


Conceptualizing and Measuring Citizens' Preferences for Democracy: Taking Stock of Three Decades of Research in a Fragmented Field

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Abstract

Research dealing with citizens' preferences for different conceptions of democracy has grown and diversified greatly. This has resulted in a highly fragmented field in which empirical evidence cannot easily be integrated into a consistent larger picture. This systematic review takes stock of this research to uncover the roots of existing inconsistencies and to show how future research can avoid them. It maps three decades of research regarding conceptualizations and measurement approaches that have been chosen to study citizens' preferences for democracy. By systematically carving out the variation in the chosen approaches, the review shows why existing research can hardly add up to a clear diagnosis regarding what kind of democracy citizens prefer. A critical discussion based on this review highlights that

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cumulative research will require a stronger conceptual and methodological integration between different strands in the literature.

Keywords

preferences for democracy, political culture, empirical democracy research, systematic review

Introduction

Democracies are under pressure across the globe. There are signs of increasing fatigue and widespread superficial adherence to democratic norms and principles as well as democratic backsliding in various countries (Graham & Svobik, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Wuttke, Gavras, et al., 2020). Yet satisfaction with democracy and democratic support are still high, particularly in Western societies (Martini & Quaranta, 2020). Given these contradictions, it is important to know not just how strongly citizens support democracy, but also *what kind of democracy it is that they support*. More concretely, we need to know how citizens want to see democratic rule realized: What preferences do citizens have regarding different models of democracy, and which democratic decision-making processes do they prefer? Within empirical democracy research, these questions are approached from different angles using diverse concepts and measures. We provide a systematic review of this empirical literature on citizen preferences for democracy.

Departing from seminal works by Easton (1965) and Almond and Verba (1963), empirical democracy research can be divided into three larger fields. The study of democratic norms and values is the first to mention. Highly influential studies have looked at the prevalence of norms and values that are supportive of democracy (Inglehart, 1997; Putnam et al., 1994) or more specifically at explicitly democratic values expressing a commitment to democratic principles (Gibson, 1996; Gibson et al., 1992; Seligson, 2000). A second important field is the study of support for democracy. Directly linked to Easton's (1965) work, aspects such as satisfaction with democracy and political trust as well as their antecedents and consequences have been studied from different angles in this line of research (Canache et al., 2001; Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016; Norris, 1999). A third strand deals with democratic preferences by examining people's conceptions of democracy, their preferences for certain models of democracy, or concrete decision-making processes. In other words, these studies ask what exactly people express support for when they state that they support democracy. This review will focus on this third line of research

that investigates citizens' democratic preferences, which took off especially in the 2000s.

Having an accurate picture regarding what kind of democracy citizens want, and whether they even have clear preferences, matters for assessing the stability of democracy and possible threats to it. Three decades of research produced a wealth of empirical insights on citizens' preferences concerning democracy. Yet, when looking at the entire breadth of findings, it seems that different conceptions of democracy are simultaneously popular. We know, *first*, that a majority of citizens primarily demand democracy in terms of rights, liberties, and procedures, traditionally associated with Dahl's notion of liberal democracy (e.g., [Canache, 2012a](#); [Dalton et al., 2007](#); [Tianjian Shi & Jie Lu, 2010](#)). *Second*, research has also shown that people commonly deem direct-democratic procedures an important part of democracy, with levels of support for referenda reaching 70% and higher (e.g., [Anderson & Goodyear-Grant, 2010](#); [Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009](#); [Bowler et al., 2007](#); [Coffé & Michels, 2014](#); [Fernández-Martínez & Font, 2018](#)). Existing evidence also shows, *third*, that sizable portions of populations endorse a so-called "stealth democracy" which leaves political decisions to independent experts while avoiding political debates and conflict (seminally, [Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002](#); see also [Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009](#); [Lavezzolo & Ramiro, 2018](#); [Webb, 2013](#)). *Fourth*, there has more recently been a surge of research on populist attitudes ([Rooduijn, 2019](#)). This attitude too expresses a preference for a certain form of democratic politics ([Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020](#), p. 2) and empirical evidence suggests that there exists widespread support among citizens for populism and a populist politics that aims to realize some true and unitary will of the people ([Castanho Silva et al., 2019](#); [Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, & Azevedo, 2019](#)).

This synopsis already illustrates that the existing empirical evidence is remarkably fragmented. Taken together, it is hard to tell what kind of democracy citizens prefer. This article aims to illuminate the roots of this disjointed state of scholarship by adopting a broad perspective that includes different strands in the literature. We contribute to the literature on citizen preferences for different realizations of democracy with a systematic review that provides a basis for strengthening the links between different subfields. Drawing on the analytical framework by [Munck and Verkuilen \(2002\)](#) and applying it to the demand-side of democracy research, three questions guide our study: *First*, which conceptualizations of democracy are studied, and how prevalent are they in the literature? *Second*, which measures are used to capture preferences for democracy? And *third*, which aggregation strategies have been adopted?

We address these questions with a review covering 98 empirical studies from the period 1990 to 2019. In doing so, we highlight commonalities in approaches, where important differences lie, and what consequences they

have for the coherence of empirical insights. Based on our findings, we distill lessons and desiderata for advancing the research on citizens' preferences for democracy.

Structure of the Systematic Review

Systematic reviews emerged from medicine and health sciences and are now gaining popularity in the social sciences as an approach to methodically assess the state-of-the-art in a given research field (Dacombe, 2018; Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Similar to empirical studies, systematic reviews use an analytic protocol that clarifies the theoretical focus of investigation, the sampling strategy, and the technique and evidence upon which the evaluation is based. Together, these steps are designed to increase transparency, replicability, and comprehensibility. In the following, we adapt the protocol proposed by Dacombe (2018, p. 150) for systematic reviews in political science.

Research Question and Analytical Framework

The main objective of our review is to examine how citizens' preferences for democracy have been studied. Our focus lies on contributions that study how citizens express preferences for certain realizations of democracy or forms of democratic decision-making. This encompasses studies that look at citizens' preferences of democracy which at least implicitly express some normative preference for a certain shape of democracy. It does not include studies on democratic support or its associated values. We aim to find out how relevant studies have arrived at empirical insights regarding the popularity of one or the other conception of democracy. This focus is critical for identifying the origins of inconsistent findings and critically evaluating which approaches for conceptualizing and measuring democratic preferences are more suitable than others.

As a framework that structures our systematic review, we draw on the contribution by Munck and Verkuilen (2002) whose critical evaluation of existing indices of democracy triggered major innovations in the empirical assessment of democracy as a regime type. Drawing on their work, we examine the studies in our sample along three analytic dimensions: On the *conceptual level*, we probe how different ideas of democracy have been conceptualized, which conceptions of democracy are most commonly analyzed, and which ones are frequently studied together. On the *measurement level*, we consider how items are linked to concepts to operationalize the different notions of democracy, what kind of indicators and how many are used to capture citizens' preferences, and to what extent there are inconsistencies. On the *aggregation level*, we look at the various strategies that have

been employed to aggregate individual items into larger dimensions or types reflecting preferences for certain conceptions of democracy.

Decisions on these three levels can ultimately lead to homogeneity or heterogeneity of the constructed measures and the generated empirical insights. If (1) some model of democracy is conceptualized in different ways; if (2) the number, the kind, and the substance of items differ for the same measured construct; and if (3) the aggregation strategies differ, it can be difficult to integrate empirical findings. [Table 1](#) sums up these aspects and the three overarching guiding questions.

Sampling Strategy, Data Collection, and Preparation.

Our systematic review spans the three decades from 1990 to 2019. The selection criteria were the following: We focus on those studies which provide at least some descriptive evidence on citizens' preferences (mean values or percentage scores). We included journal articles, book chapters, and books in English. We excluded conference and working papers. To ensure comparability of studies in our sample, we also excluded studies that did not use standardized survey questionnaires (e.g., focus groups) and/or relied on very small samples (i.e., less than 100).

[Figure 1](#) illustrates the sampling strategy based on these criteria. Sampling occurred in three steps to increasingly saturate our selection. We first did a database search using Scopus and Web of Science, which resulted in the identification of 125 contributions (without duplicates between and within databases and without non-retrievable articles).¹ 27 of these entries were

Table 1. Analytical framework of the systematic review.

Dimension	Main questions
Conceptualization	How are citizen preferences for democracy conceptualized? Which conceptions of democracy are adopted, and which are most prevalent in the literature? Which different conceptions of democracy are studied jointly?
Measurement	How are different conceptions operationalized? Are items linked to constructs ex-ante (before) or ex-post (after the) analysis? What kinds of, and how many, items are utilized? To what extent is there a convergence/divergence concerning the items employed?
Aggregation	What kinds of aggregation strategies have been used? Are items aggregated into dimensions or types? What kind of aggregation approaches are prevalent?

Analytic dimensions based on [Munck and Verkuilen \(2002\)](#).

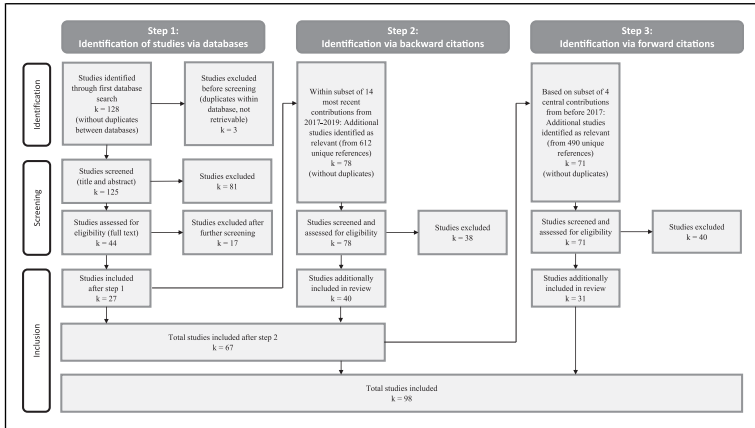


Figure 1. Process for including studies in the systematic review. Notes: Own depiction based on the PRISMA flowchart.

included in the sample after screening. Based on this first set of studies, we identified additional studies through backward and forward citation tracking (Heyvaert et al., 2017, pp. 94–95). In step two, using backward citations, we selected all studies published in 2017 and afterward in our initial included selection (14 studies) and checked all their references to identify further works. In step three, we identified four studies before 2017 as particularly central given their title, content, and popularity (Akkerman et al., 2014; Dalton et al., 2007; Donovan & Karp, 2006; Miller et al., 1997)² and checked the subsequent papers in which these studies were cited. Relevant contributions identified in this step were again screened to further saturate our sample. In this way, we ended up with 98 studies in our sample (see Supplemental Annex A1 for the complete list and Supplemental Annex A2 for the underlying sampling steps).³ While we cannot guarantee that we did not miss relevant contributions, the chosen approach is documented in a replicable fashion and we are confident that we comprehensively cover the breadth of studies dealing with citizens' preferences for democracy.

Analysis of the Material and Presentation of Findings

We aim to map systematically how citizens' democratic preferences have been studied in the past three decades. Our analytical framework distinguishes conceptualization, measurement, and aggregation as key steps in the research process (see Table 1). We translated these steps into coding categories, which we used to analyze the 98 sampled studies (see Supplemental Annex A3 for the codebook). We coded (1) whether theoretical constructs have been

predefined, and which ones and how many; (2) whether items are ex-ante or ex-post linked to theoretical constructs, and how many items were used per construct; and (3) what aggregation approach was chosen, including whether and which methods for scale- or type-building have been used. The dataset generated in this process has been furnished with background information about the geographic scope and the main empirical findings of the prevalence of the studied democracy preferences. For each guiding analytic dimension, we aimed to identify patterns pointing to relevant commonalities and differences. These patterns may exist both for individually-studied conceptions of democracy as well as between the conceptions. Given the exploratory nature of this endeavor, we use a repertoire of descriptive techniques.⁴

Conceptualization: How Has Democracy Been Conceptualized?

We first present how democracy has been conceptualized among the reviewed contributions. Concept formation lays the foundation for any empirical analysis (Sartori, 1970, p. 1038) and is therefore directly related to the resulting empirical diagnosis of citizens' preferences for democracy. Three aspects are important: *First*, does the study define conceptions of democracy before the empirical analysis? *Second*, how is democracy conceptualized? And *third*, is this conception studied in isolation or are different conceptions examined jointly?

Are Conceptions of Democracy Predefined or Not?

When probing what kind of democracy citizens demand and what they associate with the term democracy, the common approach is to predefine the conceptions of democracy to be measured; 81 out of 98 studies do this. Still, the remaining 17 contributions in our sample do not explicitly predefine notions of democracy but adopt an exploratory approach: They openly register what citizens associate with democracy or which aspects of democratic rule they deem important, but without presupposing specific notions of democracy before the measurement and the analysis. Prevalent conceptions are then identified *post-hoc* based on empirical results and their interpretation (e.g., Bratton et al., 2005; Canache, 2012a; Jamal & Tessler, 2008; Landwehr & Steiner, 2017; Miller et al., 1997).⁵ The general interest in these open-ended studies is whether citizens have any understanding of democracy and, if so, what the perceived core aspects of democratic rule are. In this, they differ from the rest of the studies in the sample which capture preferences for certain predefined conceptions of democracy.

It should be noted though that among those studies that do predefine conceptions of democracy, there are huge differences regarding the systematic

formation of concepts under study. Some contributions only briefly introduce the notions of democracy they examine (e.g., [Bedock & Panel, 2017](#)) or present them with the data and measures (e.g., [Tezcür et al., 2012](#)). In other words, this is more about measurement rather than clarifying the conceptual underpinnings. Others are much more explicit and provide extensive conceptual foundations that already prepare how they then measure the constructs of interest (e.g., [Kriesi et al., 2016](#)). With such variation on the conceptual level, disparate research aiming to study the same construct will hardly arrive at comparable empirical measures and findings.

Which Models of Democracy Are Posited?

Examination of the sampled literature reveals six diverse conceptions used to assess the preferences for democracy among citizens: liberal-democratic, direct-democratic, substantive, stealth-democratic, populist, and authoritarian. [Table 2](#) provides an overview of their grouping with a description of each.

[Figure 2](#) shows the frequency of the different conceptions of democracy, including those studies that do not explicitly predefine a specific model of democracy. The liberal-democratic conception is most frequently examined—by almost half of the studies in our sample. Direct, stealth, populist, and substantive democracy are all covered by between 18 to 27 contributions. The authoritarian conception of democracy occurs much less frequently (e.g., [Cho, 2015](#); [Jamal & Tessler, 2008](#); [Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007](#); [Welzel & Alvarez, 2014](#)).

Trends over time show that interest in liberal democracy—as well as for substantive and authoritarian democracy—has remained rather stable. Interest in direct democracy, however, was strong in the 2000s, whereas the 2010s saw a heavy increase in studies dedicated to stealth democracy and a huge surge in scholarly interest in populism (see [Supplemental Annex A4](#)). These trends are linked to real-world developments in the 2010s such as expert governments installed in the aftermath of the financial crisis or the fourth wave of populism in Europe and beyond, respectively.

How Many Conceptions Are Predefined, and Which Are Commonly Treated Together?

The reviewed studies differ regarding the number of conceptions of democracy they analyze. This aspect, especially whether only one or several conceptions are examined, matters for the findings and conclusions about citizens' preferences that one will arrive at. Only when probing support for multiple conceptions of democracy, is it possible to register the degree to which support for one conception can go along with support for another conception. This is a point we return to further below. As [Figure 3](#) shows, 37 out of 98 studies examine one predefined concept, followed by 28 that start from two conceptions. 14 analyze three concepts and two predefine four

Table 2. Categories for conceptions of democracy in the reviewed studies.

Conception	Short description
Liberal democracy	A conception of democracy following Dahl's (2000) idea of electoral/procedural components like free and fair elections and a set of civil liberties
Direct democracy	A conception of democracy that places great weight on the use of instruments for immediate citizen influence over political decisions (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009 ; Bowler et al., 2007)
Substantive democracy	A conception of democracy as primarily being instrumental to producing certain socio-economic outcomes or goals like justice, fairness, or equality (e.g., Baviskar & Malone, 2004 ; Canache, 2012a ; Oser & Hooghe, 2018)
Stealth democracy	A conception of democracy based on the idea of objective and efficient decision-making by experts without commotion or an active role of citizens (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002 , p. 143). Not all studies that cover such an elitist conception also expressly call it stealth democracy but rather speak of an elitist or expert/technocratic model of democracy (Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017 ; Rapeli, 2016)
Populist democracy	A conception of democratic politics that stresses the centrality of popular sovereignty based on the idea of a homogenous people, popular will, and opposition to decision-making by a political elite (Mudde, 2004 , p. 543; Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, & Dandoy, 2019)
Authoritarian democracy	A conception of democracy that entails conferring unchecked power to individuals or organizations like the army or religious leaders (de Regt, 2013 ; Kirsch & Welzel, 2019)

Liberal democracy also subsumes studies on democracy as “sunshine democracy” (e.g., [Nebló et al., 2010](#)) and “representative democracy”—as opposed to, for example, direct democracy (e.g., [Coffé & Michels, 2014](#)).

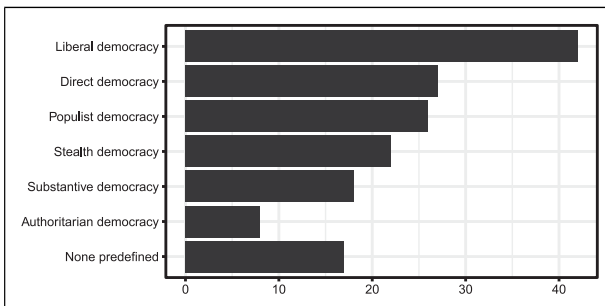


Figure 2. Coverage of different of conceptions of democracy in the literature. Notes: Own depiction based on coding the reviewed studies; x-axis displays the number of studies in the respective category.

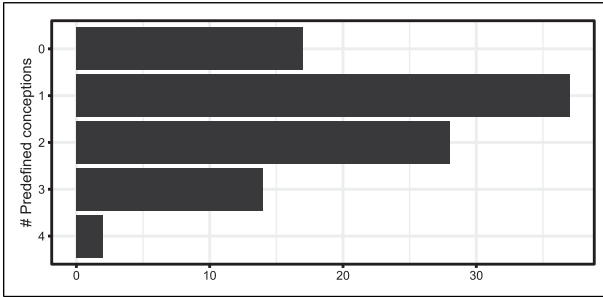


Figure 3. Number of predefined conceptions of democracy per study. Notes: Own depiction based on the coding of the reviewed studies; x-axis displays the number of studies in the respective category.

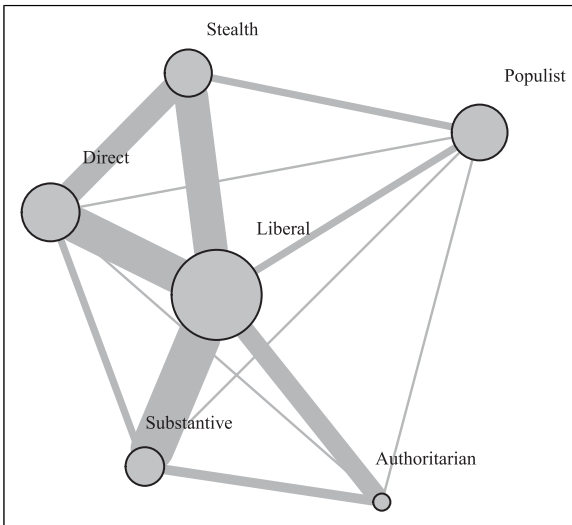


Figure 4. Prevalence of different conceptions of democracy and their joint treatment in the literature. Notes: Own depiction based on the coding of the reviewed studies; size of circles displays the prevalence of the conceptions in the literature and the thickness of the lines reflects the relative affinity between the conceptions.

concepts. Interestingly, the share of studies in our sample that do not expressly predefine conceptions of democracy decreased over time, while the number of conceptions that have been covered per contribution has remained constant over time, ranging between 1.5 and 1.7 concepts per study (see [Supplemental Annex A4](#)).

[Figure 4](#) presents the relative affinity between the different conceptions of democracy via a network structure: The thickness of the lines reflects how often conceptions are examined together, whereas the size of the circles

represents the prevalence of the conceptions. Liberal democracy is not only the central conception in the reviewed research, but it is also regularly studied together with substantive (18), direct (15), or stealth-democratic conceptions (14). The latter two are also frequently treated together (10). Populist and authoritarian democracy, in contrast, are rather peripheral and only rarely studied with other concepts.

Among contributions that examine one conception of democracy alone, it is commonly either citizens' preferences for direct or participatory democracy (Anderson & Goodyear-Grant, 2010; Bowler et al., 2007, 2017; Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan & Karp, 2006), preferences for stealth democracy (e.g., Ackermann et al., 2019; Atkinson et al., 2016; Lavezzolo & Ramiro, 2018) or populist attitudes (e.g., Fatke, 2019; Schulz et al., 2018; Spruyt et al., 2016). When two conceptions of democracy are treated together, we find various contrasting groupings. Yet, liberal democracy is most often included in the comparison. Some compare a liberal with a substantive conception (e.g., Baviskar & Malone, 2004, p. 4; Kornberg & Clarke, 1994, p. 542), others a liberal-democratic with a direct-democratic model (e.g., Allen & Birch, 2015; Bedock & Panel, 2017; Canache, 2012b; Coffé & Michels, 2014). Stealth democracy is similarly juxtaposed to either liberal or direct democracy (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Evans & Stoker, 2016; Fernández-Martínez & Font, 2018; Neblo et al., 2010; Rapeli, 2016; Webb, 2013). Among studies positing three conceptions, one finds a cluster of contributions that have examined the demand for liberal/representative, direct, and stealth/expert democracy (Bengtsson, 2012; Coffé & Michels, 2014; Font et al., 2015; Gherghina & Geissel, 2017; Medvic, 2019). Two studies, furthermore, stand out because they treat a populist preference together with preferences for stealth democracy (Mohrenberg et al., 2019) or together with both a stealth/elite democratic preference and demand for political pluralism (Akkerman et al., 2014). The study by Welzel and Alvarez (2014, pp. 62–63) distinguishes between the four conceptions of liberal (support for equal freedoms of citizens), social (support for redistributive justice), populist (support for providing “bread and butter” and “law and order”), and authoritarian democracy. Ulbricht's (2018) four predefined conceptions differ from this set by including direct instead of populist democracy.

Looking at the geographic scope of research on citizens' conceptions of democracy (see Supplemental Annex A5), it is furthermore striking that almost two-thirds of the reviewed studies cover European countries (including Russia), followed by the Americas (with 30 contributions), while Asia (18), Oceania (9), and Africa (9) are much less prevalent. We also observe that studies on favoring liberal democracy over substantive and/or authoritarian democracy take a broad perspective to compare established democracies to democratizing or non-democratic regimes. Populism and stealth democracy, on the other hand, have mainly been studied in the United States (U.S.) and

Europe. More than half of the studies (54 of 98) are single-country studies, whereas the study of only two countries is very rare (4 studies). Most comparative contributions cover between three to five (9), six to nine (8), or ten to nineteen (13) countries. Only ten contributions in the sample study more than that, with three contributions covering more than 50 countries (see [Supplemental Annex A6](#)).

Summary for Conceptualization

We conclude that research on citizens' preferences for democracy shows a discernible fragmentation at the conceptual level. The literature examines different conceptions of democracy, but most studies concentrate on only one or two of them. Substantive democracy is generally studied together with (at least) a liberal-democratic conception, as are stealth democracy and direct democracy. Strikingly, preferences for populism are rarely studied in conjunction with other conceptions of democracy. Liberal democracy is the central construct in the literature on citizen preference for democracy. There is, however, some variation in terms of how it is conceptualized. A preference for liberal democracy is sometimes phrased as liberties and freedoms, sometimes as procedures (e.g., elections), or both. Some variation also exists for substantive democracy, which is conceptualized in terms of different substantive outcomes comprising economic progress, social justice, the realization of certain rights, or several together. Finally, one study expressly ties a populist conception of democracy to a demand for substantive outcomes ([Welzel & Alvarez, 2014](#), pp. 62–63).

Measurement: How Are Different Conceptions Operationalized?

In the second step of our systematic review, we focus on measurement. The main question is how the different conceptualizations of democracy are translated into indicators to capture citizens' preferences. We consider four aspects of measurement: *first*, the linkage between conceptualization and operationalization; *second*, the number of items used; *third*, the substance of items; and *fourth*, a possible overlap of items used for different conceptions of democracy.

Inductive versus Deductive Approaches for Measurement

The sample reveals a wide range of ways to link indicators with conceptualizations of democracy. One major distinction is between deductive approaches, which link indicators to constructs before measurement and analysis, and inductive approaches, which empirically register responses first

and then connect them to conceptions of democracy. As [Table 3](#) shows, inductive measurement is used whenever conceptions are not predefined; but even where conceptions are predefined, we still find 13 out of 81 studies that inductively link measured responses to conceptions.

The inductive approach is mostly found in studies that rely on open-ended questions asking respondents what they associate with the term democracy, often with the possibility to state three responses. Responses to these open-ended questions are either grouped inductively into a set of categories ([Canache, 2012a](#); [Doorenspleet, 2015](#); [Miller et al., 1997](#)) or they are assigned to predefined constructs and categories ([Baviskar & Malone, 2004](#); [Canache, 2012b](#); [Dalton et al., 2007](#); [Tianjian Shi & Jie Lu, 2010](#)). A few studies, however, use a set of closed questions that capture different attributes of democratic politics, but without an a priori linkage to specific conceptions of democracy ([Landwehr & Steiner, 2017](#); [Sack, 2016](#); [Thomassen, 1995](#)). Instead, they connect items to dimensions and conceptions of democracy after statistically extracting such dimensions—a step that falls under the aggregation strategy discussed further below.

Almost 70% of our sample uses a deductive approach positing how indicators are linked to predefined conceptions of democracy. Yet, there is some variation in what kinds of items are used. While rating questions are dominant, particularly studies about stealth democracy also draw on ranking questions ([Medvic, 2019](#)) or use explicitly bipolar rating items that prompt respondents to evaluate a trade-off between different forms of democratic politics ([Allen & Birch, 2015](#); [Bengtsson, 2012](#); [Coffé & Michels, 2014](#); [Font et al., 2015](#); [Gherghina & Geissel, 2017](#); [Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002](#); [Rapeli, 2016](#)). Others have used closed questions asking respondents to choose one among several attributes as being most essential for democracy ([Jamal & Tessler, 2008](#); [Lu, 2013](#); [Zhai, 2019](#)).

Number of Items Used

Turning to the choice of items, one should note first that it is common practice in the reviewed studies to rely on data and survey items explicitly designed to

Table 3. Linkage between conceptualization and measurement.

Items inductively versus deductively linked to conceptions of democracy			
Predefined conceptions	Deductively	Inductively	Total
Yes	68	13	81
No	0	17	17
Total	68	30	98

Own depiction based on the coding of the reviewed studies. See the codebook in [Supplemental Annex A3](#) for details.

measure preferences for different forms of democracy (see [Supplemental Annex A7](#) for an overview of the data sources). This is done by drawing on custom surveys measuring conceptions of democracy (38 of the 98 studies) or by using large, institutional survey projects which included specific indicators of democratic preferences (e.g., the European Social Survey 2012, the World Values Survey, or the various Barometer surveys).

Yet, the choice of items for measuring these preferences is far from uniform. We find considerable variation in the number of items used. [Figure 5](#) illustrates this variation in constructs where these have been defined and linked to indicators before the empirical analysis. Looking at the number of items used to measure predefined conceptions of democracy, it is notable, *first*, that this number largely varies between one and five. There is a tendency to rely on only a few items for measuring preferences for direct democracy and authoritarian democracy. The clear outlier for direct democracy is one study that uses 13 items ([Dyck & Baldassare, 2009](#)). An exception, *second*, are measures of preferences for populist politics, which are regularly based on more than five items. *Third*, measures of preferences for liberal democracy vary widely in the number of formulated items. While many contributions use two to four items, several studies go much further and draw on ten or even more items to measure a liberal-democratic preference.

[Figure 5](#) does not cover studies that use the inductive measurement approach because these are not directly comparable. We can, however, observe that they include a variety of ways in which the items are linked to conceptions of democracy or instead are reported individually. It is notable that the number of items used in inductive approaches varies strongly. Many studies rely on a single, open-ended question. At the other end of the spectrum, some studies use a large item set of up to 31 indicators from which several attitudinal dimensions are derived.

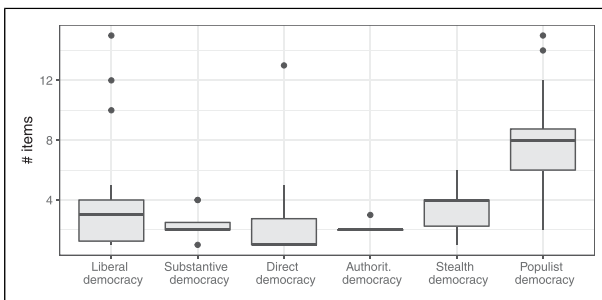


Figure 5. Number of items used in the reviewed studies (predefined conceptions only). Notes: Own depiction. Note that if the same item is used to cover more than one conception, such as with bipolar rating items, it is counted for each conception.

Consensus Concerning the Substance of Items

The registered heterogeneity in the use of indicators to measure preferences for different conceptions of democracy may already lead to different empirical patterns. Do we additionally find marked variation in the substance of the chosen indicators? The answer depends on the posited conception of democracy (see [Supplemental Annex A8 and A9](#) for details on the following discussion). The most frequently used items to capture a liberal conception of democracy measure the importance that people can choose their leaders in free elections, that civil rights are protected against oppression, and that gender equality is guaranteed. While almost 60 different items are present in the sample, these refer to similar core features of liberal democracy, indicating a high degree of consensus. Variation mainly exists regarding the conceptual breadth of the used indicator sets. For instance, we find a minimalist approach with only one item on the importance of free and fair elections ([Bedock & Panel, 2017](#)), and a maximalist approach with 12 items to capture a broad set of attributes characterizing liberal-democratic rule ([Kriesi et al., 2016](#)).

We similarly observe a high degree of consensus concerning other measures of democracy. The notion of direct democracy is usually based on items asking about the importance or the desired frequency of referenda, and about the importance of regularly investigating public opinion and promoting citizen participation (e.g., [Bedock & Panel, 2017](#); [Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009](#); [Dalton et al., 2001](#); [Donovan & Karp, 2006](#)). Several contributions draw on more items, but all similarly tap into support for direct citizen participation in decision-making or concrete instruments for direct citizen influence ([Bowler et al., 2017](#); [Coffé & Michels, 2014](#)). Substantive democracy boils down to six items which focus on the importance of socio-economic improvement, economic opportunities, and/or equality. The most common items for measuring substantive democracy are about taxing the rich and subsidizing the poor, unemployment aid, and protecting against poverty ([de Regt, 2013](#); [Kriesi et al., 2016](#); [Welzel & Alvarez, 2014](#)). The items used to capture an authoritarian notion of democracy are about religious interpretation of the law being an essential characteristic of democracy, the army taking over when the government is incompetent, and people obeying their rulers.

The picture is less clear for the study of stealth democracy. On the one hand, it is closely tied to the original item set developed by [Hibbing and Theiss-Morse \(2002, p. 143\)](#) who ask whether people agree that government would be run better if decisions were left to non-elected independent experts, if government would be run better if decisions were left up to successful business people, if politicians should stop talking and act on important problems, or if compromise in politics is just selling out one's principles. These items have become a standard for other contributions ([Ackermann et al., 2019](#); [Atkinson et al., 2016](#); [Coffé & Michels, 2014](#); [Font et al., 2015](#); [Webb,](#)

2013). Given their predominance, we identify only 12 different items linked to stealth democracy in the reviewed studies overall (not counting bipolar rating items).

On the other hand, criticism of these standard items has prompted alternative measures. Some scholars have examined which kinds of expert respondents prefer to govern and through which institutions (Fernández-Martínez & Font, 2018; VanderMolen, 2017). Others have complemented the original items with further items on expert decision-making (Font et al., 2015) or utilized alternative measures for expert democracy (Bengtsson, 2012; Bertou & Pastorella, 2017). Further variation is found in studies that explicitly measure stealth democracy in a trade-off with other conceptions of democracy (Coffé & Michels, 2014; Font et al., 2015; Gherghina & Geissel, 2017; Rapeli, 2016; Medvic, 2019).

Turning to populist preferences of democracy, the apparent consensus regarding the definition of populism by Mudde (2004) does not translate into coherent measurement. On the one hand, the measurement of populist understanding of democracy heavily concentrates on a core set of indicators formulated in the study by Akkerman et al. (2014), with the most common items measuring agreement with the following statements: that the people and not politicians should make the most important decisions, that politicians in parliament follow the will of the people, and that the political difference between the elite and the people are larger than the difference among the people. On the other hand, we count 73 different items in the reviewed literature relating to aspects such as elite character and actions, qualities of ordinary people, and trust in the judgment of the people.

Furthermore, there are marked differences regarding how indicators relate to individual subdimensions of populism. While the conceptual distinction by Akkerman et al. (2014) between popular sovereignty, anti-elitism, and a Manichean worldview is mirrored in other contributions (e.g., Castanho Silva et al., 2019; Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, & Azevedo, 2019), we also find several alternatives to this operationalization. Some studies do not include a measure for the Manichean worldview but instead use an indicator for anti-pluralism (Rico & Anduiza, 2017), or only rely on people-centrism and anti-elitism (Mohrenberg et al., 2019). One also finds different ways of capturing the “popular” element of populism. Whereas Fatke (2019) differentiates between items measuring popular sovereignty and people-centrism, Schulz et al. (2018) measure anti-elitism, popular sovereignty, and homogeneity among the people as three subdimensions. The authors also posit a Manichean worldview as an additional dimension which they see as cutting across the three other subdimensions and which they do not explicitly measure as a separate variable. In a similar vein, Spruyt et al. (2016) conceptualize preferences for populism as composed of four ideas but do not construct subscales to which the indicators are matched. Instead, they posit that their

eight indicators tap into the four core ideas of populism, with some items reflecting several of those ideas at the same time. In sum, despite the use of similar items, there is considerable disagreement in how these items link to the concept of populism and its subdimensions. This contributes to the use of different item sets and a differential weighting of conceptualized subdimensions.

Item Overlap between Conceptions of Democracy

Adding to the described variation regarding the measurement of preferences for democracy is the overlap of items, that is, the same item(s) being used to measure attributes that belong to different conceptions of democracy (see [Supplemental Annex A10](#)). For instance, it is notable that the study by [Welzel and Alvarez \(2014\)](#) uses support for referenda as an indicator of a preference for liberal democracy. This deviates from the conventional use of this indicator as a measure of support specifically for direct democracy.

Further overlap exists in items used to measure preferences for direct democracy and populism. For instance, some items that serve to measure people-centrism, that is, if respondents are inquired to state whether people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken ([Schulz et al., 2018](#)) or whether the people should have a final say through referenda ([Fatke, 2019](#); [Schulz et al., 2018](#)) are almost identical to items used to measure the preference for direct democracy. Indeed, studies on preferences for populism show that this attitude is markedly correlated with demand for citizen influence via referenda ([Jacobs et al., 2018](#); [Mohrenberg et al., 2019](#)). As contributions on support for direct democracy ([Bowler et al., 2007](#), p. 357; [Dalton et al., 2001](#), pp. 150–151) and on stealth democracy ([Font et al., 2015](#), p. 166; [Webb, 2013](#), p. 750) have cautioned, however, support for direct-democratic principles and institutions may go along with citizen preferences for other features characterizing a democratic regime. Finally, we also find some overlap between preferences for populism and stealth democracy. For instance, the item “elected officials talk too much and take too little action” used by [Akkerman et al. \(2014](#), p. 1331) and reproduced by others (e.g., [Jacobs et al., 2018](#), p. 527; [Rico et al., 2017](#), p. 451) has also been employed to measure a preference for stealth democracy, as described above.

Summary for Measurement

Looking at the measurement level, we see both homogeneity and heterogeneity. On the one hand, there are recurring measurement strategies for each of the covered conceptions. Preferences for liberal democracy are often measured with similar items and certain standard items exist for stealth democracy and preferences for populism, whereas preferences for direct

democracy are mostly measured with support for referenda. On the other hand, there is also a considerable variation in the measurement of individual conceptions. This concerns the questions of whether items are deductively or inductively linked to the concept, what kinds of survey questions are used, how many items are utilized, and the substance of the chosen items.

Strikingly, the same indicators are used for different conceptions of democracy, an overlap that can be discerned between, for example, preferences for populism vis-à-vis stealth democracy and direct democracy. This illustrates that conceptions are interrelated and that it is difficult to conclude from the existing research which conception of democracy citizens prefer. Expressing support for referenda, for instance, could reflect a preference for direct democracy and, at the same time, a preference for populism, but it would also be relevant to know which and how many citizens are direct democrats without populist preferences.

Aggregation: What Kinds of Aggregation Strategies Have Been Used?

Finally, we examine the aggregation techniques used in the sampled studies. To classify aggregation strategies, we have chosen the following four categories: *first*, separate preference dimensions when items or linear additions of items are used to represent conceptions of democracy, or studies that measure only one conception; *second*, separate associations of democracy, as an approach in which attributes associated with democracy, usually open-ended questions, are taken to represent different conceptions of democracy; *third*, preference trade-offs, as the explicit measurement of prioritization of one conception over another; and *fourth*, distinctive types that take preference dimensions/items as being *jointly* constitutive of a conception of democracy.

Prevalence and Description of Aggregation Approaches

The distribution of aggregation strategies in our sample shows a skewed pattern. Most studies either use attitudinal dimensions representing individual preferences (64) or measure independent stated associations with democracy (16). Only 10 use a typological aggregation logic, and similarly, few expressly measure preference trade-offs (8). Overall, there is a staggering variety of approaches to aggregation, along with the aforementioned distinction between inductive versus deductive measurement, as shown in [Table 4](#). The deductive approach of formulating items and generating preference dimensions predominates, but altogether six cells in the table are populated with at least four studies. Since the chosen overall measurement approach has direct consequences for what patterns one will ultimately extract from the data, it is hardly surprising that the reviewed research has amassed evidence that is difficult to

Table 4. Overall measurement strategies.

Aggregation approach	Inductive: Items ex-post linked to conceptions	Deductive: Items ex-ante linked to conceptions	Total
Separate preference dimensions	13	52	65
Separate associations with democracy	14	1	15
Preference trade-offs	0	8	8
Distinctive preference types	3	7	10
Total	30	68	98

Own depiction based on the coding of the reviewed studies. See the codebook in [Supplemental Annex A3](#) for details.

integrate into a coherent overall picture. We will next describe how these aggregation strategies work and how they shape the empirical insights produced. Elaborating these differences makes the spectrum of approaches to measure citizens' preferences for democracy more palpable.

Separate Preference Dimensions. Measuring preferences for democracy through separate preference dimensions, that is, by adding up rating items, can take several forms. They depend on whether an inductive or deductive method for aggregating items into dimensions is chosen and on whether an aggregation takes place at all. One approach is to look at items individually rather than combining them into dimensions. We find this approach mainly in contributions in which the liberal conception of democracy is combined with at least one other conception (de Regt, 2013; e.g., Fuchs & Roller, 2006), and in studies that measure a preference for direct democracy with a single item (e.g., Bedock & Panel, 2017; Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan & Karp, 2006).

A different inductive approach is to add up items in dimensions reflecting different conceptions of democracy, but without making explicit ex-ante assumptions about how these items are linked to these conceptions. Studies following this strategy employ structure-identifying statistical techniques to arrive at dimensions that bundle the items and then interpret the resulting dimensions as conceptions of democracy (e.g., Landwehr & Steiner, 2017; Thomassen, 1995). The intent of this inductive approach is to determine how a set of items referring to various aspects of democracy is reflected in the perceptions and evaluations of citizens.

This is different from other studies that make explicit assumptions about which items are linked to which conception of democracy. In their

measurement strategy, they partly follow theoretical assumptions alone (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2016; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Rico & Anduiza, 2017; Webb, 2013), or they additionally check a conceptually posited item structure with scaling methods, such as factor analysis (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Bengtsson, 2012; Font et al., 2015; Kornberg & Clarke, 1994; Neblo et al., 2010; Schulz et al., 2018; Spruyt et al., 2016; Thomassen, 1995; Welzel & Alvarez, 2014).

Notably, preference scales generated this way can be at odds with how citizen preferences for certain conceptions of democracy have been conceptualized. This is particularly the case for research on populist attitudes (see also Wuttke, Schimpf, et al., 2020). Various studies have expressly conceptualized this attitude as the combination of several attributes, but have not adopted a measurement approach that reflects this conceptual assumption (e.g., Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2018; Spruyt et al., 2016; Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, & Azevedo, 2019). Wuttke, Schimpf, et al. (2020) argue that the usual conceptualization of a preference for populism as being made up of several elements would mean taking different attributes or dimensions as *necessary* and *jointly sufficient* for a certain attitudinal type. The authors measure a preference for populism accordingly and show that this can make a major difference for the empirical results. They conclude that in comparison to an additive aggregation approach, the combinatorial approach leads to greater consistency between concepts and measures. Empirically, this means that the number of citizens with a populist preference will be lower. For instance, for German survey data, the authors report about 5% having a populist attitude based on the combinatorial measure, which is much lower than the roughly 30% obtained with the aggregative approach (Wuttke, Schimpf, et al., 2020, pp. 363–364).

A similar argument applies to other conceptions of democracy, such as liberal or substantive democracy. If one has generated several separate preference dimensions, a high score on one dimension, such as a liberal democracy dimension, does not necessarily mean that a person holds a preference purely for this conception of democracy. That person could also simultaneously have high scores on dimensions that reflect other conceptions of democracy which would mean that the person has mixed, possibly even inconsistent, democratic preferences. Yet, one can find studies that speak of people preferring a certain conception of democracy when they score high on one dimension alone, that is, without considering how they score on other measured dimensions (see, e.g., Bedock & Panel, 2017, pp. 400–404; Sack, 2016, p. 10).

Separate Associations with Democracy. Another set of studies probes meanings associated with democracy based on responses to open-ended questions. These responses are then grouped under different attributes such as rule of law

or equal opportunity (e.g., [Canache, 2012a](#); [Miller et al., 1997](#)) or models of democracy like liberal or substantive democracy ([Dalton et al., 2007](#)). This approach of categorizing responses usually means imposing a structure on citizens' preferences for democracy. Sorting responses into a certain category means that citizens will not be able to fall into other categories representing conceptions of democracy. Respondents' associations to the open-ended question about the meaning of democracy—which can be more than one response—are usually reported as the number or percent of mentions under the chosen categories ([Chu et al., 2008](#); [Miller et al., 1997](#)). In this case, however, they remain separate associations, and we do not know which associations go along with others and might together form types that correspond to different conceptions of democracy. The same applies to related studies that ask respondents with a closed question to choose one among four attributes as being most essential for democracy ([Jamal & Tessler, 2008](#); [Zhai, 2019](#)). In this way, one will get the dominant association by the very design of the survey question. As we note below, some studies depart from this approach by expressly combining several different associations with democracy into mixed types.

Preference Trade-Offs. Probing trade-offs between conceptions of democracy through the measurement and aggregation strategy can be done via ranking ([Lagos, 2008](#); [Medvic, 2019](#)) or with bipolar rating items ([Allen & Birch, 2015](#); [Bengtsson, 2012](#); [Coffé & Michels, 2014](#); [Font et al., 2015](#); [Gherghina & Geissel, 2017](#); [Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002](#); [Rapeli, 2016](#)). Such items directly reflect trade-offs as respondents must choose between conceptions of democratic politics. However, this approach is only rarely adopted in the studies included in our sample.

A second, indirect way of probing trade-offs relies on statistical methods to extract the relative importance of different conceptions of democracy. [Quaranta \(2018\)](#) uses an item response theory model to identify a continuum from a minimalist to a maximalist understanding of democracy as a latent trait behind nine attributes of democracy (recoded into binary variables). [Ulbricht \(2018\)](#) chooses yet another method and starts from assumptions about a normative ordering of conceptions of democracy which is then directly incorporated in a special scaling technique that arrives at preference scores reflecting priorities and trade-offs.

Distinctive Preference Types. Some of the reviewed contributions combine items or dimensions into attitudinal types. For instance, [Canache \(2012b\)](#) reports which first association with democracy goes along with which second and third association. It seems obvious that this typological approach will lead to different results than reporting associations with democracy separately, that is, without looking at combinations, and taking these associations directly as

citizens' conceptions of democracy. The same is true when a combinatorial approach is used to generate preference types based on preference dimensions. Some contributions generate types in this fashion based on conceptual considerations (Fernández-Martínez & Font, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2016; Welzel & Alvarez, 2014). A notable example in this regard is the aggregation strategy in the contribution by Ferrín and Kriesi (2016) which combines a liberal democracy index (composed of a liberalism index and electoral process index), a social justice index, and a direct democracy index into overall 9 types. Among these types, "uncommitted democrats" and "fully committed democrats" form polar opposites with various combinations lying in between.

Other contributions take a data-driven approach and use cluster analysis (Bengtsson, 2012; Carlin & Singer, 2011; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007) or latent class analysis (Oser & Hooghe, 2018) to generate citizen types with different conceptions of democracy. Bengtsson (2012) has combined variable-oriented scaling to create attitude dimensions from individual items with a case-oriented cluster analysis to identify which attitudinal patterns are present in the Finnish population.

Overall, with a combinatorial aggregation strategy, we can detect types favoring a certain conception of democracy that can be distinguished from mixed preference types, that is, types with preferences for different models of democracy. This is important because, for instance, preferences for a liberal conception of democracy mixed with authoritarian or with substantive traits are hardly comparable to pure preferences for liberal democracy. If, in contrast, one looks at individual scales separate from each other, it remains unknown whether a preference for certain elements of democratic rule is simultaneously present with preferences for other elements (on this point, see also Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007, pp. 643–644; Bengtsson, 2012, p. 52).

Summary for Aggregation

Additional heterogeneity is introduced with the aggregation strategy when it comes to the variety of adopted methodological approaches. Given that research on preferences for democracy deals with different conceptions, one might expect that a combinatorial measurement viewing attributes as necessary for a certain attitudinal type would frequently be used. However, only a few studies adopt such an approach. The clear majority extracts preference dimensions independently from one another, and these are supposed to represent conceptions of democracy. Other studies arrive at measures of an explicit trade-off between conceptions of democracy or report which associations with democracy people have while these associations are asked in a fashion that leads to mutually exclusive associations.

Notably, generating separate preference dimensions using scaling methods has become a predominant approach in the 2010s. The research on a populist

attitude, where this approach is common, has done this frequently. Furthermore, we also find that preference trade-off measures are almost exclusively found in the 2010s in our sample (7 of 8), and of the ten studies generating types, nine also fall in this decade (see [Supplemental Annex A11](#)). There has been, thus, a detectable shift in how conceptions of democracy are measured.

On the level of aggregation strategies, it becomes apparent that the variation we observe in measurement will not lead to the same empirical patterns, even when studying the same constructs. It makes a difference whether one probes the degree to which citizens endorse a specific conception of democracy based on an additive dimension that fits with simultaneous preferences for other conceptions, or whether one measures if citizens exclusively or primarily adhere to a certain conception of democracy.

Discussion

The initial observation of this review has been the high degree of fragmentation in the literature on preferences for democracy. Given the breadth of conceptual and measurement approaches we have systematized above, it becomes palpable why the amassed evidence on citizens' democracy preferences is hard to integrate into a coherent picture (for a similar argument, see [Carlin, 2018](#); [Carnaghan, 2011](#); [Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016](#)). Taking up the guiding questions of this review, the main source of fragmentation and incoherence seems to be the lack of standard procedures for conceptualization and measurement regarding the various conceptions of democracy. Consequently, the comparability of empirical findings is low, and cumulative knowledge production is hindered.

Heterogeneity in conceptualization and measurement ultimately makes a difference for the actual empirical results. One can illustrate this by pointing to some contributions in our sample that study the same concept for the same geographic area but use different measurement approaches. For instance, [Shin and Cho \(2010\)](#) find considerably varying levels of support for substantive democracy and procedural democracy in the East Asian countries using open-ended versus closed questions. The literature on direct democracy offers similar inconsistencies. [Bowler et al. \(2007\)](#) find that 67% of British citizens demand direct democracy realized through referenda. However, based on the use of a trade-off question in a survey fielded in the United Kingdom, [Allen and Birch \(2015\)](#) obtain an average score of 4 on a scale from 1 to 7, with the highest value reflecting the strongest preferences for representative versus direct democracy. This finding at least partly qualifies any registered clear support for direct democracy. A related example is a study by [Dalton et al. \(2001\)](#), which finds that 55% in Germany favor direct over representative democracy,

while the study by [Bowler et al. \(2007\)](#) registers 81% of citizens favoring direct democracy in Germany.

Another example that we want to highlight concerns inconsistencies within research on stealth democracy. [Bengtsson and Christensen's \(2016\)](#) study on Finland using rating items reports the strongest preferences for direct democracy, followed by representative and only then expert/stealth democracy. [Rapeli's \(2016\)](#) study on Finland, which uses a trade-off item instead, similarly finds that citizens favor representative over expert democracy. Yet, these conclusions are not supported by [Bengtsson \(2012\)](#), who performed a cluster analysis beyond considering preferences for direct, expert, representative democracy separately. According to her study, the cluster favoring expert democracy is almost as large as the largest cluster, which favors direct democracy. The cluster primarily demanding representative democracy is the smallest of the three clusters identified. Discrepancies similarly emerge for the U.S. when looking at the findings by [Hibbing and Theiss-Morse \(2002\)](#) in comparison to those by [Medvic \(2019\)](#), who uses a ranking-based approach; and for the Netherlands when comparing the simple rating measures and the trade-off items used within the study by [Coffé and Michels \(2014\)](#).

Finally, [Kriesi et al. \(2016\)](#) show that pure types, or groups that see only one element of democracy as highly important, are very rare. Having first created three preference dimensions for liberal, direct, and social democracy, they combine these scales into types depending on whether any of the three conceptions are seen as highly important elements of democracy or not. Only about 15% of citizens in the studied European countries want democracy as liberal democracy without simultaneously showing demand for substantive and direct democracy. This is quite different from [Dalton et al. \(2007\)](#) who find 60% of citizens in established democracies have a preference for liberal democracy rather than a substantive or a direct-democratic conception of democracy using an open-ended question. Further, [Kriesi et al. \(2016\)](#) show that pure direct democrats (with support for minimal liberal-democratic features) only amount to one percent. Most citizens (about 60%) demand liberal democracy plus social and/or direct democracy.

These comparisons altogether show that the conclusions we draw about which conceptions of democracy prevail in the population will be markedly shaped by the chosen approaches to conceptualization, measurement, and aggregation, and some of them may easily hide relevant information. This has important implications, which we discuss below along with desiderata for future research.

Desiderata for Future Research

Why should we care about the fragmentation of research on citizen preferences for democracy? One reason is that such fragmented research invites

disparate, possibly conflicting conclusions about the state of democracy on the level of citizen preferences. A precise picture of the (alternative) democratic procedures and decision-making processes citizens prefer is essential for designing effective reforms that can address signs of democratic fatigue or erosion. Based on our systematic review, we argue that one of the most important desiderata for future research is contextualization. By this, we mean that attitudes toward conceptions of democracy should not be studied in isolation but as preferences for alternative realizations of democratic principles. If, for instance, populist preferences are studied in isolation, we do not know whether parts of the citizenry prefer populism to liberal-democratic politics or hold (possibly inconsistent) preferences for both. Similarly, if preferences for populist democracy are not analyzed in contrast to direct democracy, crucial nuances concerning the preferred form of democracy are missed. That has serious consequences because the reforms which are called for by these two types of “democrats with adjectives” are quite different. To address the issue of contextualization, we offer three relevant future avenues for research on citizens’ preferences for democracy related to conceptualization, measurement, and aggregation.

First, scholars should consolidate strategies of conceptualization concerning the different types of democracy. Here, greater uniformity and coherence but also distinctiveness of the concepts seem warranted (see also [Carlin, 2018](#), p. 415; [Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016](#), p. 695). Efforts in this direction would benefit from considering how different conceptions of democracy relate to each other such that they avoid conceptual overlap. This requires specifying what are truly distinctive features of individual conceptions, what are shared attributes, and how attributes may only jointly be constitutive of a given conception of democracy. Such a combinatorial approach speaks to the idea of understanding citizen preferences for different conceptions of democracy as attitudinal types. It implies that a range of attributes of democratic politics can go together in different ways, making up qualitatively different yet interrelated types (e.g., direct democracy and populist democracy as related but distinct conceptions of democracy). This combinatorial approach would mirror on the demand-side, that is, the citizen level, what Varieties of Democracy ([Lindberg et al., 2014](#)) provides on the supply-side.

Second, ways to measure preferences for democracy should equally be consolidated and clarified. In this respect, we advocate a combinatorial measurement approach that builds types from preference items or dimensions based on corresponding conceptual considerations (e.g., [Bengtsson, 2012](#); [Kriesi et al., 2016](#); [Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007](#)).⁶ The advantage of such an approach to capture democratic preferences becomes apparent against its alternatives: separately measuring the agreement with individual conceptions of democracy based on rating questions, for instance, does not tell us how much people prefer some conception over others. Trade-off questions, in turn,

provide this information but suffer from the problem that they force respondents to state a clear preference. Ultimately, though, trade-off measures cannot register that considerable parts of the population may simultaneously endorse different conceptions of democracy, even ones that researchers might deem incompatible (Cho, 2015; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007; Welzel & Alvarez, 2014). In contrast, the combinatorial approach can detect citizens who purely or primarily adhere to one conception of democracy, but also may show some degree of overlap—such as liberal and direct democracy or populism and stealth democracy.

There are thus strong reasons to opt for an aggregation approach that combines attributes into distinctive yet related attitudinal types, and that makes it possible to detect mixed or inconsistent types. Such an approach would also stay true to the fact that “democratic belief profiles” (Carlin, 2018, p. 399) are made up of different configurations of elements that show different degrees of overlap and distance. From this, it follows that relying on scaling procedures alone is insufficient for studying the prevalence of conceptions of democracy among citizens (Carlin & Singer, 2011, pp. 1507–1508; Miller et al., 1997, pp. 159–160; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007, pp. 643–644). Scaling procedures are variable-oriented and show how items combine into larger dimensions. They do not tell us how certain expressed preferences or attitudes combine into types of citizens and how large these groups are.

Third, researchers need to specify the attitudes or preferences they intend to measure. Some of the concepts, like liberal democracy, are fully fledged models of democracy, while others, like direct democracy, are modes of decision-making.⁷ One way to move forward would include insights from qualitative and experimental studies on democratic support which have shown that levels of support vary considerably depending on whether questions focus on an abstract notion of democracy or assess actual features of the democracy in practice (e.g., Carnaghan, 2011; Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016). Against this backdrop, it will be worthwhile to capture abstract features of a specific conception in addition to concrete modes of politics and the working of the respective democratic regime (see, e.g., Font et al., 2015).

In sum, the literature on citizen preferences for democracy would benefit from both more focus and more breadth. Conceptualization and measurement approaches should focus on the key aspects of each conception of democracy and consolidate existing measures to capture them. In doing so, one needs to consider distinguishing (combinations of) features as well as overlap among the different conceptions of democracy. Scholarship with a combinatorial approach of aggregation could uncover different attitudinal types among citizens reflecting preferences for certain conceptions of democracy *over* other conceptions. Such an approach would automatically guarantee more breadth in the analysis of preferences for democracy. Conceptions of democracy would no longer be studied in isolation with limited informative value

regarding citizens' actual preferences. Rather, we would get a more accurate picture of what kind of democracy citizens prefer.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online

Notes

1. Search string for the database search: (citizens AND attitude AND (“meanings of democracy” OR “conceptions of democracy” OR “understanding of democracy” OR “definitions of democracy” OR “meaning of democracy” OR “direct democracy” OR “participatory democracy” OR “Stealth democracy” OR “Populist attitude”)).
2. These studies were chosen to better cover the different strands of research on meanings of democracy (Dalton et al., 2007; Miller et al., 1997), direct democracy (Donovan & Karp, 2006), and a populist attitude (Akkerman et al., 2014). We did not take the seminal study for stealth democracy in this step as stealth democracy is a very specific term that we also used in our search string.
3. Besides studies with very small samples or qualitative methodology, we excluded studies at the stage of further screening for eligibility if they did not present descriptive evidence on conceptions of democracy, focused only on democratic support or on other aspects rather than conceptions of democracy (e.g., in the field of media studies when explaining media preferences) or were otherwise only narrowly interested in a conception of democracy as an explanatory factor.

4. Replication materials and code can be accessed via Harvard Dataverse (König et al., 2021).
5. Several studies do not easily fit this distinction because they do not expressly predefine different conceptions of democracy before the presentation of empirical evidence, but they rely on indicators that were formulated with certain conceptions in mind (see [Supplemental Annex A3](#) for details).
6. We have only touched upon the fact that concepts and measures in research on citizen preferences for different types of democracy are frequently only loosely connected in this review. Here, recent innovations in concept formation (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019; Goertz, 2020) could offer fruitful ideas for more explicit conceptualization and measurement templates.
7. Specifically, the concepts of stealth democracy and direct democracy are often employed to capture preferences for a certain way in which decisions are taken. However, one also finds contributions in which direct democracy (e.g., Coffé & Michels, 2014; Dalton et al., 2001; Kriesi et al., 2016) or stealth democracy (Evans & Stoker, 2016; Fernández-Martínez & Font, 2018) are more comprehensively treated like models of democracy that go beyond merely decision-making. Hence, sometimes, certain conceptions are closer to forms of decision-making while others come closer to models of democracy. In other cases, references to both, democratic models and forms of decision-making, can be found without explicit distinctions between them (e.g., Fernández-Martínez & Font, 2018; Gherghina & Geissel, 2017).

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