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Europeans' Democratic Aspirations and Evaluations

Are ordinary citizens capable of forming coherent opinions on how democracies should ideally work? In contrast with the assumption that mass publics are ill informed about politics, Enrique Hernández' PhD thesis reveals that most Europeans have a coherent idea about how democracies ought to work ideally. When thinking about their ideal model of democracy, a majority of individuals attribute higher importance to essential democratic features, such as free and fair elections, than to other features that apply also to not fully democratic political systems, such as the fact that governments explain their decisions to citizens. Hernández, who was supervised by Hanspeter Kriesi and defended his thesis on 21 October 2016, concludes that the democratic aspirations of most Europeans are coherently structured.

What happens when individuals perceive that their political systems do not fulfill these democratic aspirations? To answer this question, the thesis develops a series of measures of democratic discontent that reflect the extent to which individuals perceive that their political systems do not match their democratic aspirations and relates them to individuals' political participation and party choice.

Generally, most forms of democratic discontent reduce the likelihood of turning out to vote and increase the probability of participating in demonstrations. Whenever individuals perceive that their political system falls short of their democratic aspirations they are less likely to participate in politics through formal institutional channels and more likely to do so through informal and non-institutionalized means. Thanks to use of novel measures of democratic discontent that refer to specific dimensions of democracy, the thesis can assess for the first time how the relationship between discontent and participation is moderated by the presence of political parties that are capable of mobilizing different forms of discontent in the electoral arena. Hernández' analysis of European Social Survey data indicates that the negative impact of democratic discontent on the likelihood of turning out to vote is weaker if parties make proposals that address the roots of citizens' discontent.

When it comes to party choice, the results confirm the assumption that discontent with the functioning of democracy increases the likelihood of supporting challenger parties. However, the empirical findings also indicate that this is not likely to occur independently of the specific nature of individuals' democratic discontent. Individuals are more likely to support either a left-wing or a right-wing challenger party depending on the specific dimension of democracy for which their democratic aspirations are not fulfilled. For example, while those who perceive that their democracies fall short of their aspirations on the social dimension of democracy are more likely to vote for left-wing challenger parties, those who perceive a democratic deficit in the direct-democracy dimension are more likely to support right-wing challenger parties. The implication of these findings is that the vote for challenger parties should not just be considered a protest vote, but a *rational protest vote* that is informed by individuals' democratic aspirations.