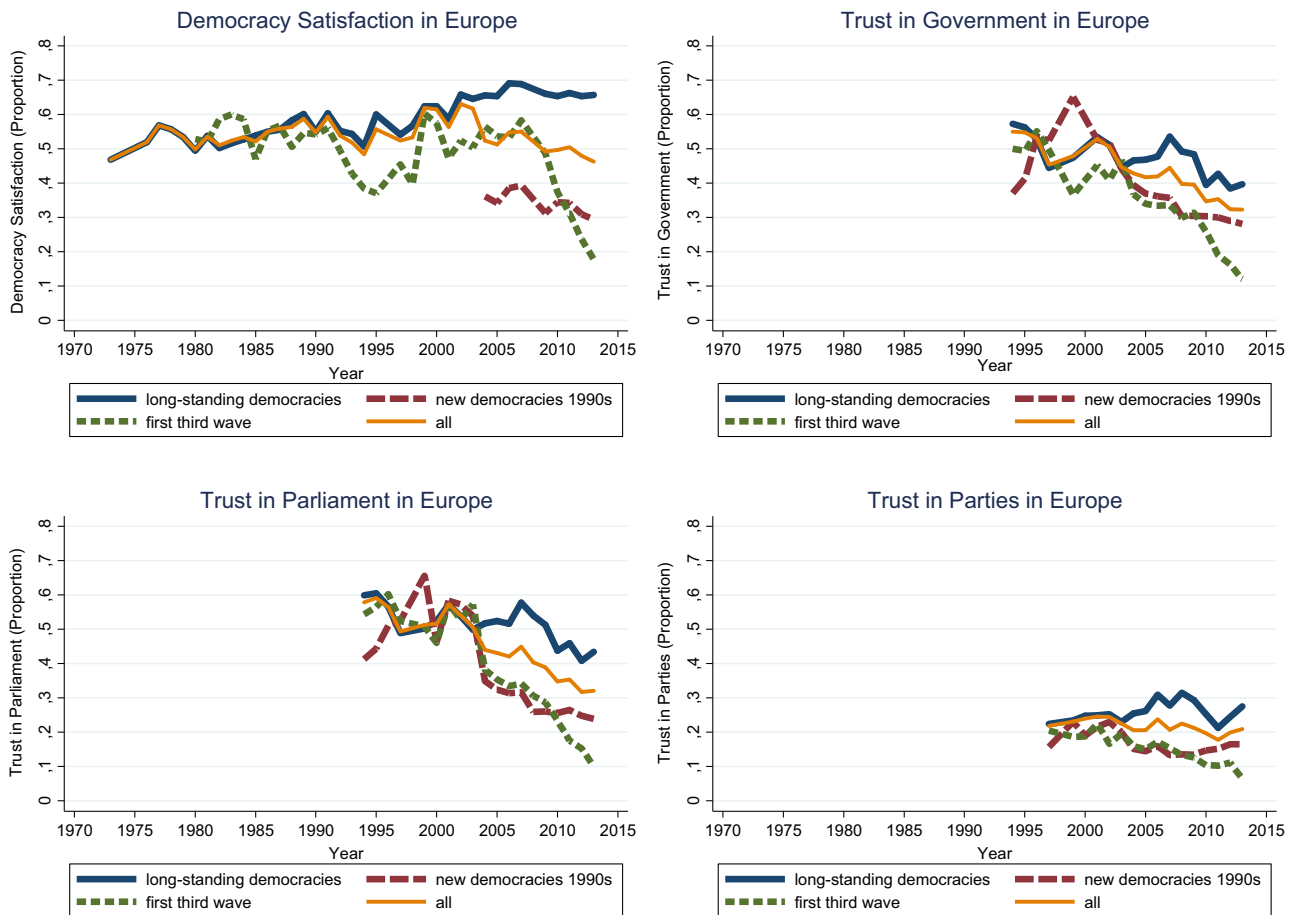
hardly 20 per cent, in comparison with about 30 per cent on average in the new democracies of the 1990s (Figure 1, panel 1).

Regarding trust in government and parliament, the overall tendency is decline. There is a small but significant decrease in western Europe and a very steep one both in the new democracies in central and eastern Europe and in the three first third-wave countries. However, in the new democracies of the 1990s, trust in institutions increased during the first half of the 1990s and has shown a steep fall since the second half of the 1990s. In the South, the decline began in the first half of the 1990s (Figure 1, panels 2 and 3).

Trust in authorities (i.e. political parties) was very low from the beginning of the time series in the first half of the 1990s. There is a slight tendency of increase in the longstanding democracies of the west and a slight tendency of decline in the new democracies of both the first wave and the latter wave (Figure 1, panel 4).

The preliminary conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that in general, longstanding democracies in Europe face much less change and decline in support than the new democracies of the 1990s and the first third wave. Furthermore, there is a negative covariation between support for democracy (increasing) and trust in institutions and authorities (decreasing) in longstanding democracies, indicating no negative spillover from more concrete evaluations like institutions and authorities to the regime level. This is different both in the new democracies in central and eastern Europe and in Portugal, Spain and Greece. The time series for central and eastern Europe regarding satisfaction with democracy is too short to judge a general tendency. Average development in Portugal, Spain and Greece suggests that if there is a spillover from the more concrete (i.e. trust) to the more abstract (i.e. evaluations of regime), it happens with a considerable time lag. Putting the development of political support in the context of the question about a rollback of democracy, one conclusion seems to be obvious: the new democracies are more vulnerable and if this vulnerability concurs with a hard strike such as the economic crisis in Portugal, Spain and Greece, negative development accelerates. A level of satisfaction with the working of democracy below 20 per cent of the population points to a degree of dissatisfaction hardly reached elsewhere. The measures of support explored so far refer to the performance of the democratic system, its institutions and actors. Dissatisfaction with performance does not necessarily mean dissatisfaction with the political order and its values. However, in the long run, there can be a spillover from dissatisfaction with performance to dissatisfaction with the normative basis of the political order. Thus, a crucial question is if support for democratic values is in decline or not.

**Figure 1.** Support for democracy, institutions and authorities in longstanding western European democracies, first third-wave countries (Portugal, Spain, Greece) and the new democracies of central and eastern Europe



Source: Eurobarometer studies. Democracy satisfaction and trust binary coded: positive = 1; negative = 0. Means thus represent proportions. Own calculations. For a list of included countries, see Appendix 1.

## Support for democratic values

The analysis of political support related to performance evaluation tells only half the story of a democratic political culture. The other half regards support for democratic values. The second step in order to check whether there is a rollback of democracy in Europe is thus to investigate democratic values and to ask whether they are in decline – and if they are, how much they are affected by performance.

There is a problem, however, concerning the availability of data on democratic values or support for the rules of the political regime. The availability of data regarding performance-related measures of political support is not very good, but the situation is even worse for support for democratic values. Thus, the time horizon of the investigation is severely limited, as is the scope of values to look at. The European Social Survey (ESS) provides

data on democratic values from 2002 onwards. It runs biannually and the last available survey is from 2012. The ESS covers 31 European countries: 15 longstanding democracies of western Europe; the three first third-wave countries (Portugal, Spain and Greece, although Greece was missing in 2006 and 2012); and 13 new democracies in central and eastern Europe. Not every country has taken part in each wave (for details, see Appendix 1). In every wave, the ESS asks about two values that are fundamental principles of democracy: equality and freedom. The question wording is general rather than political. Specifically, the questions ask about the importance of people being treated equally and having equal opportunities, and about the importance of making one's own decisions and being free.

Support for these two values is very high across countries and time. Thus, there is neither a big difference between time points nor between countries, as Table 2

**Table 2.** Variation of support for democratic values, satisfaction with democracy and trust in government across time and countries

	Maximal differences across countries and time			
	Original scale values		As a percentage of scale range	
	Across time	Across countries	Across time	Across countries
Equality	0.42	0.92	8.4	18.5
Freedom	0.27	0.86	5.5	17.1
Satisfaction with democracy	3.26	7.45	32.6	74.5
Trust in government	2.96	6.60	29.6	66.0

Sources: European Social Surveys 1–6 (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012). For a list of included countries, see Appendix 1.

shows. On the six-point scale, differences across time in two-year intervals starting with 2002 and ending with 2012 do not amount to more than 0.4 or 8 per cent of the scale range. Across countries the largest difference is below one scale point, thus 18 per cent of the scale range at maximum.

In contrast, the variation of the general performance-related support measures 'satisfaction with the working of democracy' and 'trust in government' is much higher. Across time, the maximal difference covers 30 per cent of the scale range or more; across countries, two thirds of the scale range or more. Thus, compared with performance-related support, value-related support for democracy or democratic values is extremely stable and uniform across time and countries. The challenge democracies face is 'only' performance-related and does not spill over to democratic values, at least until now.

Given the limited variation of support for democracy-related values, it is clear that a negative spillover from performance-related to value-related support for democracy has not taken place. A check with regression models clearly confirms this interpretation. There is no effect

regressing support for the values of equality and freedom on performance-related support measures like satisfaction with government, trust in parliament, parties or politicians, and satisfaction with the working of democracy. Bad performance does not spill over to democratic values.

What we find is that dissatisfaction with political authorities and institutions spills over to dissatisfaction with the working of democracy. A negative development of performance-related support for authorities and institutions leads to less performance-related support for democracy. These effects are strong and do not differ much across regions. In contrast to the findings from aggregate data in the last section, at the individual level there is a clear positive relationship between support for authorities and institutions on the one hand and satisfaction with the working of democracy on the other. This is even true for the longstanding democracies of western Europe (Table 3). Negative performance and respective evaluations thus have spillover effects but, as of now, only on performance-related and not on value-related support for democracy.

**Table 3.** Spillover from performance-related support to democratic values and satisfaction with the working of democracy in Europe

	$R^2$ (within) from fixed-effects regressions			
	All	Longstanding democracies	New democracies of the 1990s	First third-wave democracies
Spillover to values				
Equality	0.002	0.004	0.002	0.006
Freedom	0.003	0.004	0.002	0.006
Satisfaction with democracy	0.397	0.394	0.415	0.401

Values regressed on satisfaction with the working of democracy, satisfaction with government, trust in parliament, trust in parties and trust in politicians. Satisfaction with the working of democracy regressed on satisfaction with government, trust in parliament, trust in parties and trust in politicians.

Sources: European Social Survey 1–6, own calculations. For a list of included countries, see Appendix 1.

**Table 4.** Support for values of liberal democracy in Europe, 2012

	Means (0 = lowest support, 10 = highest)		
	Longstanding democracies	New democracies of the 1990s	First third-wave democracies
Free and fair elections	9.0	8.8	8.9
People discuss before decisions	7.3	7.5	7.5
Offer clear alternatives	7.8	8.1	8.2
Opposition free to criticize government	8.3	8.2	8.1
Media provide reliable information	8.7	8.7	8.7
Media free to criticize government	8.1	8.3	8.2
Minority groups are protected	8.5	8.0	8.8
Courts treat everyone equally	9.3	9.1	9.2
Governments explain	8.9	8.8	8.9
Punish government in case of bad job	8.3	8.4	8.8
Take into account EU governments	6.7	6.4	7.4

Source: *European Social Survey 6 (2012)*, own calculations. For a list of included countries, see Appendix 1.

Although the developmental perspective is crucial for answering the question of whether there is a rollback of democracy, a closer inspection of democratic values and the evaluation of democracy may provide more detailed insights into the relationship between performance evaluation and normative support for democracy. Going into values in more detail, however, has the implication of losing the dynamic perspective. Only the European Social Survey 6 (ESS6) of 2012 provides detailed measures regarding the meaning of democracy, i.e. of the importance people attach to different normative aspects of democracy. The ESS asks about 11 values of liberal democracy, as displayed in Table 4. The question wording can be found in Appendix 2.

Table 4 shows that there is extremely high support for almost all normative elements of liberal democracy. The only two items without a support level of eight or higher on an 11-point scale are 'that voters discuss politics with people they know before deciding how to vote' and 'that politicians take into account the views of other European governments before making decisions'. This means that the deliberative and supranational normative elements do not get as much support as classical democratic values like free and fair elections, equality before the law, or a free opposition. Support is high and rather uniform across all countries. It has to be pointed out that despite the findings described earlier on the strong decline in performance-related support in the countries of the first third wave (Portugal, Spain and Greece), there is no indication that the support for the value base of democracy is decreasing in these countries too.

Even though it seems that democratic values have not been much affected by poor performance and the incident decline of performance-related political support – at least until 2012 – it is nonetheless worth checking this. The ESS6 asks not only about support for demo-

cratic values but also about whether the items in the value question apply to a particular country (whether elections are free and fair in one's own country, for example). Thus, it asks for an evaluation of the performance of the respective democracy regarding its normative elements. For inspecting whether there is a relationship between support for values and the satisfaction with the working of democracy on the one hand and performance-related evaluations and satisfaction with the working of democracy on the other, simple correlations have been calculated. The results show a very similar pattern to that found for the values of freedom and equality: there is no relationship between satisfaction with the working of democracy and the values people regard as relevant for democracy. However, there is a clear relationship between performance-related evaluations, i.e. the realization of democratic values and satisfaction with the working of democracy (Table 5).

The correlations do not differ much between the three groups of democracies regarding values and satisfaction with the working of democracy. With the exception of support for the norm of free and fair elections, the other correlations are close to zero. This is different from the evaluations, where the correlations are regularly high except in the first third-wave countries Portugal and Spain (Greece is missing in ESS6).

The analysis shows that support for democratic values is rather stable across time and quite uniform across regions. Looking at 2012 only, the findings point out that support for a whole variety of democratic norms is equal across longstanding and new democracies. Furthermore, there is no indication of a spillover from evaluation-related support measures to support of norms, whereas there is a clear relation between performance-related evaluation measures and

**Table 5.** Correlation between satisfaction with the working of democracy, values of liberal democracy and evaluation of the realization of the values in longstanding democracies, new democracies of the 1990s and the first third-wave democracies

	Correlation between:					
	Support for values of liberal democracy and satisfaction with the working of democracy			Evaluation of the realization of values and satisfaction with the working of democracy		
	Longstanding democracies	New democracies of the 1990s	First third-wave democracies <sup>a</sup>	Longstanding democracies	New democracies of the 1990s	First third-wave democracies <sup>a</sup>
Free and fair elections	0.21	0.06	0.06	0.43	0.48	0.23
People discuss before decisions	0.09	0.03	0.08	0.21	0.28	0.16
Offer clear alternatives	0.08	0.00	0.05	0.29	0.36	0.16
Opposition free to criticize government	0.12	-0.02	0.03	0.28	0.27	0.15
Media provide reliable information	0.07	-0.03	-0.03	0.29	0.34	0.14
Media free to criticize government	0.10	0.00	0.02	0.28	0.35	0.09
Minority groups are protected	0.15	0.02	-0.01	0.36	0.17	0.20
Courts treat everyone equally	0.14	-0.02	0.00	0.48	0.38	0.22
Governments explain	-0.05	-0.09	-0.01	0.33	0.20	0.16
Punish government in case of bad job	0.04	-0.07	-0.01	0.46	0.36	0.23
Take into account EU governments	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.23	0.15	0.17
Mean correlation	0.09	-0.01	0.02	0.33	0.31	0.18

Source: European Social Survey 6 (2012), own calculations. For a list of included countries, see Appendix 1.

<sup>a</sup>Includes only Portugal and Spain (Greece did not run the survey).

satisfaction with the working of democracy. Given the data situation, this conclusion has to be taken tentatively. However, the available data do not suggest that there is a rollback regarding support for the values of democracy.

### Democratic structures in law and in practice

Turning from the subjective perspective of citizens – the crucial perspective regarding the legitimacy of democracy – to the quasi-objective perspective of macro-level data on political structures, the last step in the analysis aims at two aspects: how are democratic principles realized in the formal political order (i.e. in constitution and in law), and how are they realized in practice? To make the difference clear: in any democratic constitution there will be a guarantee of political equality. In practice, however, it may well be that political participation is unequal, i.e. political equality can be distorted by socially induced differences in participation. This section does not deal with micro-level data and orientations of citizens, but with macro-level data on the formal or legal situation regarding a number of democratic functions and their realization in practice.

The data stem from the Democracy Barometer Project, which covers 70 countries and for most countries spans a period from 1990 to 2012. This analysis is limited to European democracies. Data are publicly

available ([www.democracybarometer.org](http://www.democracybarometer.org)). The democracy barometer defines three principles – freedom, equality and democratic control – and nine functions of democracy (three for each principle) as necessary conditions for democracy. Below the level of functions, components differentiate between elements in law and elements in practice. To measure the nine functions, the democracy barometer uses about 100 macro indicators from a variety of sources (Bühlmann et al., 2007, 2011, 2012).

The functions to be realized for the democratic principle of freedom are individual liberties, the rule of law and a democratic public sphere. The principle of democratic control should be guaranteed by free and fair competition, mutual constraints of political institutions (horizontal accountability) and the effective power to govern, allowing the reach and grasp of binding decisions for the whole nation. To realize political equality, transparency, equal participation and good representation must be guaranteed.

In order to check whether there has been any rollback in law and the practice of democracies in Europe, simple regressions over time of the performance of functions in law and practice have been performed, covering the period from 1990 to 2012 annually. If there is a trend, regression coefficients should show consistent direction and significance across the three groups of countries – the longstanding democracies of western Europe, the



new democracies of the 1990s in central and eastern Europe, and the first third-wave countries Portugal, Spain and Greece. As the search is for rollback the coefficients should be negative, indicating a decline in democratic quality.

There are two consistently and significantly positive trends (transparency in law, representation in practice) and one consistently negative trend (the effective power to govern in practice). However, there are a number of significantly negative trends that do not apply to all democracies. Individual liberties in practice are in decline in the longstanding and first third-wave democracies, as is participation in practice in the longstanding democracies and the new democracies in central and eastern Europe. Rule of law in practice is decreasing in the new democracies of the 1990s and the first third-wave countries. Transparency in practice seems to drop everywhere, but the trend is only statistically significant for the first third-wave countries. Altogether there is a significant trend of decline in the quality of democracy in practice in ten instances, of which nine refer to democratic functions in practice. These nine instances are equally distributed among all groups of democracies and affect the three principles – freedom, control and equality – to the same degree (Table 6).

Inspecting the development not in a statistical way but by looking at the figures that represent those functions that are on significant decline in at least two of the three country groups (Figure 2) reveals quite some volatility in democratic quality in practice in contrast to the development of democratic quality in law. In general, negative trends are most pronounced for individual liberties in practice and effective power to govern in practice in the first third-wave democracies and for rule of law in practice and participation in practice in the new democracies in central and eastern Europe.

Democratic quality in practice is generally highest in the longstanding democracies of western Europe, the first third-wave democracies come second (with the exception of participation in practice) and the new democracies of the 1990s show the lowest quality. Differences regarding democratic qualities in law – the institutional dimension – are rather small between the groups of countries with a different length of democratic experience (Figure 2).

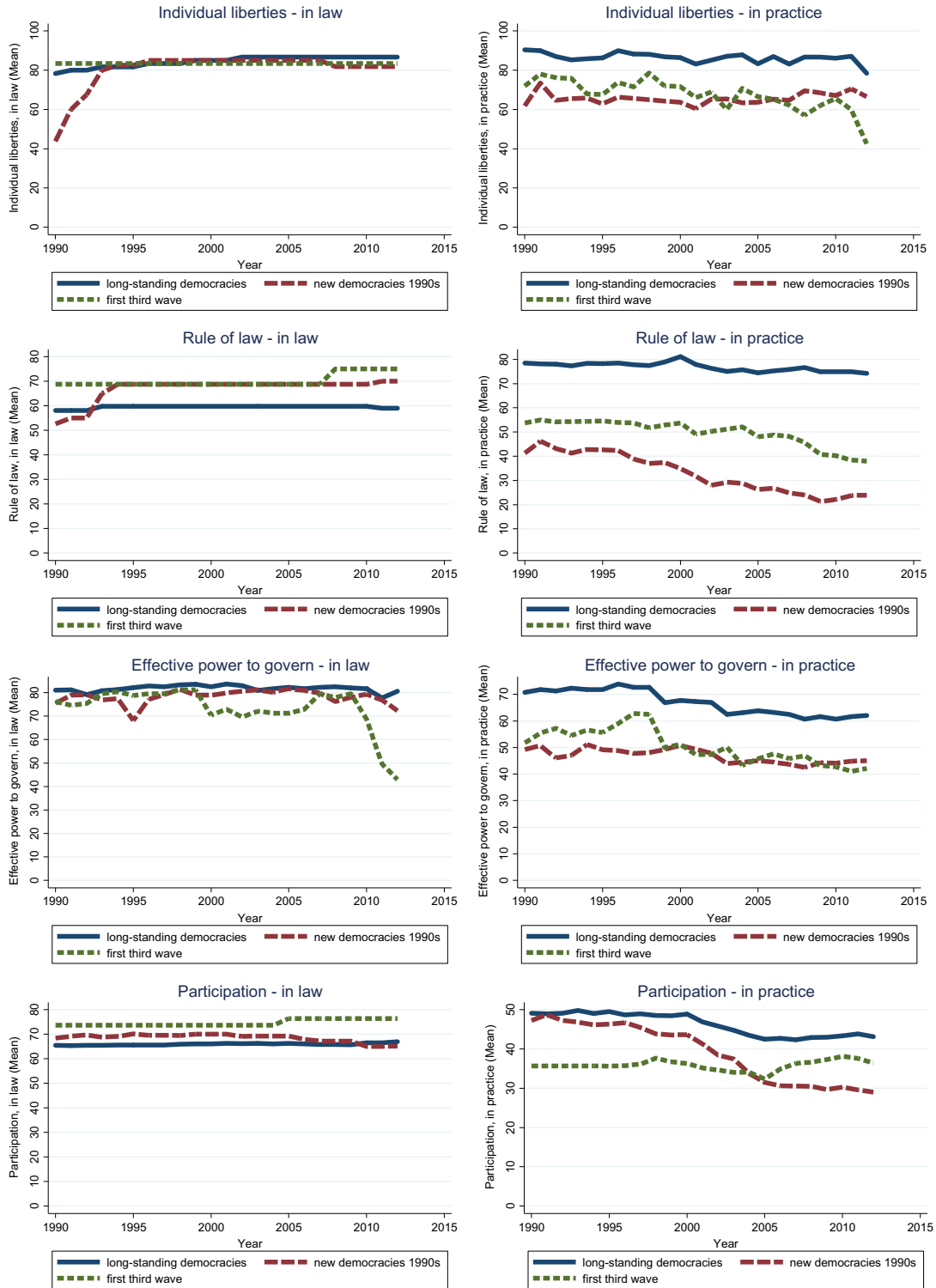
It should be noted that there is only one instance of a negative trend regarding democratic quality in law: effective power to govern in law has decreased in the first third-wave democracies since 2010. The steep

**Table 6.** Democratic functions in law and in practice in Europe

Democracy component	Longstanding democracies		New democracies of the 1990s		First third-wave democracies	
	Regression coefficient B	Significance (p < 0.05)	Regression coefficient B	Significance (p < 0.05)	Regression coefficient B	Significance (p < 0.05)
<b>Freedom</b>						
Individual liberties, in law	0.438	*	0.696	*	0.000	
Individual liberties, in practice	-0.233	*	0.098		-0.921	*
Rule of law, in law	0.176		0.458	*	0.278	
Rule of law, in practice	-0.191		-1.170	*	-0.718	*
Public sphere, in law	0.195		0.749		0.000	
Public sphere, in practice	-0.031		0.006		-0.139	*
<b>Control</b>						
Competition, in law	-0.045		-0.181		0.000	
Competition, in practice	0.316	*	0.051		0.140	
Mutual constraints, in law	0.052		-0.028		0.000	
Mutual constraints, in practice	0.144		0.521	*	0.347	
Effective power to govern, in law	-0.014		0.034		-0.795	*
Effective power to govern, in practice	-0.598	*	-0.292	*	-0.774	*
<b>Equality</b>						
Transparency, in law	1.389	*	2.719	*	0.529	*
Transparency, in practice	-0.004		-0.255		-0.698	*
Participation, in law	0.072		-0.182		0.165	
Participation, in practice	-0.400	*	-1.069	*	0.036	
Representation, in law	0.107		0.086		0.189	
Representation, in practice	0.641	*	0.570	*	0.703	*

Source: Democracy Barometer data, [www.democracybarometer.org](http://www.democracybarometer.org), own calculations.  
For a list of included countries, see Appendix 1.

**Figure 2.** The development of democratic quality in law and in practice for different democratic functions in Europe



Source: Democracy Barometer data ([www.democracybarometer.org](http://www.democracybarometer.org)), own calculations. For a list of included countries, see Appendix 1.

decline is a result of the European crisis regime by the so-called Troika made up of the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Commission (EC) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is affecting national sovereignty.

The analysis in the third part showed several things. First, making a conceptual difference between the quality of democracy in law and in practice is crucial for detecting areas where democracy may be on the rollback. The developments of the quality of formal and legal guarantees and the practice of democratic functions tell different stories. Whereas democratic functions show no decline regarding their formal qualities (with one exception in one country group), there are statistically significant trends of a drop in the quality of functions regarding their practice. Four out of nine functions show trends of decline in the quality of the practice of democracy, affecting all three principles of democracy (freedom, democratic control and equality). The performance of democracy is decreasing, not the formal institutions. In analogy to the findings at the micro level, one may conclude that the norms and values of democracy embedded in institutions do not face descent whereas the performance of democracy does.

## Conclusions

Is there a rollback of democracy or not? In order to answer this question, two dimensions – political culture and political structures or institutions – and two aspects – performance and norms – have been analysed systematically. Using survey data across time and countries, the political cultures of longstanding European democracies, the first third-wave democracies and the new democracies of the 1990s in central and eastern Europe were examined regarding citizens' satisfaction with the performance of authorities, institutions, the working of democracy and support for democratic values. The differentiation into country groups with a different length of democratic experience resulted from the consideration that democracies are more vulnerable the younger they are. A further expectation was that support for values and norms of democracy should be rather persistent, whereas performance-related support should be shown to be more volatile and on decline in times of crisis. Secondly, an analysis building on macro-level measures of the quality of democracies distinguishing between the quality of formal democratic institutions and democratic practice was performed. This distinction mirrors the differentiation in support for values and satisfaction with performance. Formal institutions can be regarded as normative bundles. Formal constitutional provisions, however, do not say a lot about the actual performance of these institutions. The

distinction between performance and norms is relevant because theories of legitimacy and political support suggest that norms are more persistent than performance-based support or the everyday performance of institutions. Values and norms provide a buffer against day-to-day challenges.

Thus, the question of a rollback of democracy is analysed at the micro level of political orientations and at the macro level of regime characteristics. Results show an interesting pattern: negative developments in terms of political culture and political structure only occur at the performance or practice level, not at the level of norms or formal rules. The only exception is the decline in the effective power to govern in the three first third-wave countries Portugal, Spain and Greece since 2010, which is due to the Troika regime during the euro crisis.

The negative development regarding performance-related political support for authorities, institutions and the regime at the micro level and the negative development of the practice of democracy at the macro level can be seen as complementary. If the quality of democratic practice decreases, it is not surprising that the evaluation of the performance of democracy and its actors goes down, too. The crucial question is to which degree the development of the practice of democracy and performance-related support may spill over to the normative dimension, i.e. support for democratic norms, and to the existing formal legal frameworks of democracies. The analysis at the micro level points to the persistence of support for democratic norms. The macro-level analysis does not show a relationship between the formal legal quality of democracy and its practice in this regard.

One has to consider, however, that in the long run negative performance may still have spillover effects, particularly on political culture. In democracies that are performing worse and worse or where citizens keep evaluating the performance negatively over a long time period, the legitimacy of the democratic regime as such may decline. The results here do not deliver evidence that this is already the case. Looking at the findings from a pessimistic perspective, one can argue that the observed time span may just be too short to show spillover from practice to norms. An optimistic view might suggest that a spillover from dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy is unlikely because the normative base of democracy is strongly supported by citizens. Neither generalization can be made without reservations. The nil effect of performance dissatisfaction on values points at one direction, but there are differences in the developments of democracies incident with a different length of democratic experience. Vulnerabilities differ and the persistence of the normative basis may not hold across time and space everywhere.

Results show that on average the older democracies of western Europe are less affected than the first new democracies of the third wave in the South, and the latter are less affected than the youngest democracies of the 1990s in central and eastern Europe. This seems to confirm that the younger a democracy is, the more vulnerable it is. However, the euro crisis shows that this must not always be the case. The first third-wave democracies (Portugal, Spain and Greece) show a steep decline in terms of satisfaction and two democratic qualities since 2010. A severe economic situation like the euro crisis increases the vulnerability of a democracy. The higher this vulnerability, the higher is the likelihood of a rollback of democracy.

A conclusion that can be drawn tentatively from these findings is that the idea of democracy, its norms and its rules are so highly relevant to the people and constitutionally so strongly protected that for the time being any rollback of the normative dimension of democracy seems rather unlikely. This is, however, no reason for a false sense of security. Democracy is a fragile public good: its legitimacy and support cannot persist if it does not perform well. Democratic rights and freedoms must go together with an acceptable performance of political actors and institutions. In this regard, democracy is not in good shape everywhere. Performance-related orientations of citizens and democratic quality in practice show trends suggesting a rollback in the performance dimension of democracy. But democracy provides the means for citizens to replace authorities by 'voting the rascals out'. Together with the strong support for democratic norms, democratic means should provide a very strong buffer against a rollback of democracy as a legitimate and supported political order.

Whether bad performance and the resulting dissatisfaction will spill over negatively to support for democracy as the best available form of government is contingent on the degree of bad performance, the duration of bad performance and the vulnerability of a polity. Time matters: the longer a bad performance lasts and the more recent the democratic experience, the more vulnerable a democracy is. In Europe the signs are alarming. The crisis of economic and political performance has left its strong imprint on the first third-wave democracies in particular. Europe cannot afford for this bad performance to continue if it does not want to increase the likelihood of a rollback of democracy, which might go beyond dissatisfaction and threaten democratic values and norms.

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*Section numbering: 2, 'The performance of democracy in Europe'; 3, 'Support for democratic values'; 4, 'Democratic structures in law and in practice'.*

*EB, Standard and East Eurobarometer data cumulated (1970–2013, ZA3521 and extensions).*

*ESS6, European Social Survey, round 6 (2012), [www.european-socialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=6](http://www.european-socialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=6).*

*ESS1–6, European Social Survey, every second year, round 1 in 2002, [www.europeansocialsurvey.org/downloadwizard/](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/downloadwizard/).*

*DB, Democracy Barometer data (1990–2012), [www.democracybarometer.org](http://www.democracybarometer.org).*

## Appendix 1. Data sets used and countries available for analysis

Used in section	2 EB	3 ESS6	3 ESS1–6	4 DB
<i>Longstanding democracies</i>				
Austria	x		1–3	x
Belgium	x	x	1–6	x
Cyprus	x	x	3–6	x
Denmark	x	x	1–6	x
Finland	x	x	1–6	x
France	x	x	1–6	x
Germany	x	x	1–6	x
Iceland	x	x	6	x
Ireland	x	x	1–6	x
Italy	x	x	1, 2, 6	x
Luxembourg	x		1–2	x
Netherlands	x	x	1–6	x
Malta	x			x
Norway	x	x	1–6	x
Sweden	x	x	1–6	x
United Kingdom	x	x	1–6	x
<i>First third-wave democracies, 1970s</i>				
Greece	x		1, 2, 4, 5	x
Portugal	x	x	1–6	x
Spain	x	x	1–6	x
<i>New democracies of the 1990s</i>				
Albania		x		x
Bulgaria	x	x	3–6	x
Croatia	x		4,5	x
Czech Republic	x	x	1, 2, 4–6	x
Estonia	x	x	2–6	x
Hungary	x	x	1–6	x
Kosovo		x	6	x
Latvia	x		3, 4	x
Lithuania	x	x	4–6	x
Macedonia	x			x
Montenegro	x			x
Poland	x	x	1–6	x
Serbia	x			x
Slovakia	x	x	2–6	x
Slovenia	x	x	1–6	x
Turkey	x		2, 4	x
Ukraine		x	2–6	x

## Appendix 2. Elements of liberal democracy

Question wording, European Social Survey 2013:

First, however, I want you to think instead about how important you think different things are for democracy in general. There are no right or wrong answers so please just tell me what you think.

... that national elections are free and fair?

... that voters discuss politics with people they know before deciding how to vote?

... that different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another?

... that opposition parties are free to criticize the government?

... that the media are free to criticize the government?

... that the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government?

... that the rights of minority groups are protected?

... that the courts treat everyone the same?

... that governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job?

... that the government explains its decisions to voters?

... that politicians take into account the views of other European governments before making decisions?

On an 11-point scale, respondents could indicate the relevance of the particular element for democracy, where 0 = 'Not at all important for democracy in general' and 10 = 'Extremely important for democracy in general'.

Question for evaluation: 'Using this card, please tell me to what extent you think each of the following statements applies in [country]. 0 means you think the statement does not apply at all and 10 means you think it applies completely'. Same list of items as for values.