Democracy
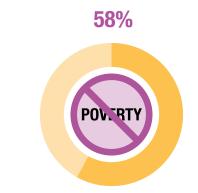## Critical consensus? Britain's expectations and evaluations of democracy

Surveys of public opinion frequently show that the British public think it is important to live in a democracy and are agreed that, although it may have its problems, democracy is better than any other form of government. But what does this actually mean in practice? Is there a consensus about what living in a democracy should involve? How far do people think the political system in Britain currently delivers what they expect from a democracy?

High expectations

People expect a lot from democracy. There is broad consensus among the British public that democracy, in addition to guaranteeing free and fair competitive elections and protecting civil liberties, should protect people against poverty and involve citizens in decision-making.

8.9/10   **8.8**/10   **8.7**/10

58%

Among the things people consider most important in a democracy are that the courts treat everyone equally (average importance rating of 8.9 out of 10), that national elections are free and fair (8.8 out of 10) and that the government explains its decisions to voters (8.7 out of 10).

A majority of people – 58% – think that it is extremely important for democracy in general that the government protects all citizens against poverty, rating this at least 9 out of 10.

Democratic deficit

A sizeable minority of people think that the current political system fails to deliver what they expect from democracy i.e. they perceive there to be a democratic deficit in Britain.

24%

18%

A quarter of people (24%) are dissatisfied with how well the government engages with the public, believing it to be extremely important that the government explains its decisions to voters but feeling that this does not happen in Britain.

People also have concerns about key democratic institutions such as the judiciary; almost one in five people (18%) think that it is extremely important in a democracy for the courts to treat everyone equally but feel that this does not happen in Britain.

Introduction

Authors

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British national identity is commonly seen, by politicians and the public alike, as being synonymous with democracy and democratic values. Echoing earlier speeches on Britishness made by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, in 2011 David Cameron addressed the need for Britain to develop a clear sense of shared national identity, and listed democracy and the rule of law as two of the key values that should be part of this shared identity.[1] As the National Identity chapter, by Zsolt Kiss and Alison Park, describes most people (85 per cent) think that having respect for Britain's political institutions and laws is very or fairly important for being truly British. People are more likely to consider this as being important than having been born in Britain (74 per cent) and much more likely to consider it as being important than having British ancestry (51 per cent).

But what do people actually mean when they refer to Britain as a democracy or say that it is important for its citizens to adhere to democratic values? To what extent do people have a shared vision of the essential features of a democratic system or agree on the extent to which these features are currently being realised in Britain?

An appreciation of the public's understanding and evaluations of democracy is important not only in order to understand British identity but also to ensure the continued health and vitality of the political system itself. Unless people care about democracy and are committed to democratic values, these values may come under strain, especially in times of war or in the face of economic, environmental or other pressures (Coggan, 2013). If people have high expectations of democracy but feel that the current system fails to live up to these expectations, the perceived 'democratic deficit' may undermine the legitimacy of the system and erode public support. Even in established democracies such as Britain continued dissatisfaction with how the process functions may alienate people from the political process, posing a threat to the representativeness of democracy as well as undermining the belief in democracy itself (Stoker, 2006; Birdwell et al., 2013).

An appreciation of the public's understanding and evaluations of democracy is important not only in order to understand British identity but also to ensure the continued health and vitality of the political system itself

The European Social Survey provides a unique opportunity to understand more about what it is that the public understands by and wants from democracy.[2] Whereas previous research on public attitudes to democracy has largely been restricted to asking people about their commitment to or evaluations of democracy in general, the 2012/13 European Social Survey contains a substantial battery of questions which ask respondents for their attitudes towards specific aspects of the democratic system including its procedures, institutions and outcomes (Kriesi et al., 2012).

In this chapter we use European Social Survey data to try to isolate exactly what it is about living in a democracy that people in Britain consider to be important. We examine the depth and breadth of their commitment to different aspects of democracy, and the extent to which there is consensus across different groups in society. The chapter also examines the extent to which people believe that the features they consider to be important in a democracy apply in Britain today, and thus whether or not there is a perceived 'democratic deficit' among the British public. Finally, we consider the potential consequences of any perceived deficit for future political engagement. Is it the case that dissatisfaction with democratic performance is leading people to become disillusioned with and disengage from politics? Or, as Pippa Norris has argued, is the democratic deficit part of a healthy democracy in which "critical citizens" continue to engage with and challenge the political system to improve (Norris, 1999; 2011)?

Answers to these questions may point to key areas on which policy makers seeking to maintain confidence in British democracy and re-engage with a disillusioned electorate in the run up to the 2015 general election should focus their attention. They are also pertinent to current discussions about the future of British democracy including the debate surrounding Scottish independence and the future of Britain in Europe, both issues that will or are likely to be decided by referendum.

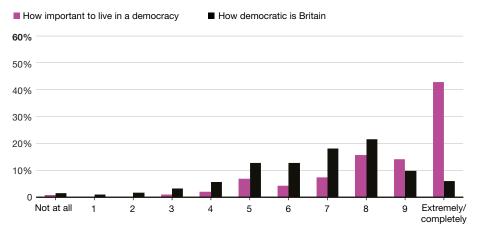## What do British people think of democracy?

The prevailing wisdom regarding public attitudes to democracy is that the public are committed to the ideal of democracy and consider it important to live in a democracy, even though they may be dissatisfied with the way democracy works in practice (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). The 2008 European Values Study found that 88 per cent of people in Britain agreed that "A democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government".[3] European Social Survey data support this picture. Respondents were asked to respond to the following questions, each time using an 11-point scale from 0 to 10, shown to them on a card:

How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? (0 was labelled 'not at all important' and 10 as 'extremely important')

How democratic do you think Britain is overall? (0 was labelled 'not at all democratic' and 10 as 'completely democratic')

Figure 1.1 below clearly shows that the vast majority of people in Britain think that it is important to live in a country that is governed democratically. Over four out of five people (84 per cent) give an answer of six out of 10 or above, and three in five people (57 per cent) give an answer of nine or ten i.e. they rate living in a democracy as being extremely important. The average (mean) score across all the responses is 8.4 out of 10. However, people are more ambivalent in their assessment of whether Britain is democratic. Britain may officially be recognised as a democracy according to objective measures such as the Freedom House Index (Freedom House, 2014). However, a significant minority of people (26 per cent) do not rate Britain higher than the mid-point of five on the democracy scale and the average rating is only 6.6 out of 10.

Figure 1.1 Attitudes towards democracy, in Britain

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13
The data on which Figure 1.1 is based can be found at Table A.3 in the appendix to this chapter. Table A.3 uses rounded data. Figure 1.1 uses unrounded data

> The public are committed to the ideal of democracy and consider it important to live in a democracy, even though they may be dissatisfied with the way democracy works in practice

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Britain is somewhere in the middle, rating democracy lower on average than Scandinavia and Germany but higher than much of southern and eastern Europe

This picture is mirrored across the European countries for which European Social Survey data are available. In all countries shown in Table 1.1 – with the important exception of Russia – people living in each country consider it very important to live in a democracy, assigning an average score greater than seven out of 10.[4] However, in many cases, people provide more lukewarm evaluations of how democratic their country is. The importance attached to living in a democracy – and evaluations of the current system – are highest in Scandinavia. The mismatch between how important it is to live in a democracy and how democratic the country actually is is greatest in some of the newer democracies of central and eastern Europe such as Slovenia and Bulgaria. Britain is somewhere in the middle, rating democracy lower on average than Scandinavia and Germany but higher than much of southern and eastern Europe.

Table 1.1 Attitudes towards democracy, by country (mean score out of 10)

	How important to live in democracy? (0–10)	How democratic is country? (0–10)	Difference (important – evaluation)	Min weighted base	Min unweighted base
Cyprus	9.5	6.0	3.5	1086	1085
Denmark	9.4	8.2	1.3	1625	1625
Sweden	9.3	7.8	1.6	1822	1822
Norway	9.3	7.7	1.6	1610	1610
Iceland	9.3	6.8	2.5	732	733
Israel	9.2	7.0	2.3	2474	2473
Switzerland	9.0	8.1	1.0	1476	1476
Germany	9.0	7.2	1.9	2929	2932
Finland	8.9	7.4	1.5	2152	2152
Kosovo	8.8	4.8	4.0	1233	1217
Hungary	8.5	5.3	3.3	1912	1912
Bulgaria	8.5	4.0	4.4	2156	2150
Netherlands	8.4	6.9	1.5	1805	1800
Spain	8.4	5.5	2.9	1829	1829
Ireland	8.4	6.6	1.8	2525	2525
Britain	**8.4**	**6.6**	**1.8**	**2066**	**2070**
Belgium	8.2	6.6	1.6	1860	1860
Slovenia	8.2	4.6	3.5	1218	1217
Poland	8.2	5.9	2.3	1819	1822
Slovakia	8.2	5.7	2.5	1828	1823
Portugal	8.1	5.9	2.2	2084	2083
Estonia	8.0	5.7	2.3	2291	2291
Czech Republic	7.9	6.2	1.7	1949	1950
Russia	6.6	4.4	2.2	2319	2320

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13

Examining responses to these two broad questions however can tell us only so much about public attitudes to democracy. It is relatively easy for people to give the socially desirable positive response to a one-off survey question asking whether they consider it important to live in a democracy. But what does this tell us about the extent of their commitment to democracy in practice? Just because people say that it is important to them to live in a democracy, it does not necessarily guarantee their acceptance of liberal democratic values (Welzel

and Klingemann, 2007) or provide an insight into what they expect their role as citizens in a democracy to be (Webb, 2013). Similarly, knowing that people are dissatisfied with the political system is not particularly informative in the absence of information about why they are dissatisfied or how they think the situation might be improved. The remainder of this chapter provides a more detailed look at attitudes to democracy in Britain.

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Knowing that people are dissatisfied with the political system is not particularly informative in the absence of information about why they are dissatisfied

What are people's specific expectations of democracy?

Democracy can mean different things to different people (Dahl, 1998; Diamond, 2003). It is generally accepted that free and fair competitive elections which can be used to hold the government accountable are an essential feature of any democratic system (Schumpeter, 1976). In addition, established European democracies are assumed to be 'liberal' democracies based on the rule of law and which guarantee certain rights and freedoms for their citizens such as free expression and the protection of minority groups (Dalton et al., 2007). However, there are other aspects of democracy over which there is more debate. For example, to what extent should democracy be required to achieve certain material outcomes for its citizens? People also hold differing opinions over the public's role in a representative democracy – i.e. how far policy should be responsive to public opinion and/or whether the public should have a say in important political decisions – and the extent to which there should be a more participatory model of direct democracy (Webb, 2013).

We can use the European Social Survey to identify how far the British public shares a particular liberal democratic view of democracy. We can also assess the extent of public support for other potential features of democracy including the achievement of certain social outcomes or the wider involvement of members of the public in political decision-making. Respondents were asked to say how important they thought different things were "for democracy in general" (original emphasis). (They were told that they would be asked later about their views on how democracy was working in Britain.)[5] They answered using an 11-point scale, where 0 signified that they thought something was "not at all important for democracy in general" and 10 signified they thought it was "extremely important for democracy in general".

Table 1.2 summarises people's expectations of what democracy should deliver. In the first column, we show the average (mean) importance assigned to each aspect of democracy (from a maximum score of 10). The second column shows the variance in these averages. This provides a measure of how much agreement there is among the population as to whether or not something is important for democracy: the lower the variance the greater the degree of consensus. The third column shows the percentage of people who consider each aspect as being extremely important for democracy i.e. rate it nine or ten on a 0 to 10 scale. The items in the table have been organised into four groups according to whether they are associated primarily with the electoral component of democracy, principles of liberal democracy, outcomes associated with social democracy or features of a participatory democracy.[6]

Table 1.2 Expectations of democracy, in Britain[7]

How important is it for democracy in general that …	Mean score (0–10)	Variance in mean score	% saying extremely important (i.e. scoring 9 or 10)
Electoral democracy			
… national elections are free and fair	8.8	3.1	65
… governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	8.2	4.2	49
… opposition parties are free to criticise the government	8.1	4.0	47
… different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	7.6	4.6	34
Liberal democracy			
… the courts treat everyone the same	8.9	3.2	71
… the courts able to stop the government acting beyond its authority	8.6	3.7	58
… the rights of minority groups are protected	7.9	4.5	44
… the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government	8.2	4.8	53
… the media are free to criticise the government	7.8	5.0	44
Social democracy			
… the government protects all citizens against poverty	8.4	4.4	58
… the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	7.4	5.8	36
Participatory democracy			
… the government explains its decisions to voters	8.7	3.6	64
… citizens have the final say on the most important issues by referendum	8.1	4.3	47

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13

All of the aspects of democracy asked about are considered important and given an average rating of between seven and nine out of ten on the original 11-point scale

It is clear that the British public demands a lot of different things from democracy. All of the aspects of democracy asked about are considered important and given an average rating of between seven and nine out of ten on the original 11-point scale. People attach importance to essential procedural features of democracy such as national elections which are free and fair (average importance rating 8.8) as well as equal treatment by the courts (8.9) and legal constraints on government authority (8.6).[8] However, there is also widespread support for the idea that any democracy has a commitment to achieve certain outcomes for its citizens; including the government protecting all its citizens against poverty (an average score of 8.4). People also strongly believe that they should be involved in the political process; with people considering it important that the government explains its decisions to voters (average score 8.7) and that citizens should have the final say in important decisions via referendums (8.1). This evidence is consistent with previous analysis of British Social Attitudes data which found strong support for constitutional reforms which would provide for more direct democracy (Curtice and Seyd, 2012).

The variance levels in the second column of Table 1.2 show that there is most public consensus around the importance of key procedural aspects of democracy such as there being free and fair elections (variance = 3.1) or the courts treating everyone equally (3.2). There is also widespread support for the importance of governments explaining decisions to voters (3.6). Opinion is more divided on other things including whether the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels (variance = 5.8) reflecting ongoing political divisions between those on the left and the right regarding the importance of redistribution as a means of promoting prosperity.

Table 1.2 also indicates that, while the public generally recognise that liberal democratic ideals such as freedom of speech are important for democracy; absolute commitment to these ideals is not universal. For example, fewer than half of people (44 per cent) think that it is extremely important for democracy that the media is free to criticise the government or that the rights of minorities are protected. This may in part reflect the fact that many people in Britain today take these basic rights for granted. However, in the absence of strong public support, such values remain vulnerable to being undermined even in an established democracy such as Britain.
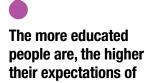
How do people vary in their expectations of democracy?

Having considered what the British public as a whole expect from democracy, we now examine whether and how the strength of people's commitment to democracy and the nature of their priorities vary across different groups in society. Which groups have particularly high expectations of democracy? Are there certain groups with a weaker commitment to democracy which might place them at risk of disengaging from the democratic process?

What role does education play?

There has been a trend in many established democracies, including Britain, towards growing dissatisfaction with democracy (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). Dalton (2004) argues that one reason for this trend may be that an increasingly educated and well-informed public now has higher expectations of what democracy can and should entail. These rising expectations have led to the emergence of "critical citizens" (Norris, 1999) whose dissatisfaction with the political system does not reflect disillusionment with democracy per se but rather a desire to reform the current political system so that it becomes even more democratic.

The more educated people are, the higher their expectations of democracy tend to be

Table 1.3 provides evidence that the more educated people are, the higher their expectations of democracy tend to be. Reporting on the same issues as in Table 1.2, Table 1.3 shows the average importance score (out of 10) of people with no qualifications; those with GCSE or A level qualifications (or equivalent); and those educated to degree level or above. Most aspects of democracy asked about in the European Social Survey are rated as being more important by those educated to degree level or above.[9] There are three exceptions to this. The expectation that governments should take measures to reduce differences in income levels is seen as being more important by those educated below degree level. Also, citizens having the final say in referendums and punishing governing parties in elections when they have done a bad job both receive similarly strong support across all educational groups. The expectations gap between the more

and less educated is largest with respect to the importance attached to the broad principles underpinning liberal democracy such as freedom of expression and equality before the law.

However, while expectations of democracy are generally significantly lower among those with no qualifications compared to those educated to degree level this is not to say that those with no qualifications do not have high or wide-ranging expectations of democracy. Even among the least educated group, all aspects of democracy are rated important with scores, on average, of at least seven on the importance scale. Furthermore, ordering the different elements of democracy based on the average score assigned reveals similar rankings across the different educational groups: all three groups, for instance, rate free and fair elections, courts treating everyone equally and government explaining its decisions to voters as among the most important things for democracy.

Table 1.3 Expectations of democracy, in Britain, by highest level of education

How important is it for democracy in general that …	No qualifications Mean importance (0–10)	GCSE or A level Mean importance (0–10)	Degree Mean importance (0–10)	Diff degree vs. no quals
Electoral democracy				
… national elections are free and fair	**8.1**	**8.6**	**9.5**	**1.34**
… governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	8.2	8.2	8.2	0.04
… opposition parties are free to criticise the government	**7.8**	**7.8**	**8.8**	**1.05**
… different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	**7.1**	**7.5**	**8.0**	**0.88**
Liberal democracy				
… the courts treat everyone the same	**8.3**	**8.9**	**9.4**	**1.05**
… the courts able to stop the government acting beyond its authority	**8.0**	**8.6**	**8.9**	**0.92**
… the rights of minority groups are protected	**7.2**	**7.8**	**8.8**	**1.54**
… the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government	**7.6**	**8.0**	**8.9**	**1.25**
… the media are free to criticise the government	**7.5**	**7.6**	**8.5**	**1.05**
Social democracy				
… the government protects all citizens against poverty	**8.1**	**8.4**	**8.6**	**0.52**
… the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	**7.4**	**7.6**	**7.0**	**-0.40**
Participatory democracy				
… the government explains its decisions to voters	**8.1**	**8.7**	**9.0**	**0.84**
… citizens have the final say on the most important issues by referendum	7.8	8.2	7.9	0.07
Min weighted base	*390*	*847*	*424*	
Min unweighted base	*437*	*812*	*415*	

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13
Items where figures are shown in bold are ones where the difference in expectations between those with a degree and those with no formal educational qualifications is statistically significant at the 95% level

Are young people committed to democracy?

Levels of political engagement are particularly low among young people. Turnout among 18 to 24 year olds in the 2010 general election was only 45 per cent compared with 69 per cent among the population as a whole (Lee and Young, 2013). Young people are less likely to be interested in politics or feel a duty to vote (Butt and Curtice, 2010). Is this political apathy also reflected in a weaker commitment to democracy among young people?

Table 1.4 shows that young people under 25 attach less importance to some aspects of democracy compared with older age groups. For example, they attach less importance to opposition parties or the media being free to criticise the government or to the media providing citizens with reliable information. On the basis of data collected at just one point in time it is impossible to know whether this represents a generational shift in attitudes, with young people today perhaps being more inclined to take democratic rights and freedoms for granted compared with previous generations, or whether becoming politically aware and recognising the value of democracy is simply something that comes with age. Previous studies of political attitudes among young people suggest that both factors may be at work (Lee and Young, 2013).

It is important, however, not to overstate the extent of young people's apathy towards democracy. They generally have relatively high expectations of democracy, rating all items seven or higher on the importance scale, and their expectations are similar in several respects to those of other age groups. For example, like the rest of the population, young people expect citizens to be involved in the democratic process, seeing it as very important that governments explain their decisions to voters and that citizens have the final say on important issues via referendums.[10]

Young people under 25 attach less importance to some aspects of democracy compared with older age groups

Table 1.4 Expectations of democracy, in Britain, by age

How important is it for democracy in general that …	Aged <25 Mean importance (0–10)	Aged 25+ Mean importance (0–10)	Diff <25 vs. 25+
Electoral democracy			
… national elections are free and fair	**8.5**	**8.8**	**-0.33**
… governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	**7.6**	**8.3**	**-0.61**
… opposition parties are free to criticise the government	**7.3**	**8.2**	**-0.90**
… different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	7.5	7.6	-0.06
Liberal democracy			
… the courts treat everyone the same	**8.6**	**9.0**	**-0.34**
… the courts able to stop the government acting beyond its authority	**8.3**	**8.6**	**-0.32**
… the rights of minority groups are protected	7.8	7.9	-0.09
… the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government	**7.6**	**8.2**	**-0.58**
… the media are free to criticise the government	**7.1**	**7.9**	**-0.85**
Social democracy			
… the government protects all citizens against poverty	**8.2**	**8.5**	**-0.29**
… the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	**7.1**	**7.5**	**-0.34**
Participatory democracy			
… the government explains its decisions to voters	8.5	8.7	-0.24
… citizens have the final say on the most important issues by referendum	8.0	8.1	-0.16
Min weighted base	*247*	*1777*	
Min unweighted base	*172*	*1855*	

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13
Items where figures are shown in bold are ones where the difference in expectations between those under 25 and those 25 and above is statistically significant at the 95% level

Is there a left-right divide in expectations?

Given that policy makers have the potential to shape the nature of democracy through constitutional reform it is worth considering the extent to which there is consensus across the political spectrum regarding the essential attributes of democracy, or whether people on different sides of the political divide prioritise different things. Consistent with the strong association between left-wing ideology and support for redistribution and welfare provision (Jacoby, 1994), we might expect those on the left to attach more importance to social justice. People placing themselves on the right of the political spectrum have traditionally held more authoritarian views and tended to be more socially conservative (Kitschelt, 1994). This may mean that they attach less importance to people having the freedom to challenge authority or the protection of minority rights.

Those on the left demonstrate, on average, a stronger commitment to liberal values including freedom of expression for the press and opposition parties as well as protecting the rights of minority groups

Table 1.5 compares the expectations of individuals who place themselves on either the left or the right of the political spectrum.[11] There is a great deal of consensus across the political divide with both groups attaching similarly high importance to aspects of democracy including the role of the courts, the need for free and fair elections, the government explaining its decisions to voters and citizens having the final say via referendums. However, as predicted, there are also differences between those on the left and the right. Those on the left demonstrate, on average, a stronger commitment to liberal values including freedom of expression for the press and opposition parties as well as protecting the rights of minority groups. Those on the left also rate the achievement of social outcomes – particularly taking steps to reduce differences in income levels – as being more important than those on the right. It is notable though that even those placing themselves on the right of the political spectrum see protecting citizens against poverty as important, scoring above eight on the importance scale. This emphasises the importance that the public in general attaches to a democratic political system which looks after the basic material needs of its citizens. Of course, those on the left and right may disagree on the best means to achieve this including, for example, the importance they each attach to income redistribution.

Table 1.5 Expectations of democracy, in Britain, by self-reported political orientation

How important is it for democracy in general that …	Left	Right	Diff left vs. right
	Mean importance (0–10)	Mean importance (0–10)	
Electoral democracy			
… national elections are free and fair	9.0	9.1	-0.12
… governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	8.4	8.2	0.17
… opposition parties are free to criticise the government	**8.6**	**8.3**	**0.32**
… different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	7.9	7.7	0.17
Liberal democracy			
… the courts treat everyone the same	9.1	9.1	-0.02
… the courts able to stop the government acting beyond its authority	8.7	8.5	0.20
… the rights of minority groups are protected	**8.5**	**7.9**	**0.57**
… the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government	8.5	8.3	0.13
… the media are free to criticise the government	**8.5**	**7.9**	**0.51**
Social democracy			
… the government protects all citizens against poverty	**8.7**	**8.4**	**0.36**
… the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	**7.8**	**7.0**	**0.80**
Participatory democracy			
… the government explains its decisions to voters	8.9	8.8	0.08
… citizens have the final say on the most important issues by referendum	8.0	8.1	-0.15
Min weighted base	*458*	*503*	
Min unweighted base	*469*	*523*	

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13
Items where figures are shown in bold are ones where the difference in expectations between those placing themselves on the left and those placing themselves on the right is statistically significant at the 95% level

Does the current political system meet people's expectations?

As well as asking respondents how important they consider different things to be for democracy in general, the European Social Survey then goes on to ask respondents to rate how they think democracy is working in Britain today. Respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they think each of the things listed in Table 1.2 actually applies in Britain.[12] They answered using an 11-pont scale with 0 signifying that they think it does not apply to Britain at all and 10 indicating that the respondent thinks it applies completely.[13]

Table 1.6 summarises people's evaluations of democracy in Britain. In the first column, we show the average (mean) evaluation given to each aspect of democracy (from a maximum score of 10). The second column shows the variance in these averages. The third column shows the percentage of people who consider that each aspect of democracy does not apply in Britain i.e. rate it less than five on a 0 to 10 scale.

There is a clear consensus that some key features of democracy do apply in Britain – for example that elections in Britain are free and fair (average evaluation = 8.2) and that opposition parties and the media are free to criticize the government (7.8 and 7.7). However, evaluations of other aspects of democracy are decidedly more mixed. This is particularly true as regards people's evaluations of how far democracy in Britain serves to involve its citizens in decision-making or ensure the material well-being of its citizens. Over one in three people (36 per cent) believe that the government in Britain does not explain its decisions to voters – rating this aspect below the mid-point of five on the evaluation scale and nearly two in five people (38 per cent) believe that the government does not protect its citizens from poverty.

36%

believe that the government in Britain does not explain its decisions to voters

Table 1.6 Evaluations of democracy, in Britain[14]

To what extent does it apply in Britain that …	Mean score (0–10)	Variance in mean score	% saying does not apply (i.e. scoring <5)
Electoral democracy			
… national elections are free and fair	8.2	3.8	4
… governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	6.1	7.7	25
… opposition parties are free to criticise the government	7.8	4.3	6
… different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	5.9	6.0	23
Liberal democracy			
… the courts treat everyone the same	6.3	8.0	25
… the rights of minority groups are protected	6.8	4.6	12
… the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government	5.9	6.9	27
… the media are free to criticise the government	7.7	4.8	8
Social democracy			
… the government protects all citizens against poverty	5.3	8.0	38
… the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	4.9	6.9	39
Participatory democracy			
… the government explains its decisions to voters	5.3	7.3	36
… citizens have the final say on the most important issues by referendum	5.5	9.4	33

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13

By comparing people's evaluations of democracy in Britain with their expectations regarding democracy in general, we can see how far the performance of the current political system matches – or fails to match up to – what the public think democracy should deliver. To what extent do people perceive a democratic deficit in Britain i.e. do people feel that the current system is failing to live up to their high expectations? Is there any evidence of a perceived democratic surplus i.e. do people feel that some democratic rights and freedoms have been extended too far and should be scaled back?

People in fact perceive a significant democratic deficit in a number of areas

Table 1.7 presents a measure of the perceived democratic deficit or surplus on each item. It measures the difference in the extent to which the respondent thinks something applies in Britain and how important they consider that thing to be for democracy in general. Assuming that people will be more concerned by a failure to deliver something they consider to be particularly important, differences are weighted according to the importance attached to that item, with more important items generating a proportionally bigger deficit/surplus. The resulting measure ranges from -1 to +1 with negative scores indicating that there is a perceived democratic deficit and positive scores a surplus.[15] There is no evidence that people want less democracy than the British political system currently delivers; the average score on each items is less than 0. People in fact perceive a significant democratic deficit in a number of areas including equal treatment by the courts and the government's ability to achieve social outcomes or involve citizens sufficiently in decision-making.
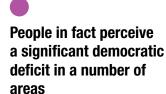
Table 1.7 Perceived democratic deficit, in Britain[16]

	Mean deficit/ surplus (-1 to 1)	% saying feature extremely important but does not apply in Britain
Electoral democracy		
… national elections are free and fair	-0.06	1
… governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	-0.19	12
… opposition parties are free to criticise the government	-0.04	2
… different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	-0.16	9
Liberal democracy		
… the courts treat everyone the same	-0.25	18
… the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government	-0.22	15
… the media are free to criticise the government	-0.04	2
… the rights of minority groups are protected	-0.12	4
Social democracy		
… the government protects all citizens against poverty	-0.30	24
… the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	-0.24	16
Participatory democracy		
… the government explains its decisions to voters	-0.32	24
… citizens have the final say on the most important issues by referendum	-0.24	17

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13

Table 1.7 also shows the proportion of people who perceived there to be a democratic deficit i.e. who rate an item as being extremely important for democracy (scoring it nine or ten on the importance scale) but do not think it applies in Britain (evaluating it less than five on the 0 to 10 evaluation scale). Nearly one in five people (18 per cent) feel that the courts do not live up to their expectations in terms of treating everyone equally[17] and around one in seven (15 per cent) perceive a deficit in terms of the quality of the information the media provide.

There is also a substantial group of people who perceive there to be a democratic deficit in terms of the delivery of material outcomes; nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of people think both that it is extremely important in a democracy for the government to protect its citizens against poverty and that this does not apply in Britain. Similarly, there is a perceived deficit in terms of how well the government communicates with voters; 24 per cent of people think that it is extremely important that the government explains its decisions to voters but that this does not apply, while 17 per cent think it is extremely important that citizens have the final say in key decisions via referendums but that this does not apply sufficiently in Britain.

1 in 5

people (18 per cent) feel that the courts do not live up to their expectations in terms of treating everyone equally

What are the implications of a democratic deficit for political engagement?

How serious is the perceived democratic deficit for the long-term health of democracy in Britain? One way in which to examine this issue is to look at the association between the public's attitudes towards democracy and their levels of political engagement. Are dissatisfied democrats nevertheless participating in the democratic process as 'critical citizens' or is their dissatisfaction expressed via apathy and disengagement?

To establish whether there is an association between people's perceptions of a democratic deficit and their propensity to participate politically, we need to discount the possibility that any relationship we observe between participation and attitudes is simply the result of people with certain background characteristics being both more or less likely to participate and to hold certain attitudes. Therefore, we ran multivariate regression analysis which enables us to look at the association between perceptions and participation after controlling for any differences in socio-demographics. We looked separately at associations with voting in elections and with engagement in non-institutionalised forms of participation, including signing petitions and taking part in demonstrations. We used four summary measures to capture perceptions of the democratic deficit, measuring the average deficit perceived on a) the four items making up the electoral dimension of democracy b) the four items making up the liberal dimension c) the two items making up the social dimension d) the two items making up the participatory dimension.

The results of our analyses, further details of which can be found in the appendix to this chapter, paint a mixed picture. There is support for the 'critical citizens' hypothesis that a perceived deficit need not be a sign of disengagement and may even encourage political participation. The larger the perceived deficit in participatory democracy, the more likely people were to have voted in the 2010 general election or to have participated in protest activities in the past year. People were also more likely to have participated in protest activities the larger the perceived deficit in the realisation of liberal democratic ideals.

However, there is also evidence that failing to deliver what people want in terms of material outcomes may contribute to political disengagement. Even after controlling for a range of background characteristics including education and left-right orientation, the more people perceived there to be a deficit in terms of the government's ability to protect citizens from poverty or reduce differences in income levels, the less likely they were to have voted in the 2010 election. This is a potential challenge for all three of the main political parties: while the perceived deficit in social outcomes is largest among individuals on the left, those in the centre and on the right also perceive a deficit on this dimension.[18]

◢

There is evidence that failing to deliver what people want in terms of material outcomes may contribute to political disengagement

Conclusions

This chapter confirms the importance attached to democracy and democratic values by the British public. Not only do people in Britain consider it important to live in a democracy, they have high and wide-ranging expectations about what this entails. The strength of people's commitment to democratic values increases with age and education and there are differences between those on the left and right of the political spectrum. However, the main thing to emerge from the analysis presented is that there is a broad consensus among all sections of the

British public that, in addition to guaranteeing free and fair competitive elections and protecting civil liberties, it is important for any democracy to achieve certain social outcomes and involve citizens in decision-making.

The current political system however does not always live up to people's expectations. Many people perceive there to be a democratic deficit in Britain and think that features they consider important for democracy do not apply in practice. There is a marked deficit in how successful the government is considered to be in protecting its citizens from poverty, perhaps not surprising given the current economic climate. There is also a large deficit regarding how well the government is thought to explain its decisions to voters and, perhaps most worryingly, a substantial minority of people believes that the British courts do not treat everyone equally. The government should consider and address the reasons for this deficit in the perceived fairness of the judicial system.

The possible implications of the perceived democratic deficit for the future health of democracy in Britain are uncertain. There is currently no evidence that the perceived failure of the system to deliver more participatory democracy or live up to liberal democratic ideals is leading people to become disengaged. Those with the highest expectations and who therefore perceive the biggest deficit remain engaged as 'critical citizens' and continue to participate in democracy through a variety of channels. However, the continued failure of government to deliver desired outcomes such as protecting citizens from poverty or reducing differences in income may be contributing to feelings of disillusionment and leading people to switch off from the political process. The government needs to do more to protect citizens' material well-being and find ways to communicate better with voters. Unless these issues are addressed there is always a risk that the existing political system may come under pressure from non-mainstream forces who promise to deliver these things, even if this comes at the expense of other features of liberal democracy.

Notes

1. Blair, T. (2000), speech on Britishness, London, Mar 28. Retrieved 27 March 2014, from www.guardian.co.uk/britain/article/0,2763,184950,00.html. Brown, G. (2006), "The Future of Britishness", speech presented to the Fabian Society's New Year Conference, London, 14 January. Retrieved 27 March 2014, from www.fabians.org.uk. Cameron, D. (2011), speech on radicalization and Islamic extremism, speech presented at the Munich Security Conference, Munich, 5 February. Retrieved 27 March 2014, from www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=329.

2. The European Social Survey provides nationally representative probability samples of all residents aged 15 and over in a number of European countries and covers a wide range of social and political topics. Six rounds of the survey have been carried out to date. Unlike the British Social Attitudes survey, the European Social Survey collects data for the whole of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. However, NI cases are excluded from the analysis presented here and the remaining respondents were asked to evaluate democracy in Britain. The data for this chapter are from Round 6 of the survey conducted in the UK between September 2012 and January 2013. European Social Survey Round 6: European Social Survey Round 6 Data (2012/13). Data file edition 1.2. Design weights were applied in all analyses. Post-stratification weights were not available at the time of analysis but have since been added to the data file (Edition 2.0). Further information about the survey can be found at: www.europeansocialsurvey.org.

3. European Values Study (2011): European Values Study 2008: Integrated Dataset (European Values Study 2008). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA4800 Data file Version 3.0.0, doi:10.4232/1.11004.

4. European Social Survey Round 6 data were available for 24 countries. A second data release in May 2014 included data from further countries.

5. The full question wording was:

    Now some questions about democracy. Later on I will ask you about how democracy is working in Britain. First, however, I want you to think instead about how important you think different things are for democracy in <u>general</u>. There are no right or wrong answers so please just tell me what you think

6. The four groupings are informed by theory and have been shown to work well empirically, producing high Cronbach's alpha scores. Electoral dimension α = 0.80. Liberal dimension α = 0.82. Social dimension α = 0.74. Participatory dimension α = 0.71.

7. Bases for Table 1.2 are as follows:

Expectations of democracy, in Britain

How important is it for democracy in general that …	Mean score (0–10)		% saying extremely important (i.e. scoring 9 or 10)	
	Weighted base	*Unweighted base*	*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
Electoral democracy				
… national elections are free and fair	*2108*	*2111*	*2200*	*2204*
… governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	*2047*	*2056*	*2200*	*2204*
… opposition parties are free to criticise the government	*2079*	*2086*	*2200*	*2204*
… different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	*2058*	*2059*	*2200*	*2204*
Liberal democracy				
… the courts treat everyone the same	*2107*	*2108*	*2200*	*2204*
… the courts able to stop the government acting beyond its authority	*2031*	*2036*	*2200*	*2204*
… the rights of minority groups are protected	*2057*	*2057*	*2200*	*2204*
… the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government	*2086*	*2086*	*2200*	*2204*
… the media are free to criticise the government	*2093*	*2099*	*2200*	*2204*
Social democracy				
… the government protects all citizens against poverty	*2099*	*2103*	*2200*	*2204*
… the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	*2068*	*2069*	*2200*	*2204*
Participatory democracy				
… the government explains its decisions to voters	*2100*	*2104*	*2200*	*2204*
… citizens have the final say on the most important issues by referendum	*2062*	*2066*	*2200*	*2204*

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13

8. Mean scores are based on the average response given by all those expressing an opinion. There is obviously a question regarding how reasonable it is to expect people to have thought about and formed meaningful opinions about all of the specific aspects of democracy asked about in the European Social Survey questionnaire. However, although around 5 per cent of respondents did answer "don't know", the vast majority of respondents were able to give an answer European Social Survey data showed.

Expectations of democracy, in Britain, item non-response

How important is it for democracy in general that …	% "Don't know" responses
Electoral democracy	
… national elections are free and fair	4
… governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	7
… opposition parties are free to criticise the government	5
… different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	6
Liberal democracy	
… the courts treat everyone the same	4
… the courts are able to stop the government acting beyond its authority	8
… the rights of minority groups are protected	6
… the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government	5
… the media are free to criticise the government	5
Social democracy	
… the government protects all citizens against poverty	4
… the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	6
Participatory democracy	
… the government explains its decisions to voters	4
… citizens have the final say on the most important issues by referendum	6
Weighted base	*2200*
Unweighted base	*2204*

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13

9. Respondents with no educational qualifications are also less likely to hold an opinion about the requirements of democracy – with levels of "don't knows" ranging from 9 per cent to 15 per cent across items – as are young people under 25 (7 per cent to 14 per cent "don't knows").

10. Whether people would actually participate in a referendum is another matter. Support for direct democracy in principle is not always matched by high turnout in practice. In the 2011 referendum regarding the electoral system used to elect MPs, for example, turnout was just 42 per cent nationally (www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/journalist/electoral-commission-media-centre/news-releases-referendums/Complete-set-of-provisional-turn-out-figures-for-referendum-now-published). Turnout in the 2012 elections to elect local police commissioners was even lower.

11. European Social Survey respondents are asked:

    In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?

    Responses 0 to 4 on the scale are categorised as being on the political left, 5 is categorised as centrist (group not shown in analysis) and responses 6 to 10 are categorised as being on the political right.

12. The items were the same as in Table 1.2 with one exception. Respondents were not asked to evaluate whether "… the courts are able to stop the government acting beyond its authority" applies in Britain. This item is not therefore included in any subsequent analysis.

13. The full question wording was:

    Now some questions about the same topics, but this time about how you think democracy is working in Britain today. Again, there are no right or wrong answers, so please just tell me what you think

14. Bases for Table 1.6 are as follows:

Evaluations of democracy, in Britain

To what extent does it apply in Britain that …	Mean score (0–10)		% saying does not apply (i.e. scoring <5)	
	Weighted base	*Unweighted base*	*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
Electoral democracy				
… national elections are free and fair	*2118*	*2122*	*2200*	*2204*
… governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	*2030*	*2041*	*2200*	*2204*
… opposition parties are free to criticise the government	*2086*	*2093*	*2200*	*2204*
… different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	*2056*	*2061*	*2200*	*2204*
Liberal democracy				
… the courts treat everyone the same	*2078*	*2081*	*2200*	*2204*
… the rights of minority groups are protected	*2016*	*2019*	*2200*	*2204*
… the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government	*2075*	*2076*	*2200*	*2204*
… the media are free to criticise the government	*2098*	*2106*	*2200*	*2204*
Social democracy				
… the government protects all citizens against poverty	*2085*	*2094*	*2200*	*2204*
… the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	*2042*	*2044*	*2200*	*2204*
Participatory democracy				
… the government explains its decisions to voters	*2075*	*2083*	*2200*	*2204*
… citizens have the final say on the most important issues by referendum	*2004*	*2017*	*2200*	*2204*

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13

15. Responses on the importance and evaluation scales were rescaled to be between 0 and 1 rather than 0 and 10. The democratic deficit measure for each item, y, was then calculated as follows: (Importance of y (0 to 1) – Evaluation of whether y applies in Britain (0 to 1)) x Importance (0–1).

16. Bases for Table 1.7 are as follows:

Perceived democratic deficit, in Britain

	Mean deficit/surplus (-1 to 1)		% saying feature extremely important but does not apply in Britain	
	Weighted base	*Unweighted base*	*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
Electoral democracy				
… national elections are free and fair	*2077*	*2079*	*2200*	*2204*
… governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	*1988*	*2000*	*2200*	*2204*
… opposition parties are free to criticise the government	*2045*	*2052*	*2200*	*2204*
… different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	*2002*	*2004*	*2200*	*2204*
Liberal democracy				
… the courts treat everyone the same	*2035*	*2039*	*2200*	*2204*
… the rights of minority groups are protected	*1972*	*1973*	*2200*	*2204*
… the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government	*2046*	*2041*	*2200*	*2204*
… the media are free to criticise the government	*2061*	*2071*	*2200*	*2204*
Social democracy				
… the government protects all citizens against poverty	*2054*	*2059*	*2200*	*2204*
… the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	*1996*	*1995*	*2200*	*2204*
Participatory democracy				
… the government explains its decisions to voters	*2045*	*2052*	*2200*	*2204*
… citizens have the final say on the most important issues by referendum	*1968*	*1977*	*2200*	*2204*

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13

17. European Social Survey data collected in 2010/11 as part of a module of questions on Trust in Justice provide further insights on this topic (Jackson et al., 2010). As many as 50 per cent of people in the UK think that a poor person is more likely than a rich person to be found guilty of an identical crime they did not commit while 30 per cent of respondents feel that someone of a different race or ethnic group from the majority would be more likely to be found guilty. (European Social Survey Round 5 Data (2010). Data file edition 3.0.)

18. The average deficit on the social democracy dimension was -0.35 among those placing themselves on the left of the political spectrum, -0.25 among those in the centre and -0.20 among those on the right.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix

The multivariate analysis technique used is logistic regression (see the Technical details chapter for further explanation of this type of analysis).

The dependent variable in Table A.1 is whether the respondent voted in the 2010 general election or not. A positive coefficient on the demographic variables indicates that the group is more likely than the reference group (shown in brackets) to have voted while a negative coefficient indicates that the group is less likely than the reference group to have voted. The deficit measure has been recoded so that higher values indicate a greater perceived deficit. A positive coefficient therefore indicates that perceiving a democratic deficit is associated with a higher likelihood of voting while a negative coefficient indicates that perceiving a deficit is associated with a lower likelihood of voting.

Table A.1 Voted vs. not voted in 2010 general election logistic regression

	Coefficient	Standard error	p value
Age	0.05**	0.01	0.000
Sex (male)	0.04	0.16	0.799
Education (no qualifications)			
GCSE or A level	0.75**	0.23	0.001
Higher qualification – not degree	1.04**	0.28	0.000
Degree	1.61**	0.28	0.000
Self-reported position on left-right scale (left)			
Centre	-0.45*	0.20	0.023
Right	0.14	0.23	0.541
Deficit – electoral democracy	-0.16	0.82	0.847
Deficit – liberal democracy	-0.03	0.79	0.972
Deficit – social democracy	-1.07**	0.40	0.007
Deficit – participatory democracy	1.98**	0.49	0.000
Constant	-2.33	0.44	0.000
R2 (adjusted)	0.15		

Weighted base: 1432
Unweighted base: 1448

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13
*= significant at 95% level **= significant at 99% level

The dependent variable in Table A.2 is whether the respondent has taken part in any form of non-institutionalized political action in the past 12 months (defined as signing a petition, taking part in a lawful demonstration or boycotting certain products). A positive coefficient on the demographic variables indicates that the group is more likely than the reference group (shown in brackets) to have taken part while a negative coefficient indicates that the group is less likely than the reference group to have taken part. The deficit measure has been recoded so that higher values indicate a greater perceived deficit. A positive coefficient therefore indicates that perceiving a democratic deficit is associated with a higher likelihood of taking part while a negative coefficient indicates that perceiving a deficit is associated with a lower likelihood of taking part.

Table A.2 Participated in non-institutionalised political action in last 12 months vs. not logistic regression

	Coefficient	Standard error	p value
Age	**0.01***	**0.00**	**0.015**
Sex (male)	**0.27***	**0.12**	**0.025**
Education (no qualifications)			
GCSE or A level	0.71**	0.19	0.000
Higher qualification – not degree	1.23**	0.22	0.000
Degree	1.40**	0.21	0.000
Self-reported position on left-right scale (left)			
Centre	-0.53**	0.15	0.000
Right	-0.23	0.17	0.176
Deficit – electoral democracy	0.32	0.63	0.613
Deficit – liberal democracy	1.30*	0.58	0.026
Deficit – social democracy	-0.59	0.33	0.072
Deficit – participatory democracy	0.77*	0.39	0.048
Constant	-1.59	0.32	0.000
R2 (adjusted)	0.08		

Weighted base: 1494
Unweighted base: 1492

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13
*= significant at 95% level **= significant at 99% level

The data on which Figure 1.1 is based are shown below.

Table A.3 Attitudes towards democracy

	How important to live in democracy?	How democratic is country?
	%	%
Not at all important/democratic	1	1
1	*	1
2	*	2
3	1	3
4	2	6
5	7	13
6	4	13
7	7	18
8	16	22
9	14	10
Extremely important/ completely democratic	43	6
Weighted base	*2200*	*2200*
Unweighted base	*2204*	*2204*

Source: European Social Survey 2012/13