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Committed or Dissatisfied? Democratic Perceptions and Political Participation in Europe

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Abstract

Why do some citizens engage in political activities beyond elections – out of commitment to democratic values, or out of dissatisfaction with democratic performance? This paper explores how Europeans’ evaluations of democracy shape their non-electoral participation, drawing on data from the European Social Survey Round 10 (2022) and its special module on “Europeans’ understandings and evaluations of democracy.”

Using multilevel models, the analysis tests two competing perspectives: (1) *committed democrats*, who hold strong democratic values and participate as a way of sustaining democratic life; and (2) *dissatisfied democrats*, or critical citizens, who turn to non-electoral activities as a response to discontent with democratic performance. The results show that lower evaluations of democracy are associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in non-electoral activities, lending support to the dissatisfied democrats perspective.

By highlighting the role of subjective democratic evaluations in shaping political behaviour, this study adds nuance to existing scholarship on democracy and participation in Europe and underscores how unmet democratic expectations can mobilise citizens beyond the ballot box.

JEL classification: D72, Z18

Key words: understanding democracy, political participation, Europe

Introduction

Democratic participation is a cornerstone of a well-functioning political system, yet citizens vary widely in their level of engagement. Cross-national studies consistently show that support for democracy is widespread (Dalton et al., 2007; Kruse et al., 2019; Norris, 2011), but what role do citizens' perceptions of democracy play in shaping their political behaviour? Some citizens may participate in politics because they see democracy as a system that enables meaningful political engagement and change. Others, however, may engage in political activities precisely because they perceive a disconnect between democratic ideals and democratic practice. This study seeks to understand how citizens' evaluation of democracy relates to their patterns of non-electoral participation.

Existing research has examined various factors influencing political participation, including institutional arrangements, political opportunity structures, socioeconomic conditions and psychological predispositions (Brady et al., 1995; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Teorell, 2006; Van Deth, 2007; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013; Verba et al., 1995). Scholars have also found evidence that different aspects of democracy influence various forms of political participation in Europe (Gherghina & Geissel, 2017; Oser & Hooghe, 2018) and globally (Cinar & Bulbul, 2022). However, empirical studies exploring the relationship between complex understandings of democracy and participation remain relatively scarce. Most notably, research has yet to fully address how subjective evaluations of democracy relate to non-electoral activism.

This paper tests two competing theoretical perspectives on the link between democratic perceptions and political participation. The first perspective suggests that citizens who are committed democrats, i.e. those who strongly value democratic principles, are more likely to participate because they see engagement as essential to maintaining and improving democratic governance. These individuals believe in the efficacy of political participation and view it as a civic duty necessary for a healthy democracy. The second perspective focuses on dissatisfied democrats, or so-called critical citizens, who engage in non-electoral forms of participation precisely because they are dissatisfied with the democratic performance in their country. These citizens, while still committed to democratic ideals, believe that conventional channels are insufficient to bring about necessary change and thus turn to protests, petitions, or other forms of non-electoral participation.

In addition to bridging these theoretical perspectives, this study also contributes to a growing body of literature on the psychological and perceptual

dimensions of political behaviour. Social psychological theories highlight that individual perceptions significantly influence behaviour, including political participation (Festinger, 1957; Ajzen, 1991). Subjective evaluations of democracy may shape engagement in distinct ways: individuals who perceive their democracy positively may be more likely to engage in non-electoral participation as a means of reinforcing democratic values, while those who perceive their democracy negatively may participate to express dissatisfaction and push for change.

Drawing on the European Social Survey (ESS) 2022 data, this paper investigates the extent to which evaluations of democracy are associated with non-electoral participation across European countries. We ask the following research question: *How does citizens' evaluation of democracy associate with their non-electoral participation?* Through a comparative, cross-national approach, the study sheds light on the nuanced ways in which democratic perceptions shape political engagement, contributing to both theoretical and empirical discussions on democratic legitimacy, citizen engagement, and political behaviour in contemporary democracies.

Theory and Hypotheses

Democratic Dimensions

While conceptualising democracy, scholars focus on its various properties, such as democratic institutions and procedures centred around equal participation in free and fair elections; freedom and civil liberties that allow citizens to exercise their political rights; social benefits, social welfare and economic security (Beetham et al., 2008; Dahl, 2020; O'Donnell, 2004). To identify variations in understanding of democracy, researchers offer a number of categories based on democratic attributes. Thus, some scholars emphasise on political freedom, political process and social benefits (Dalton et al., 2007), or distinguish between procedural, instrumental and authoritarian conceptions (Norris, 2011). Ferrin and Kriesi (2016) developed three categories based on theoretically derived groups or “visions” of democracy: liberal, social and direct. The liberal democracy group comprises liberal and electoral components, that are, in turn, divided into subcomponents. Following this classification, we approach democracy as a multifaceted concept with a broad range of dimensions.

One of the most fundamental dimensions within the liberal group is the rule of law as it represents the basic principle of democracy, that is all citizens are equally subject to the law (O'Donnell, 2004). The liberal group also includes freedoms, such as freedom of media as the “fourth power of the state” (Schultz, 1998), and representation, e.g., representation of minorities. The two most

prominent electoral components are electoral competition and vertical accountability (Ferrin and Kriesi 2016). Besides free and competitive elections, it is essential that opposition parties are able to criticise the government while political leaders are responsible for their decisions (Morlino, 2009). Social equality corresponds to social or social and economic rights, meaning that the government should protect all citizens against poverty and take measures to reduce economic inequality. Finally, participation refers to direct forms in which voters can affect political decisions via referenda. Conceptualising democracy through these multiple dimensions offers a greater potential for the analysis of individuals' understanding of democracy and its impact on the probability of civic engagement.

Subjective Evaluations of Democracy and Political Participation

Citizens' understanding of democracy consists of two key components: views of democracy, which reflect their normative ideals of what democracy should be, and evaluations of democracy, which capture their assessments of how well democracy functions in their country (Ferrin and Kriesi, 2016). Views of democracy are socially grounded, with social class strongly shaping which dimensions of democracy citizens emphasise (Ceka and Megalhaes, 2016). Evaluations are shaped by both individual-level beliefs and the macro-political environment, meaning that citizens' assessments of democratic performance are influenced by their political context as well as their expectations (Kriesi and Saris, 2016). Individuals with broader views of democracy (who recognise multiple democratic attributes) are more likely to develop complex evaluations of democratic performance.

A key question is how these evaluations shape political participation. We employ a broader theoretical framework on committed vs dissatisfied democrats to test two competing theories regarding the relationship between evaluations of democracy and non-electoral participation.

In democratic states, it is possible that citizens with strong views of democracy engage in politics because they believe that participation is one of the crucial features of healthy democratic functioning. Thus, those who agree that elections in democracies should be open and fair, are likely to vote. Others believe that authorities should take into account citizens' voice and are willing to express their will by engaging in various political activities. Individuals with strong democratic values are more likely to engage in non-electoral participation as a means of reinforcing and safeguarding democratic processes. Those committed democrats believe in the legitimacy and importance of democratic systems, seeing

non-electoral participation, such as protests or petitions, not only as a way to express political views but also as a civic responsibility. For these individuals, participation is a means to ensure that democracy remains functional, accountable, and responsive. They perceive their involvement as a way to strengthen democratic norms, rather than as a protest against perceived failures of the system. Thus, committed democrats are more likely to engage in non-electoral participation because they view it as an essential element of democratic governance.

At the same time, lofty views of democratic ideals may lead to frustration with the way democracy actually works. The subjective experience of democracy is a kind of relative deprivation. According to relative deprivation theory, a feeling of frustration occurs not just as the result of negative evaluations of reality, but also because of pre-existing high expectations or norms (Gurr, 1974). When there is a gap between high expectations and individuals' real experience, the results can be dissatisfaction and frustration, i.e., grievance. When citizens hold lofty expectations of democracy they may evaluate the practice of democracy in their country negatively. Their perceived disconnect between expectations and reality makes them critical of democracy and may lead to political action. Those critical citizens, feeling alienated or disillusioned by democratic institutions, may turn to non-institutionalised forms of political engagement such as protests, petitions, or direct actions as a way to voice their dissatisfaction and demand change. Rather than participating to reinforce democratic legitimacy, they participate as a form of resistance to perceived democratic deficits, seeking to bring attention to issues of injustice or unmet democratic promises. Thus, their participation is driven by a sense of democratic failure, rather than a desire to support or maintain the system.

In line with the theory, we test the following competing hypotheses:

H1. The higher the evaluation of the way democracy works in a country, the higher the probability of non-electoral participation.

H2. The lower the evaluation of the way democracy works in a country, the higher the probability of non-electoral participation.

The first hypothesis follows the committed democrats theory, suggesting that citizens who positively evaluate democracy are more likely to participate in non-electoral activities to uphold and reinforce democratic principles. The second hypothesis aligns with the grievance and critical citizens' theory, with dissatisfaction fueling non-electoral engagement.

Data and methods

Data

In our analyses, we rely on the European Social Survey round ten (ESS, 2022). The ESS is known for providing high-quality data with various attitudinal items. Round ten contains a special “Europeans’ understandings and evaluations of democracy” module which allows us to test our hypotheses with an extensive and detailed battery of questions on citizens’ evaluations of democracy based on multiple democratic dimensions theoretically derived in accordance with liberal, social and direct visions of democracy. This enables a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between understanding of democracy and political action.

In most of the countries data were collected in face-to-face mode. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, in nine countries, data were collected in self-completion mode. In our analyses, we only used the face-to-face data resulting in the sample of 22 countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia and Slovakia. The total sample size is 37,611.

Measures

The “Europeans’ understandings and evaluations of democracy” module provides a set of multiple indicators of respondents’ evaluation of democracy in their country. These indicators are grouped based on the electoral, liberal, social and direct dimensions of democracy discussed in the theory section. Respondents were asked to express the extent to which various statements apply in their country (using a scale where 0 means “does not apply” at all and 10 “applies completely”). Question wording of these items are presented in Table 1. We used all 9 items to construct the evaluation of democracy index, which is our main independent variable. All items form a strong scale with Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$.

Our dependent variable is non-electoral participation. The question wording for non-electoral participation is as follows: “There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?” Respondents were asked whether they had been engaged in contacting a politician, government or local government official; donated to or participated in a political party or pressure group; wearing or displaying a campaign badge/sticker; signing a petition; taking part in a lawful public demonstration; and boycotting certain products. All six items are binary with 0 = “no” and 1 = “yes”. Following Koc (2021), we treat

non-electoral participation as a unidimensional concept and construct the dependent variable as a grouped binary one with the number of successful trials out of 6.

Table 1. Question Wording on Views and Evaluation of Democracy

Electoral dimension
... national elections are free and fair?
... that different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another?
... governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job?
Liberal dimension
... courts treat everyone the same?
... the rights of minority groups are protected?
... the media are free to criticise the government?
Social dimension
... the government protects all citizens against poverty?
... the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels?
Direct democracy dimension
... citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums?

Covariates

We include a set of control variables that the cross-national literature finds as related to political participation: age, gender, years of education, subjective income evaluation, trust in parliament, interest in politics, as well as internal and external efficacy (Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Kaase, 1999; Melo & Stockemer, 2014; Stolle & Hooghe, 2011; Verba et al., 1995).

We use both age as a continuous variable and age squared to control for the non-linear effect. Education is measured with years of full-time education. We measure subjective income evaluation with feeling about household's income. The original scale ranges from 1 to 4 denoting living comfortably, coping, difficult and very difficult on respondents' present income. We dichotomise feeling about household's income into two categories with 0 = those who feel difficult and very

difficult on present income and 1 = those who reported coping and living comfortably on their present income.

Interest in politics is a 4-point scale ranging from “not at all interested” coded as 1 to “very interested” coded as 4. Trust in parliament is an 11-point scale from 0 to 10. Finally, we have two measures of political efficacy. The first item assesses internal efficacy: the respondent’s perceived ability to take an active role in groups involved with political issues, with responses ranging from 1 = “not at all able” to 5 = “completely able”. The second item refers to external political efficacy: “And how much would you say that the political system in [country] allows people like you to have an influence on politics?” also on a scale from 1 = “not at all confident” to 5 = “a great deal”. Descriptive statistics of all variables used in the analysis are presented in Appendix 1.

Model

We estimate a two-level binomial model with non-electoral participation as a dependent grouped binary variable (the number of participations out of 6 activities), evaluation of democracy index as the main independent variable with two entries (country mean and the demeaned index), a set of individual-level covariates, and both individual-level and country-level random intercepts to account for overdispersion. We decomposed the evaluation of democracy index into two uncorrelated variables. The first one is a country mean and the second one is the subtracted country mean from the original index. This approach allows us to capture the within country variation controlling for potential biases stemming from unobserved factors that remain constant across nations (Bell & Jones, 2015).

All cases with missing values were excluded from the analysis. The model used a post-stratification weight merged with a design weight, as provided by ESS. The model was estimated using the “glmer” command in the “lme4” package in R (Bates et al., 2015).

Results

Before moving on to the model, we briefly report some descriptive information. Figure 1 shows the distribution of non-electoral participation across countries included in the analysis. It is evident that in all the countries the distribution is skewed with most observations at 0. For this reason, in our analysis, we used non-electoral participation as a grouped binary variable to estimate the average effect of evaluation of democracy across all types of participation rather than focusing on participation vs non-participation.

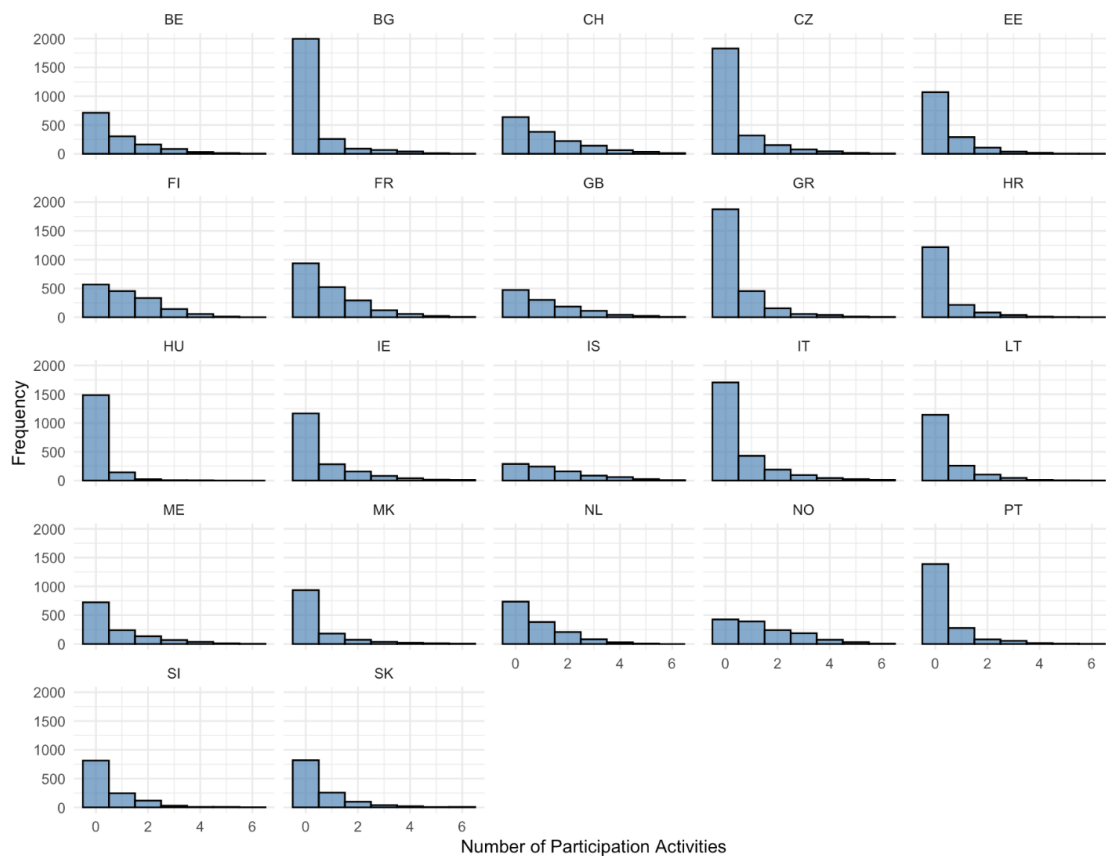


Figure 1. Distribution of non-electoral participation by country.

Figure 2 represents the distribution for the computed evaluation of democracy index by country. As can be seen, respondents in Finland, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland tend to evaluate the democratic performance in their country rather positively. Only in Bulgaria do most respondents indicate dissatisfaction with democracy in their country.

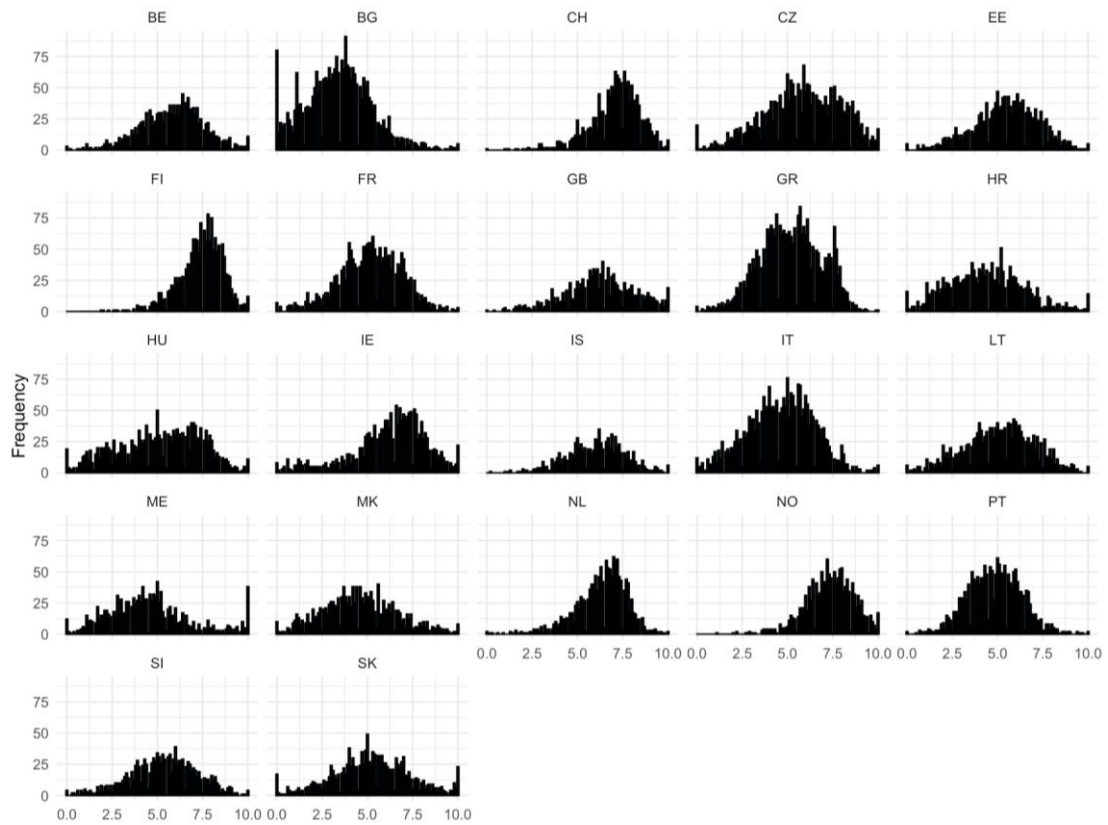


Figure 2. Distribution of evaluation of democracy by country.

Table 2 presents the estimates of the binomial model. According to the model's estimates, evaluation of democracy within countries has a negative effect on non-electoral participation. This result is in line with hypothesis 2: a higher evaluation of democracy is associated with a lower level of participation. Thus, those dissatisfied with the democratic performance in their country tend to engage in non-electoral participation. The coefficient is statistically significant at the 0.001 level.

Table 2. Multilevel Binomial Regression of Non-Electoral Participation on Selected Independent Variables

	Non-electoral participation
Evaluation of Democracy between countries	0.266*** (0.080)
Evaluation of Democracy within countries	-0.080*** (0.006)
Gender: Female	0.128*** (0.019)
Age	0.011*** (0.003)
Age2	-0.0002*** (0.00004)
Years of education	0.060*** (0.003)
Feeling about household's income: Living comfortably and coping	-0.064** (0.026)
Trust in Parliament	-0.020*** (0.005)
Interest in Politics	0.469*** (0.013)
Internal efficacy	0.324*** (0.010)
External efficacy	0.069*** (0.011)
Constant	-6.546*** (0.457)
Variance components	
Individual Intercept	0.708
Country intercept	0.133
N individuals	31,058
Log-likelihood	-31,533.55
Akaike inf. crit.	63,095.11
Bayesian inf. crit.	63,211.92

Note: Reference categories: gender = male, feeling about household income = difficult and very difficult
Significance: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Figure 3 shows the effect of evaluation of democracy on the average predicted probability of individual participation across all 6 types of non-electoral

participation. An increase in respondent's evaluation of democracy is associated with the decline in the probability of individuals to engage in non-electoral participation from 14 to 4 per cent. Since the lower values of evaluation of democracy indicate dissatisfied citizens, these results confirm the hypothesis that non-electoral participation is driven by critical citizens rather than committed democrats.

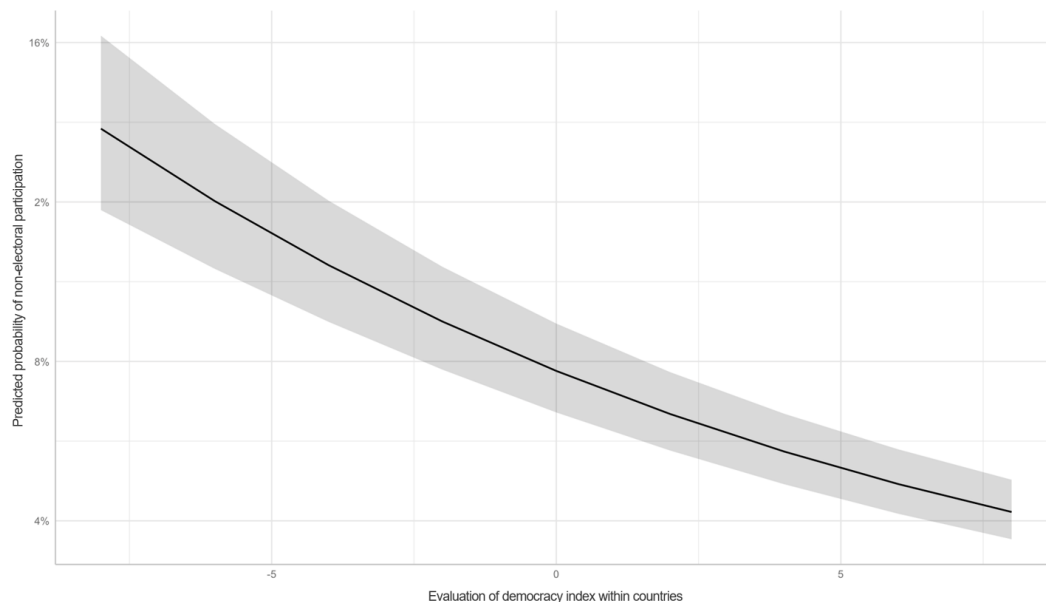


Figure 3. The effect of evaluation of democracy on non-electoral participation.

Note: The independent variable is the evaluation of democracy index within the country where 0 equals the average score across countries.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between subjective evaluations of democracy and non-electoral political participation across 22 European countries. Our findings provide strong evidence that dissatisfaction with democratic performance is associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in non-electoral participation. This suggests that critical citizens – those who perceive a disconnect between democratic ideals and their implementation – are more likely to take action outside the electoral process to express their dissatisfaction and advocate for change.

These results contribute to the ongoing debate about the role of democratic evaluations in shaping political behavior. The evidence aligns with the “critical citizens” perspective, which argues that individuals who perceive democratic deficiencies are more likely to engage in non-electoral forms of participation, such as protests, petitions, and boycotts. This supports the argument

that unmet expectations and perceived democratic deficits drive political engagement beyond traditional electoral mechanisms.

The findings challenge the alternative hypothesis, which posits that individuals with positive evaluations of democracy would be more likely to engage in non-electoral participation as a way of reinforcing democratic principles. Instead, our analysis suggests that those who are more satisfied with democracy are less likely to participate in non-electoral activities, possibly because they perceive fewer grievances requiring political action. Our study also highlights the importance of considering the multidimensional nature of democracy. By employing a broad conceptualisation of democratic evaluations, spanning electoral, liberal, social, and direct democracy dimensions, we provide a nuanced understanding of how different democratic attributes shape political participation. This approach allows us to capture variations in perceptions and participation patterns that might be overlooked in studies using narrower definitions of democracy.

Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating longitudinal data to examine whether dissatisfaction with democracy has a long-term effect on political participation or if it varies in response to changing political conditions. Furthermore, in this study we focused on non-electoral participation. However, it would be interesting to investigate whether subjective perceptions of democracy impact patterns of voting behavior.

In conclusion, this study underscores the significant role of democratic evaluations in shaping non-electoral participation. The findings suggest that dissatisfaction with democratic performance acts as a mobilising force, prompting individuals to engage in political activities beyond voting. As democratic institutions seek to enhance legitimacy and engagement, understanding the motivations behind non-electoral participation remains crucial for fostering a politically active and responsive citizenry.

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Appendix 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables Included in the Analysis

Variable	N	Mean / proportion	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Country	37,611			1	22
Gender	37,611	1.54		1	2
Age	34,876	49.91	16.77	18	80
Years of full-time education completed	36,946	13	3.88	0	22
Feeling about household's income	37,126	2		1	4
Trust in country's parliament	36,903	4.49	2.69	0	10
How interested in politics	37,523	2.26	0.92	1	4
Confident in own ability to participate in politics	36,751	2.06	1.04	1	5
Political system allows people to have a say in what government does	36,772	2.19	0.99	1	5
Contacted politician or government official last 12 months	37,293	0.14	0.35	0	1
Donated to or participated in political party or pressure group last 12 months	37,230	0.06	0.23	0	1
Worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker last 12 months	37,252	0.06	0.25	0	1
Signed petition last 12 months	37,310	0.19	0.39	0	1
Taken part in public demonstration last 12 months	37,321	0.06	0.25	0	1
Boycotted certain products last 12 months	37,208	0.14	0.35	0	1
Non-electoral participation computed	36,054	0.67	1.11	0	6
In country national elections are free and fair	36,469	7.82	2.89	1	11
In country different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another	35,950	6.5	2.58	1	11
In country governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job	35,858	6.02	2.99	1	11
In country the courts treat everyone the same	36,391	6.1	3.07	1	11
In country the rights of minority groups are protected	36,320	7.35	2.51	1	11
In country the media are free to criticise the government	36,662	7.41	2.84	1	11

In country the government protects all citizens against poverty	36,956	5.27	2.78	1	11
In country the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels	36,417	5.33	2.64	1	11
In country citizens have the final say on political issues by voting directly in referendums	36,146	5.79	3.02	1	11
Evaluation of democracy index computed	37,411	5.4	2.07	0	10

*Note: proportions for categorical variables