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### Just Like the Others: Party Differences, Perception, and Satisfaction with Democracy

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## Just Like the Others: Party Differences, Perception, and Satisfaction with Democracy

### Comments

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## **Just Like the Others: Party Differences, Perception, and Satisfaction with Democracy**

**Abstract:** A robust literature on citizens' satisfaction with democracy argues that system satisfaction is based on the policy outcomes citizens anticipate from electoral results. A tacit assumption in this research is that there are differences between the parties and that citizens are aware of the ideological and preference diversity in their political environment. Some citizens, however, fail to perceive these differences. Using a multi-national set of post-election surveys, regression analysis, and propensity score matching, perceived party difference is shown to substantially impact citizens' systemic satisfaction. Those who believe all parties are the same are substantially less satisfied with the functioning of their democracy. The negative effect of perceived party homogeneity is mitigated by closeness to a political party and sense of representation. By manipulating the public's reserve of democratic satisfaction, this perception of party homogeneity threatens democratic stability.

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**Key words:** democracy; satisfaction with democracy; political parties; polarization; public opinion

**Biography:** Hannah Ridge is a PhD candidate studying the effect of popular understandings of democracy on support for democratization. Her research focuses on public opinion on democracy, Middle East politics, and religion and politics. She has a master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Chicago. Her work has been published in *Political Behavior* and *Religion, State and Society*.

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This is an era of polarization. Although issue polarization among the electorate is contested (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005; Knutsen 1998), the party elite and party platforms in the United States and Europe are markedly ideologically separate (Layman and Carsey 2002; Hetherington 2009). Partisans often distrust and dislike the members of other parties (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Ridge 2020). Despite this evident ideological disparity, some citizens in modern democracies believe that there are no differences between the political parties in their country.

Party polarization is proposed to influence various political outcomes, for good and for ill, from cabinet durability (Maoz and Somer-Topcu 2010) and voter turnout (Dalton 2008) to gridlock (Jones 2001) and mass partisanship (Lupu 2015). Polarization is also viewed as a threat to democratic norms and stability (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). What does it mean, then, if the public does not recognize it? Does democracy falter if the citizens see no difference between the diverging groups?

A substantial literature on satisfaction with democracy argues that anticipated policy outcomes are an important feature in citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of their democracy (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Blais and Gélinau 2007; Curini, Jou, and Memoli 2012; Singh, Karakoç, and Blais 2012). If they like the parties' positions, they see democracy working well. Ideological congruence for citizens and political parties is also a fundamental feature of individuals' evaluations of their systems' performance, with people favoring democracies in which parties' ideologies align with their preferences and those of the median voter (Kim 2009; Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011). Failure to identify differences between the parties where it exists would undermine that relationship by erasing the diversity of ideologies, policy

offerings, and potential outcomes and thereby pose a threat to citizens' satisfaction with democracy.

Using a multi-national set of post-election surveys from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), perceived party difference is shown to substantially impact citizens' systemic satisfaction. There is lower satisfaction among those who perceive no difference between the parties in their democracy. Greater differences, though, are less beneficial than minor differences. This relationship is moderated by closeness to a political party and feeling represented by a party. Perceived party similarity is less damaging to satisfaction for citizens who have a connection to an existing party.

The analysis focuses on citizens *specific* support for democracy (Easton 1975). The surveys do not demonstrate cross-temporal decline in satisfaction from many years of engagement with a diverse or homogenous party system or a resultant decay of *diffuse* support for democracy. Nevertheless, it has been recognized that understanding the factors “fostering higher levels of satisfaction with the working of democracy [is] a critical step toward assessing whether the public has a role in enhancing democratic stability” (Aldrich et al. 2020, 257). By manipulating the public's reserve of democratic satisfaction, this perception of party homogeneity undermines democratic stability and increases willingness to pursue alternative systems of government.

### **The Influence of Equivalence and Choice**

Ideology and associated policy preferences play a substantial role in citizens' evaluations of their democracy. The functioning of a democracy is its conversion of some voters or parties' beliefs or preferences into law, so the outcomes that that process would create, as well as the efficiency with which the conversion is accomplished, matter for the system's impression on its

subjects. For democracy's interparty competition to have an effect, the parties and proposed outcomes must be distinct. These interparty differences create the environment within which citizens experience and evaluate their institutions. Their perceptions of the environment influence those assessments.

There is substantial party diversity within countries. While some parties come from the same party families and issue space may be overlapped, diversity is necessary both for citizens to find representation and for parties to distinguish themselves to potential supporters. It is common to depict this difference on one dimension, strongly related to economic ideology. Parties in a system may even overlap on this dimension, representing a shared element of ideology. Secondary dimensions, such as regionalism and Euroscepticism, can clarify the differences between the parties for ideologically-similar voters in another domain (Gougou and Tiberj 2015, Knutsen 1998; Stecker and Tausendpfund 2016). Parties can also distinguish themselves in the ideological foundation for their position on that dimension or in their proposed method of enacting an otherwise similar stance.

Political representation is directly relevant to system attitudes. Having multiple options, up to a point, increases citizens' ability to choose and creates opportunities for voters to find a party that represents their preferences or identities (Dalton 1985; Carey and Hix 2011). Harding (2011, 222, 234) notes that "what voters care about is expressing their preferences" and "a sufficiently broad range of options is in fact no substitute for a party that represents one's preferences." Citizens are more likely to be satisfied with the functioning of their democracy when there are more parties covering distinct points on the ideological spectrum and when they can vote for a party that represents them (Harding 2011). They are also more satisfied when there is greater congruence between their ideological position and that of the winning party (Kim

2009; Stecker and Tausendpfund 2016). This preference is the basis of the robust finding in the satisfaction with democracy literature that election winners are more satisfied than election losers (Blais and Gélinau 2007; Harding 2011; Dahlberg and Linde 2016). At the same time, citizens are more satisfied with the systems' functioning when the middle of the ideological space is well-tended. Citizens in proportional and majoritarian systems are more satisfied when the average level of liberalism/conservatism in participating parties' platforms is closer to that of the mean voter (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011; Curini, Jou, and Memoli 2012). Voters want representation for their beliefs, potentially even their own extremity, which requires a diversity of parties, but they are not necessarily interested in overall systemic ideological extremism. Although electoral forces should push parties toward median positions (Downs 1957), institutional factors (i.e. thresholds for participation, polarization, number of parties) may mean politicians do not approach the public's median position in practice in both majoritarian and proportional representation systems (Lee, Moretti, and Butler 2004; Powell 2011). As such, the most satisfying distribution of platforms may not actually occur.

For ideological, party family, and policy differences between parties to influence systemic satisfaction as scholars have argued, though, citizens must be aware of these distinctions. Limited work has broached citizens' capacity in this regard. Individuals in "more polarized systems" are more likely to identify "major differences" or "important differences" between the parties (Lupu 2015, 345). Voters are more likely to perceive major or important differences in older political systems and in systems with fewer parties (Lupu 2015), but regime age and effective number of parties do not influence perceptions of party extremity (Anderson and Just 2018). Older, educated, richer, and ideologically extreme respondents are also more likely to assert there are such significant differences between the parties (Lupu 2015). Partisans,

winners, the educated, and extremely partisan individuals are more likely to identify great left/right distances between the end-most parties (Anderson and Just 2018). Among Americans, there is a correlation between markedly (dis)liking the incumbent and identifying major differences (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). Ideological proximity to a political party (Lupu 2015) and personal left/right placement are not significantly related to identifying differences between parties (Anderson and Just 2018). Perceiving no differences, as opposed to minor or major differences, has not received similar scrutiny.

Not appreciating the diversity undercuts the democracy's apparent functioning. People are regularly assumed to prefer, learn the most in, and work hardest in environments with free individual choice. This pattern is well linked to notions of democratic liberty and individualism (Iyengar and Lepper 1999). For a democracy to function, citizens must be able to make meaningful choices: "Meaningful choices are only possible if there are acceptable offers. This requires (a) that the choice set entails at least one choice option with a reasonable proximity to voters and (b) that the choice options are sufficiently differentiated" (Wessels and Schmitt 2008, 21). This proximity could occur in their ideology or in their proposed policies. Apparent party similarity also erases the competitive element of the democratic system. The result is a foregone conclusion by virtue of the options' homogeneity. Without choice, the democracy is objectively not functioning as well as it could. Citizens would be right to appreciate that as unsatisfactory performance.

Choice and awareness of it are necessary for democracy to function and should thus impact perceived functioning. The efficiency of party linkages in representation depend on the citizens' "clarity of party positions" because "characteristics that clarify party positions make it easier for voters to select a party consistent with their issue beliefs" (Dalton 1985, 294). Diverse



systems with clear positions allow them to enact their democratic will (Dalton 1985; Wang 2014). Perceived party equivalence means lack of clarity, which makes choosing appropriate representatives and recognizing one's representation in the system difficult. The belief that elected bodies are mirroring the public's views is linked to citizens satisfaction with democracy (Dahlberg and Linde 2016). By undermining the sense of representation perceived homogeneity undermines democratic satisfaction.

Perceived equivalence also undermines the apparent value of the political parties and, thereby, the competition between them: "When parties agree on policies, they become irrelevant to citizens" (Lupu 2015, 334). They seem interchangeable. Citizens' view of their democracy's functioning could suffer when democratic institutions like parties serve no apparent function for representation and choice. Taken together, these principles suggest that citizens who recognize less diversity between the political parties in their country will be less satisfied with the functioning of their democracy (H1a).

However, voters are less satisfied in the face of parties' inhabiting starkly disparate ideological positions. Voters want diversity, in that they want distinct options from which to choose, but they do not necessarily want massive ideological or policy differences between the parties, which could leave the median ideological space untended, confront citizens with ideological extremists or alienating parties, devolve into uncompromising partisan gridlock, or result in great policy alterations with each election (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011; Linz and Gispert 2004; Powell 2011; Anderson 2011). This is consistent with research on responses to the numbers of options available when making a choice: "choosers in extensive-choice contexts enjoy the choice-making process more – presumably because of the opportunities it affords – but also feel more responsible for the choices they make, resulting in frustration with the choice-

making process and dissatisfaction with their choices” (Iyengar and Lepper 2000, 1003). Choice is good, but too many options can confuse and ultimately displease decisionmakers. Given this response, citizens perceiving minor differences between the parties should be more satisfied than those perceiving no differences and those perceiving major differences (H1b).

The influence of perceived homogeneity though could be moderated by factors that otherwise distinguish the parties in a system. While being ideologically close to a party does not influence citizens’ perceptions of diversity, citizens who feel close to a party have less reason to be dissatisfied by similarities between the parties. This would be true whether their closeness reflects inherited membership, attachment to its ideology, or identity-based connections to the party. Closeness to a party is a function of “habituation to a competitive party system” (Converse 1969, 141), and those who are close to a political party are themselves more likely to be satisfied with their democracy (Aldrich et al. 2020). Similarity among the parties could appear in several dimensions (i.e. proximal ideological position, shared stance on a key policy, overlapping electoral base). In any case, homogeneity means similarity to something the partisan has endorsed. Furthermore, for the partisan, closeness would also bestow sufficient, if artificial, difference between these parties that he is still able to choose. The resemblance poses fewer costs on him cognitively and/or ideologically, so he has less reason to be discomfited by it. The sense of systemic inadequacy and cognitive load that might otherwise stem from a belief in party equivalence should be reduced by personal closeness to a political party (H2).

Likewise, those who feel represented by a party should be less dissatisfied by similarity (H3). Individuals who feel represented in their political system are more satisfied than those who do not feel so represented (Aarts and Thomassen 2008). This connection would moderate the effect of perceived party homogeneity. Where the party system is not providing as much

diversity, it is providing parties that are akin to one that the respondent feels can represent him. Maybe it shares his ideology; maybe it is viewed as the party of his co-religionists or co-ethnics. He could be confident similar parties would serve a similar function. As with voters who are close to a party, his sense of representation would relatively reduce the cognitive cost of participation in a homogenous party system compared to those without such a sense of representation by a party. Perceptions of institutional failure represented by homogeneity may then be less negatively impactful for citizens who feel represented by a party.

### **Materials and methods**

To test these hypotheses, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, a multinational set of nationally-representative post-election surveys, is brought to bear. In the third module, the CSES included fifty elections in forty-one polities between 2006 and 2011. In addition to the standard battery of election and demographic questions, this wave inquired about citizens' perceptions of their countries' parties. This module is used because it is the only module to include this question.

Respondents were asked, "During the election campaign, would you say that there were major differences between the [parties/candidates], minor differences, or no differences at all?" (Comparative 2015). This focuses particularly on the differences among the parties in the recent election, encouraging a political evaluation of their differences, rather than asking generally about the idea of parties in the country. This is consistent with the ideological emphasis here. This question provides the primary independent variable. For the first, third, and fourth hypotheses, the variable is treated as a three-point scale; a higher score indicates greater perceived difference. For the second hypothesis, a factor variable is used with minor differences as the reference category.

[Figure 1 here]

Individuals recognize that parties situate themselves apart ideologically. Figure 1 shows the median position ratings for the four largest parties. The zero to ten scale shows relative liberalism (left) and conservatism (right). Voters' perceptions of the parties' positions "rest on party reputations" as well as public positions (Best and McDonald, 2011, 93). Following Dalton (2011, 105), "We do not assume that most voters have an understanding of 'Left' and 'Right' in terms of sophisticated ideological concepts, such as socialism, liberalism, or other philosophical concepts. Instead, the Left-Right scale is a *political identity and policy orientation*." Although "people rarely use the extreme ends of the ideological continuum" when evaluating parties, "they do situate political parties quite far apart from each other" (Anderson and Just 2018, 16). Greater spread might have been shown if additional parties were included in the figure, but these would not have been major players. Majoritarian systems have 2.4 effective parties and proportional representation systems have 4.6 effective electoral parties (Dalton and Anderson 2011). Even among these four parties, substantial variation is evident.

[Figure 2 here]

Nevertheless, nontrivial, if minority, populations in each country think that there are no differences between the political parties in their country. Figure 2 shows the share of the population in each country that identified no, minor, or major differences between the political parties in his country. The bulk of the sample perceives minor differences between the parties (48.1%), though in some countries substantial populations perceive major differences among the parties. Overall, seven percent of survey respondents identify *no* difference between the parties. Perceiving major differences between the parties, on the other hand, is a much more common view overall (44.9%). South Korea has the largest population share identifying no difference

(22.6%), followed by Mexico (2009) (20.2%), and Croatia (17.0%). The United States (71.8%), Switzerland (66.1%), and Uruguay (61.7%) have the largest proportion identifying major differences between the parties.

Secondary political features, like Euroscepticism, regionalism, or party leaders could increase the perceived distinctiveness of political parties without moving the parties far apart on the left-right axis. Additionally, non-political factors could influence citizens' perception of the differences. For instance, someone who believes that all the parties are corrupt, ineffectual, or representative of the establishment could think of the parties as similar in that way. As such, ideological diversity is not the only mechanism by which parties could appear (dis)similar. The democratic difficulties posed by perceiving partisan homogeneity or major differences between the parties exist whether the perception of (dis)similarity is a purely ideological evaluation or a more holistic impression of the parties on offer in the democracy.

The outcome variable of interest is satisfaction with democracy. Respondents were asked, "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [COUNTRY]" (Comparative 2015). It is a four-point scale with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> The question pertains to institutional satisfaction in that country, not the respondent's beliefs about democracy as a general idea (Linde and Ekman 2003). It is "located between diffuse notions of support for democratic principles and specific attitudes toward political actors" (Blais, Morin-Chassé, and Singh 2017, 86). Although some researchers have expressed concern about the measure's correlation in new democracies with other indicators, like regime support (Canache, Mondak, and Seligson 2001),

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<sup>1</sup> While the distribution varies across countries, for each case, feeling fairly or not very satisfied were the most common responses. The US has the largest share that were very satisfied, and Croatia had the largest share of not at all satisfied (Appendix 1).

others argue that “[a]lthough it contains some ambiguity, that ambiguity is acceptable” (Wagner, Schneider, and Halla 2003, 32). In fact, such that democratic satisfaction is dependent on or causative towards these beliefs, these relationships are appropriate and expected. While concern is warranted for the use in currently democratizing countries, the ambiguity is less in established democracies. It is a standard question in the examinations of citizens’ views of democracy in practice.

Closeness to a political party is measured with a four-point scale. It is based on a combination of two questions: does the respondent think of himself as “close to any particular party” and, if he does, how close he feels. Zero indicates not feeling close to any party. Increasing scores report feeling not very close, somewhat close, and very close. This is a modification of Aldrich et al.’s (2020) measure of party closeness, which uses only the scale of how close the individual feels to the party to which he feels closest. By including those who do not feel close to a political party, this measurement preserves more of the sample and includes a broader range of affiliations.<sup>2</sup>

Individual-level characteristics are associated with perception of difference and with satisfaction with democracy: age, gender, level of education, ideology, and income quintile (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Blais and Gélinau 2007; Lupu 2015). Respondents’ age is measured in years.<sup>3</sup> Gender is a binary indicator for female. Education is an eight-point scale from no education to postgraduate education. Income is included as individual’s income quintile for the country. Political ideology self-placement on a zero to ten scale is included; higher scores

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<sup>2</sup> Each election had a sizeable population identifying as close to a party, though rates differed across countries. Feeling somewhat close is the most frequent response. Slovenia has the highest percentage of not feeling close to a party, while the US has the lowest (Appendix 2).

<sup>3</sup> The data assigns a value of 001 for American respondents over 90; this is adjusted to 90.

indicate greater conservatism. Another measure gives the absolute value of the distance from the scale's middle to indicate ideological extremism. A binary variable is also introduced for whether the person believes "any of the parties in [COUNTRY] represent [his] views reasonably well" (Comparative 2015). Interest in politics is measured with a four-point scale based on how closely the respondent followed the election campaign from not closely at all to very closely with higher scores indicating greater interest in politics. Electoral outcome is commonly found to influence citizen satisfaction. A factor variable identifies winners, losers, and non-voters.<sup>4</sup> The vote for the president is used if a presidential election occurred during the recent contest. Where there was no presidential election, the vote choice in district or the party list vote is used. Those voters who supported any governing coalition member, identified by the CSES election reports, are considered to have won the election. Losers are the reference category. As government outputs influence citizens' democratic satisfaction, citizens' evaluations of the governments' performance since the last election are included (Dahlberg, Linde, and Holmberg 2015). Respondents rated the performance from very good to very bad, with higher scores indicating worse performance.

Additional outputs have been included at the national level. GDP per capita and the unemployment rate in the year prior to the election is included, as countries with superior economic conditions have been found to have higher overall satisfaction (Lühiste 2014).<sup>5</sup> The Liberal Democracy Index rating for the country is included to account for variations in the level

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<sup>4</sup> Identifying winners and losers by vote choice is standard in the satisfaction with democracy literature (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Blais and Gélinau 2007; Dahlberg and Linde 2016). Outcome could also be operationalized based on feeling close to a political party. Strategic voters and abstainers' satisfaction may still reflect the outcome of the party to which they are close. The results are robust to this alternative specification (Appendix 3).

<sup>5</sup> Unemployment was missing for Peru. World Bank data is used.

of democracy in the country (Coppedge et al 2020). This measure helps to distinguish the effect of perceived heterogeneity on satisfaction from the fact that party diversity is linked to the country's level of democracy (Wang 2014). A binary variable is also included for the form of democracy; the indicator identifies presidential systems as opposed to parliamentary or mixed systems. A measure of regime age is included, as citizens of older democracies are more engaged and party systems may be more stable; citizens in older democracies are also more likely to be satisfied democrats (Dahlberg, Linde, and Holmberg 2015). A measure of party-system size is included. Party polarization presents the left-right spread of a system's parties weighted by vote share (Dalton 2008).<sup>6</sup> The largest parties in a system tend to persist over time, even as new parties emerge, and they form the strongest impression of the actionable scope of ideological space in the country's politics (Gougou and Tiberj 2015), while systems with more parties are also more likely to have covered a larger issue space (Carey and Hix 2011). The weighted measure of system size accounts for the impact both of the number of parties and the narrative-dominating potential of large parties. The year prior to the election is used for GDP per capita, unemployment, and democracy rating to ensure that the measurement antedates the election, including elections that occur early in the year. This year more accurately measures the situation the respondent would experience before the election and the survey. The age, unemployment rate, and GDP per capita variables are scaled.

Cases are removed where the surveys did not include questions of interest.<sup>7</sup> Cases were also removed for elections in states that did not "meet conventional criteria for liberal

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<sup>6</sup> Because the metric excludes countries that are not "Free" according to Freedom House and excludes presidential-only races, Romania is dropped. This encourages this study's focus on democracies.

<sup>7</sup> Satisfaction with democracy was not addressed in Chile, and perception of difference between the parties was not addressed in Denmark and Norway. Political interest was not measured in



democracy,” meaning they were not rated Free by Freedom House leading up to the election (Dahlberg and Linde 2016, 5; also Dahlberg, Linde, and Holmberg 2015).<sup>8</sup> This maintains the focus on the functioning of democracy in true democracies; non-democracies are not comparable in terms of democratic functioning . The sample includes 28,662 respondents in thirty-three elections. As the satisfaction with democracy variable is a four-point scale, ordered logistic regression models are employed. The surveys were conducted within country, so responses are clustered by the election. Employing hierarchical models, rather than fixed effects models, avoids artificially inflating the significance of national-level characteristics, leading to false positives (Wells and Kriekhaus 2006). The module also contains a sufficiently large number of elections to use multilevel models (Bryan and Jenkins 2015). The use of ordered, multilevel mixed effects models is consistent with previous systemic satisfaction studies (Kim 2009; Blais and Gélinau 2007; Lupu 2015).

One might be concerned about endogeneity and the fact that some factors associated with views on party diversity are also associated with satisfaction with democracy. In this observational data, assignment to treatment is not random. To address this concern, propensity score matching is employed. The propensity score is the likelihood that a case would be in a particular treatment category given the covariates (Rosebaum and Rubin 1985). In this case, the likelihood that each citizen will perceive no, minor, or major differences between the parties is calculated based on individual and national characteristics. Conditioning on the propensity score

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Taiwan, and income quintile was not assessed in Latvia or South Africa. Perception of representation was not measured in the Netherlands. Union membership was not addressed in Spain or Chile, which also did not measure perception of government performance. Regime age is not available for Hong Kong or Iceland.

<sup>8</sup> This removes Belarus (Not Free), Hong Kong (Partly Free), the Philippines (Partly Free), Thailand (Partly Free), and Turkey (Partly Free). These countries also scored below 0.5 on the Liberal Democracy Index.

“recreate[s] a situation that would have been expected in a randomized experiment” (Thoemmes and Kim 2011, 92). With propensity score matching, respondents are then matched based on their propensity scores, their likelihood of being in a treated group, and the difference in outcomes in reported satisfaction of the pairs is the treatment effect (Bryer 2013). This means that cases are similarly situated except for the characteristic of interest – their treatment category – including in their likelihood of being in that treatment group. Because there are three categories in this case, triplet matches are identified. The differences between the pairs within the triplets are the treatment effects. Improved balance across the characteristics that influence likelihood of categorization in the independent variable of interest and the dependent variable signifies the approximation of random assignment: “The eventual strength of propensity score methods is dependent on how well balance is achieved” (Bryer 2013, 6). The following traits are used to match respondents, building on the satisfaction with democracy literature and Lupu (2015) and Anderson and Just’s (2018) work on party difference perception: age, gender, education, income, union membership, conservatism, ideological extremism, closeness to a political party, political interest, winner/loser/non-voter status, feeling represented by a party, presidential system, the effective number of electoral parties, ethnic heterogeneity, GDP per capita, unemployment rate, democracy rating, government performance evaluation, age of the democracy, weighted party system polarization, and election.<sup>9</sup> Employing a “rich set of covariates” improves the propensity score analysis (Thoemmes and Kim 2011, 93).

This research follows Lupu (2015) in setting aside possible dynamic effects. Changes in party positions over time can influence how citizens perceive the groups, their positions relative

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<sup>9</sup> Ethnic heterogeneity was measured using Alesina et al’s (2003) ethnic fractionalization scores, following Lupu (2015). Union membership is a binary indicator.

to each other, and the respondents' positions relative to the parties. Using data from a point in time, rather than a panel, however, requires focusing on the recent environment and election rather than the potential cross-temporal shifts.

## Results

[Table 1 here]

The direct effect of perceived party homogeneity is considered first. Individuals who perceive greater diversity among the parties are significantly more likely to be satisfied with their democracy's functioning (Model 1 in Table 1). This is consistent with the first hypothesis (H1a). It is also evident that those who perceive minor differences between the parties in their country are the most likely to be satisfied with their democracy (Model 2 in Table 1). They are substantially more likely to be satisfied than those who perceive no differences; the negative effect of perceived partisan homogeneity on satisfaction compared to minor differences is sizeable. Those who perceive major differences between the parties are less satisfied than those perceiving only minor differences, but the negative impact is far smaller. This pattern is consistent with the second hypothesis (H1b).

These models also show that older respondents and women are less likely to be satisfied. Higher earning, more educated, more ideologically-conservative, and more politically-engaged citizens, on the other hand, are more likely to be satisfied. Citizens who feel represented by a party in their system and winners are more likely to be satisfied. Respondents in wealthier countries are also more likely to be satisfied with their institutions' performance, as are those who live in more democratic and older democracies and who have a more favorable view of their government's performance. These findings are consistent with previous studies of citizen satisfaction. Party system polarization in the country and unemployment rate are not significant.

[Table 2 here]

The matching process, which attempts to match all treated cases, matched almost all of them. Of those identifying no differences between the parties, 99.63% were matched; 99.57% of those identifying major differences between the parties were matched. 32.70% of citizens perceiving minor difference between the parties were matched. The total matched set includes 12,356 triplets. The results shown here are for a caliper of 0.25 of a standard deviation and allow up to fifteen matches to be retained (Bryer 2013). Covariate balance across treatments is greatly improved by matching (Appendix 4), and there is strong common support across treatment groups (Appendix 5).

Comparing the treatment groups, the most satisfied group is those who perceive minor differences between the parties in their system (see Table 2). The average difference in satisfaction between those who perceive major differences and minor differences between the parties and no difference and minor difference between the parties is negative, meaning that the level of satisfaction value is greater for those perceiving some difference. The average difference between those who perceive major differences and no difference is positive, indicating that greater difference increases satisfaction relative to no difference. The significance is robust to changes in caliper size and number of potential retained matches (Appendix 6). This is consistent the second hypothesis.

The effect of perceiving party difference is dependent on how close one is to a political party. Being close to a political party moderates the effect of (not) perceiving a difference (Model 3 in Table 1). The closer one is to a political party, the less influential otherwise perceiving difference between the systems' parties is on citizens' satisfaction with democracy. These results also hold if closeness is measured with a dichotomy for being close to a political

party or not (Appendix 7). This is consistent with the prediction (H2). Similarly, the effect of party differences depends on whether the individual feels represented by a party in the system.<sup>10</sup> Feeling represented by a party moderates the effect of perceived partisan difference on citizens' system satisfaction (Model 4 in Table 1). This is consistent with the fourth hypothesis. Where similarity among the parties represents similarity to an approved position, homogeneity is less damaging to satisfaction and diversity is less valuable.

These results are robust to the inclusion of control measures for objective system polarization and the size of the party system. Alternative measures of party system scope – the effective number of political parties in the election and the absolute difference in the expert-assessed left/right ideology of the two largest parties in that election by vote share – do not substantially change the results (Appendix 9). This indicates that the satisfaction effect is a function of how the participants perceive their system to be rather than a function of how diverse is by some objective standard. This is consistent with the fact that “the actual partisan offerings seem to matter relatively little to how people see the spread of electoral options” (Anderson and Just 2018, 24). These results are also robust to the inclusion of the union membership, extremism, and ethnic heterogeneity measures, which were included in Lupu's (2015) study of propensity to perceive difference. While respondents' ideological extremism is significantly related to satisfaction, the others are not (Appendix 10).

## **Discussion**

Despite reports of increasing difference between political parties, some citizens perceive no difference between the parties in their country. The democratic process, however, expects

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<sup>10</sup> The frequency of feeling represented by a party varies across countries, with most people feeling represented. Brazil (2006) has the lowest incidence of feeling represented; New Zealand has the highest (Appendix 8).

voters to be able to distinguish among their political options. Theories of citizens' satisfaction with and commitment to democracy propose that the political differences between the parties are a fundamental force in satisfaction with a system's offerings and outcomes.

These results indicate that feeling connected to a party is a major driver of satisfaction with democracy. Citizens' systemic satisfaction is impacted not just by their own partisanship and sense of representation, by a party and in government, but also by the diversity of partisan profiles that they perceive in the system as a whole. Citizens prefer a democracy in which the parties are not uniform, but, at the same time, they would rather the parties not appear to be profoundly dissimilar. These results are consistent with prior research finding that citizens are pleased with democracies that offer policies that align with their views *and* offering options that would accommodate most other voters (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011; Kim 2009). Minor differences can cover that policy space and offer most voters a reason to view one party as closer to their preferences than another; major differences, on the other hand, may leave the impression that parties hold extreme positions and the median space is underserved.

Feeling close to a political party, which is itself a boon for democratic satisfaction, moderates this effect (Aldrich et al. 2020). Whether and the extent to which the parties are seen as different from each other has a stronger influence on the satisfaction of the citizens who are not close to a political party in their country than that of those that have a partisan identity. The relationship also holds when feeling represented by a party in the system is considered. However, the masses are becoming increasingly distrustful of and less involved with political parties (Linz and Gispert 2004). The practical influence of this relationship may decline in tandem. The greater the share of the population that feels alienated from the parties in the system, the greater the influence of the potentially-skewed perspective on the diversity of the parties in the system.

These results are presented with the necessary reservations of survey research. The results are from a single point-in-time, rather than a panel study. As such, the study cannot consider cross-temporal effects or feedback loops. Also, due to the availability of the necessary questions, the study relies on older data. Patterns and prevalences may have shifted over time. For instance, affective polarization occurred in the decades leading up to this module. Subsequent studies find slight affective depolarization in the US and some other countries, while others have not depolarized (Boxell et al 2020). It is possible that the identified differences between parties have shifted. This must be an area of further research. The study is also limited by the countries included. Countries opt to participate in the CSES, and only countries with an election in the module timeframe are includable. As such, the surveys represent a non-random sample of democracies. Additional surveys of this question would increase the generalizability of the results.

## **Conclusion**

This article has looked at the implications of citizens' impression that the parties in their democracy are or are not distinguishable from each other. The democratic system relies on parties' being distinct for there to be competition, choice, representation, and legitimacy. These surveys indicate that electoral systems are providing voters with diverse offerings, which most respondents recognize. Nevertheless, a non-trivial population is convinced of their equivalence. The focus here has been on the effect of those evaluations of the differences between the parties.

It finds that citizens who view their system as including a broad array of parties are more likely to be satisfied with their democracy's performance. That relationship comes with a caveat; major differences between the parties are dissatisfying relative to minor differences, although believing the parties are equivalent is substantially more displeasing. Ideological position and

anticipated policy outcomes are the primary linkages between parties in elections and citizens' satisfaction with democracy in the satisfaction with democracy literature. Voters want choices, which require difference, and they want those choices to cover the median ideological position, not just the extrema. Furthermore, widespread parties confront voters with severe ideological opposition and mean greater potential for large shifts in policy with each alteration of government. As such, the extrema to which parties may move are not necessarily conducive to democratic stability, even if they are supported or tolerated in that contest.

Connection with a political party significantly influences this relationship. Perceiving homogeneity in the systems' parties is less impactful for democratic satisfaction among citizens who are close to political parties in their system and citizens who feel represented by a party. They have more democratic buy-in already and are less likely to need to search their options, so the resource and attention costs are reduced for them. Additionally, they are less likely to experience gaps in the systems' offerings, because a party exists for them.

These findings thus have some troubling implications for democratic commitment. Several scholars have proposed that reserves of democratic satisfaction are necessary for democratic stability (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Curini, Jou, and Memoli 2011; Aldrich et al. 2020). Positive and negative specific support, over time, can form or erode diffuse support (Easton 1975). While scholars use satisfaction with democracy as a measure of specific support, Linde and Peters (2020) notably employ it as an empirical indicator of Easton's (1975, 444) concept of a "reservoir of goodwill" when measuring the extant social level of satisfaction. Additionally, satisfaction with democracy is significantly related to believing that democracy is the best form of government (Ridge 2020). In that case, a party system evaluation that reduces



satisfaction with democracy is undermining the reservoir of democratic satisfaction that is sustaining the citizenry's support for democracy as a system.

These findings present two avenues of threat. On one hand, citizens who see all parties as the same, may decline to engage the system. They would be less able to choose a party to join or to support. Unaffiliated citizens, an increasingly common phenomenon, tend to be less satisfied, and those who do not feel represented are also less satisfied. Citizens who cannot distinguish the parties will be less capable of identifying representation, and voting and other forms of political engagement will be more cognitively taxing. Popular dissatisfaction could then drive the citizens out of democratic participation. This is a normative problem for democratic legitimacy as fewer citizens would be involved in forming the supposedly representative government.

On the other hand, polarization in the United States and in other countries is pushing parties apart ideologically. Separatist movements, secularism, Euroscepticism, and other issues provide additional axes on which parties can distinguish themselves. The more profound these interparty differences appear to voters, the more likely it is that citizens who recognize these differences will become dissatisfied. Optimistically, they could support the development of intermediary parties, if they thought the system would sustain them. Pessimistically, it could push them to restrict their present democracy somehow to push parties back to a median space or to replace it in search of a more satisfying system. Such a result, even if it can be peaceably achieved, would not necessarily be a unified state or liberal democracy.

Figure 1: Citizens' Placement of the Four Largest Parties - Median

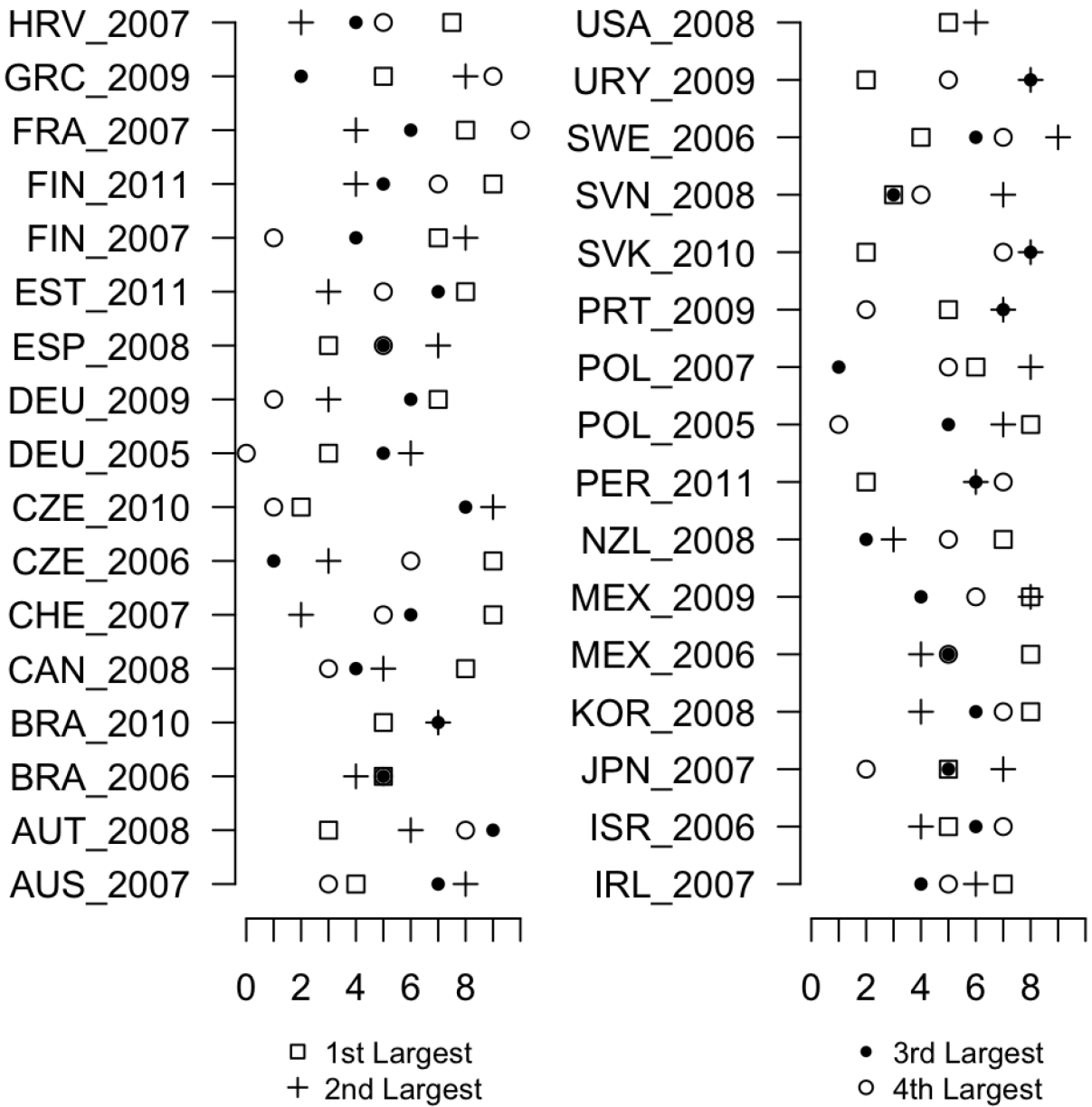


Figure 2: Citizens' Perception of Party Diversity

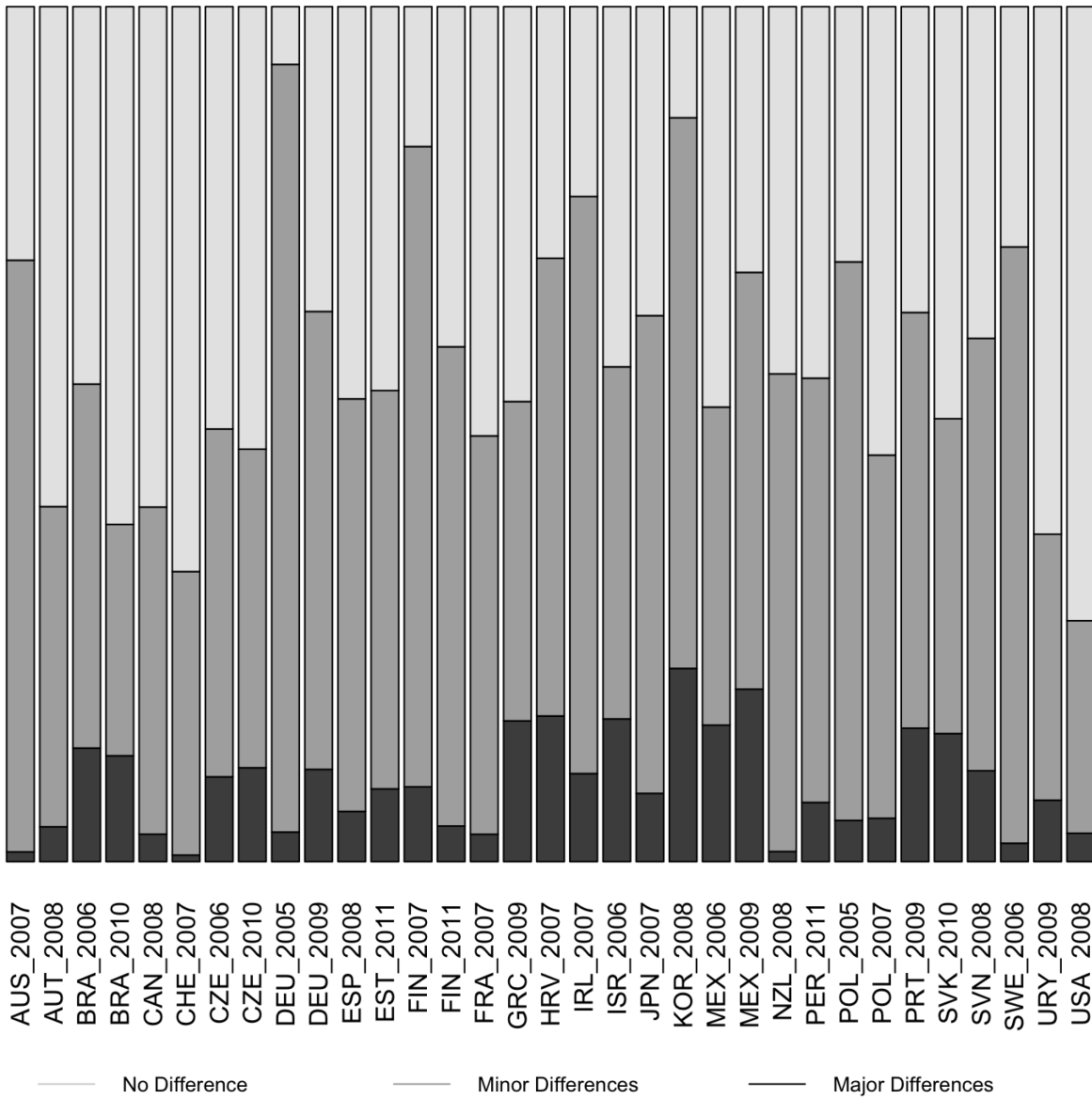


Table 1: Perceived Difference and Satisfaction with Democracy

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Perceived Difference between Parties	0.07** (0.02)		0.12*** (0.03)	0.14*** (0.03)
Perceived Difference between Parties (No Differences)		-0.40*** (0.05)		
Perceived Difference between Parties (Major Differences)		-0.07** (0.03)		
Closeness to a Political Party	0.07*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.16*** (0.04)	0.07*** (0.01)
Age	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)
Female	-0.09*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.02)
Interest in Political	0.19*** (0.02)	0.19*** (0.02)	0.19*** (0.02)	0.19*** (0.02)
Education	0.02* (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)
Income Quintile	0.09*** (0.01)	0.09*** (0.01)	0.09*** (0.01)	0.09*** (0.01)
Ideology	0.05*** (0.00)	0.05*** (0.00)	0.05*** (0.00)	0.05*** (0.00)
Represented by a Party	0.30*** (0.03)	0.29*** (0.03)	0.30*** (0.03)	0.59*** (0.09)
Government Performance Evaluation	-0.70*** (0.02)	-0.70*** (0.02)	-0.70*** (0.02)	-0.70*** (0.02)
Non-Voter	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Winner	0.55*** (0.03)	0.55*** (0.03)	0.55*** (0.03)	0.56*** (0.03)
Liberal Democracy Index	2.52* (1.17)	1.92 (1.04)	2.46* (1.06)	2.46* (1.04)
GDP per Capita	0.49** (0.15)	0.50*** (0.15)	0.50*** (0.15)	0.49*** (0.15)
Unemployment Rate	0.14 (0.09)	0.15 (0.09)	0.14 (0.09)	0.14 (0.09)
Regime Age	0.00* (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)
Presidential System	0.98*** (0.26)	0.97*** (0.27)	1.00*** (0.26)	0.98*** (0.26)

System Polarization	0.13 (0.07)	0.13 (0.07)	0.13 (0.07)	0.13 (0.07)
Perceived Difference between Parties:Closeness to a Political Party			-0.04* (0.02)	
Perceived Difference between Parties:Represented by a Party				-0.13** (0.04)
1 2	0.18 (0.92)	-0.51 (0.81)	0.26 (0.83)	0.30 (0.82)
2 3	2.33* (0.92)	1.64* (0.81)	2.41** (0.83)	2.45** (0.82)
3 4	5.58*** (0.92)	4.89*** (0.81)	5.65*** (0.83)	5.70*** (0.82)
AIC	58118.26	58053.70	58115.74	58109.81
Num. obs.	28662	28662	28662	28662
Groups (Election)	33	33	33	33
Variance: Election: (Intercept)	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.15

\*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<0.01, \*p<0.05

Table 2: Tri-Match Differences

Treatments	Mean Difference	T
Major Differences – No Differences	0.123	11.74
Major Differences – Minor Differences	-0.024	-2.48
No Differences – Minor Differences	-0.147	-14.83

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