GOOD QUESTIONS, DUBIOUS INFERENCES, AND BAD SOLUTIONS:
SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS ON SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY

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Abstract
I evaluate claims made in a recent paper, which challenges the validity of the widely-used Satisfaction with Democracy (SWD) indicator (Canache, Mondak, and Seligson 2001). I argue that the study falls short because the evidence presented in the paper does not actually nor necessarily lead to the inferences the authors draw. Because the results are open to many crucial challenges and interpretations, they are insufficient to indict the preponderance of studies that have made use of the SWD indicator and that have moved our understanding of political support forward in important and interesting ways. I argue that the paper does not make a very strong case against the measure, tells us little we do not already know, and does not seek to advance our theoretical understanding of political support. Maybe most importantly, it does not offer a solution to the problems it purports to identify. I also suggest more fruitful and constructive ways to deal with the potential ambiguity of the indicator.

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In a recent paper Canache, Mondak, and Seligson [CMS] (2001) challenge the validity of the widely-used Satisfaction with Democracy (SWD) indicator. Based on correlational and factor analyses of data collected in Romania, El Salvador, and 17 Latin American countries, the authors argue that the satisfaction with democracy measure frequently used in comparative studies of political system support is fatally flawed and therefore of little value for understanding cross-national variation in political system support. They conclude, accordingly, that all prior research that makes use of the indicator is essentially meaningless. Such strong statements and the momentous consequences they suggest warrant closer scrutiny. Below, I attempt to provide such a reevaluation of the arguments and the evidence the paper provides.

To begin, it is difficult to argue with the idea that it is good scientific practice to make sure that the indicators we use measure what we think they measure. And clearly, a number of scholars have used the satisfaction with democracy indicator for different purposes in cross-national research on political system support. Given the prominence of the indicator in recently published research in the area of system support, I understand the motivation underlying the study, and I share several of the concerns the authors outline regarding the proper use of the item. In particular, I share the worry that imperfect indicators may stifle progress toward a better understanding of theories and evidence in research on political system support. At the same time, however, I am skeptical that the evidence offered in this article leads to the inferences the authors draw; worse yet, I would argue that they fail to move us forward in any meaningful way.

Put simply, the results of the study show several things. First, they show that the satisfaction with democracy measure is correlated with measures of specific support and measures of institutional confidence. Second, they show that people think of different things when they are asked to specify what they are satisfied with. Finally, the evidence the authors rely on to make their case is collected in countries that clearly constitute a biased sample of contemporary democracies. As a result, the results presented by CMS are hardly new, they constitute a set of exercises open to crucial challenges and alternative interpretations, and they are certainly insufficient to indict the preponderance of studies that have moved our understanding of political support forward in important and interesting ways. Thus, in the final analysis, the paper does not make a very
strong case against the satisfaction with democracy measure because it does not tell us anything we do not already know, because it does not seek to advance our theoretical understanding of political support, and because it does not offer a solution to the problem it purports to identify.

**Stipulating the Evidence: Old Hat and A Strawman**

Primarily, CMS purport to show that the satisfaction with democracy measure is correlated with indicators of specific support and people’s confidence in public institutions. This is part of the evidence is easy to stipulate; one problem is, however, that this is hardly novel. We have known for quite some time—going back to the Citrin-Miller debate in the 1970s and much research in comparative politics—that indicators of specific and diffuse support are correlated. Moreover, as the authors point out, recent studies (e.g., Klingemann 1999; Kornberg and Clarke 1994) have shown more specifically that the satisfaction with democracy indicator is correlated with both specific and diffuse measures of support. Yet, as is also well established in the empirical literature, satisfaction with democracy is not the only measure of political system support that has the property of correlating with other measures of political system support—in fact, virtually all do. Thus, the results presented here are not new, not even in the context of developing democratic regimes, and contribute little to what we already know.

CMS also probe the validity of the satisfaction with democracy indicator by making use of an open-ended measure (based on a small Romanian sample) to show that people associate different things with the satisfaction with democracy measure. But would not virtually any survey item of political support have this property? However, I seriously doubt that this means the item is, therefore, invalid. If we were to ask the question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as President?” and then were to follow up with “Please name one aspect/thing about his handling of the job as President that you approve/disapprove of,” we also would be likely to get a number of responses ranging from his environmental policy, to the state of the economy, his personal life, or his relations with Congress (and we could think of
Does this mean that the presidential approval question is a bad item for measuring specific support? More importantly, because the approval question means different things to different people, should we therefore conclude that it is wise to throw out all prior research on presidential approval? In my mind, this does not pass the strawman test.

**Challenging the Inferences**

When examining the inferences CMS draw, it also is important to take a step away from the empirics and take a look at the theory underlying empirical studies, such as the ones the authors criticize. The starting point for most studies of political support is the classic work by David Easton who argues that the legitimacy of democracies is affected by the extent to which citizens trust government to do what is right most of the time (Easton 1965, 1975). Easton distinguishes between diffuse and specific support, arguing that the political community, regime, or incumbent authorities can all be the objects of citizen support. Diffuse support is taken to be a long-standing predisposition, an “attachment to a political object for its own sake” that “taps deep political sentiments and is not easily depleted through disappointment with outputs” (Easton 1965: 274). Thus, diffuse support refers to evaluations of what an object is or represents, not of what it does. Specific support derives from a citizen’s evaluation of system outputs; it is performance-based and short-term.

Diffuse support consists of “a reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed or the effect of which they see as damaging to their wants” (Easton 1965: 273). A political system relies on reserves of diffuse support to tide it over during periods of inferior short-term performance. Lack of specific support can—in the long run—carry over to more general feelings of dissatisfaction with the political system. Although specific support is necessary for the maintenance of a government (or administration) in power, diffuse support is needed to uphold a political system as a form of government (see also Dalton 1988).

Although these ideas had an immense influence on the study of political system support, researchers
have long recognized that Easton’s concepts have both theoretical and empirical shortcomings. On a theoretical level, it is clear that Easton’s two categories do not exhaust the possible varieties of political support (Thompson 1970; Weatherford 1986, 1987, 1992; Lambert, Curtis, Brown, and Kay 1986; Küchler 1991). The object of a citizen’s support does not have to be—and probably cannot be—reliably separated in terms of the system and the system’s outputs. As a result, the translation of Easton’s conceptual definition of diffuse and specific support to empirical observation is fraught with peril (Norris 1999). In fact, the difficulties of separately measuring diffuse and specific support are enormous and, I would argue, virtually impossible to overcome: separate indicators of the two have long been known to be highly correlated (Loewenberg 1971; Kaase 1988).

This, of course, is something CMS find as well. As a result, it is easy to question the validity of any measure of political system support—including the satisfaction with democracy indicator—that is correlated with other measures of specific and diffuse support. All this also means in the final analysis, however, is that the distinction between diffuse and specific support has mainly been relevant at the conceptual level, not in the world of empirical social research (Fuchs 1993), and that it is easy to pick on any one indicator for failing a test most indicators would fail as well.

Aside from the fact that CMS do not add to already well-established correlational findings among measures of diffuse and specific support, the inferences the authors draw are open to other important challenges. In good part, this is the case because correlations can be inferred to mean different things. They may indicate that two survey items tap into the same (or a similar) underlying concept. Or, and this is equally plausible in a world of theory-driven research, they may indicate the existence of relationships among theoretically meaningful concepts. That is, finding that measures of support for the incumbent government’s policies are correlated with support for the political system, for example, does not imply that the two are measures of the same thing. To use an even more absurd example, few scholars would claim that a strong correlation between economic conditions and presidential approval means that the two measure the same underlying phenomenon. Thus, the correlations presented here are far from conclusive as validity tests for
the satisfaction with democracy measure and could equally be construed to lend support to the inference that
they are evidence for Easton’s idea that the different levels of political support, ranging from more specific
to more general, can be correlated in predictable ways. CMS ignore this possibility, possibly because it is
contrary to what they seek to demonstrate.

The paper also neglects to disclose fully how other, similar tests that already have been published
might affect their own analyses and the conclusions they draw. The discussion of Klingemann’s (1999)
results regarding the validity of the different measures of system support is particularly telling. The authors
argue (p.508) that the evidence presented by Klingemann is too mixed to be viewed as definitive: “SWD and
Klingemann’s four-item regime performance scale are correlated at a level of .46, a mark that is at once too
high and too low to resolve how SWD relates to system support.” Later on, in their analysis of other items,
the authors argue (p.515) that a high correlation between an item and an alternate indicator denotes that they
represent the same construct.

Using the criterion championed by CMS, the Klingemann results actually are very clear. Those who
routinely work with individual level survey data know that a .46 correlation is very high. Given that there
is measurement error and that we would expect cross-national differences because of differences in context
and language differences, a .46 correlation is actually quite convincing and substantial. Klingemann’s results
also show that the intra-country correlation ranges from .30 for Belarus and .55 for East Germany. Maybe
most importantly, the correlations are considerably higher than any of the correlations presented by CMS in
this paper and meant to invalidate the satisfaction with democracy measure on grounds of tapping into too
many different dimensions of political system support.

In fact, the results reported by CMS suggest strongly that the satisfaction with democracy most
consistently measures regime performance. Examining the correlations in the Latin American countries, the
authors argue that (p.522) “The one bit of constancy is that system support is significantly related to SWD
in all nations.” This is hardly cause for alarm; in fact, it is likely to be good news! Looking at the results, one
cannot help but be struck by the similarity of the coefficients across such a large and diverse number of
countries (Table 4). Again, given the well-known problems inherent in cross-national survey research (e.g., problems of translation and data collection, especially in less developed countries like those analyzed here), this suggests pretty uniform support for the conclusion that satisfaction with democracy is correlated consistently with measures of institutional confidence—that is, measures of regime performance. Taken together, then, it appears clear that the correlation of the satisfaction with democracy measure and the regime performance indicators in the Klingemann analyses coupled with the authors’ own evidence of somewhat lower, but consistent, correlations with institutional confidence shows that SWD indeed measures regime performance as argued by Klingemann (see also Norris 1999).

In addition, by focusing on individual-level cross-sectional correlations, the authors examine only one limited chunk of the validity of the indicator as a measure of political system support. Even if the evidence presented by the authors were unequivocal, what about other criteria for validity, such as face validity? Any indicator of system support must ask about an object that refers without doubt to the political system, and respondents must be able to give different evaluations of the object (Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson [1995, 330]; Muller, Jukam, and Seligson [1982, 246]). Asking about how democracy works in the respondent’s country clearly relates to the political system; providing four response categories allows respondents to evaluate the system positively or negatively. There is little doubt in my mind that the measure passes the face validity test. A strong case can be made that an item asking people about the working of (=performance) democracy (=an object more general than, say, incumbent political authorities or any one institutions such as parliament) and how satisfied they are with it (=asking people to render a positive or negative evaluation) taps into support that is focused on the performance of the political system as it exists in reality.

An additional test of the validity of the indicator not considered by the authors would be to see whether it has certain properties. For example, any indicator of general system support (such as the satisfaction with democracy measure) should be more stable than, say, an indicator of support for political authorities (such as executive approval). As it turns out, we know this to be the case (cf. Fuchs 1993; Fuchs,
Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995). Moreover, general system support should be systematically higher in older
democracies than in newer ones (we know this to be true as well; cf. Anderson 2001; Klingemann 1999;
Tóka, 1995). And the link between specific support and system performance on one hand and the satisfaction
with democracy measure should be much stronger in newer democracies where there is less of a reservoir of
diffuse support.

And What About the Sample?

Aside from the arguable interpretations of the evidence provided in the article, the data themselves
are of questionable utility for validating the satisfaction with democracy indicator. In fact, I would argue that
the countries chosen to validate the construct allow only a very limited test of the construct’s usefulness for
testing theoretically meaningful relationships among concepts. After all, most of the theoretically-driven
empirical research that uses the satisfaction with democracy indicator has been conducted on the older,
established democracies of West Europe. Thus, even if the evidence were to invalidate the indicator (which,
in my mind, it clearly does not), then this would hardly be cause to throw out the indicator for conducting
research in the mature European democracies.

Incidently, I agree with the authors that it is yet to be established whether the construct has or should
have leverage in new democracies. Given the authors’ focus on Latin America, I suspect that they feel that
the satisfaction with democracy item is particularly problematic in that context. I, too, wonder about using
the indicator in the context of newly established democracies. And if I interpret their unease correctly, I
would argue that it is incumbent on those using this particular indicator anywhere other than the old
democracies to elaborate on whether it is a good idea to ask people about how “democracy” and how it
“works.” According to the Freedom House indicators, for example, Romania was not considered “free” until
1995-96 and anyone who recently has been to Romania (as the authors presumably have) knows that asking
the average Romanian about democracy and how it works is a challenging undertaking (similarly, El Salvador
was considered only partly free until 1996-97, and both Romania’s and El Salvador’s democracies are clearly
different from the West European or North American democracies previous research has focused on). Similarly, Freedom House scores for the group of 17 Latin American countries used in the cross-national analysis show that they are considerably less democratic than the countries in which the indicator has most prominently been used (and they only recently have had significant improvement in these scores).¹

Thus, I would agree with CMS that using this particular question wording about how democracy “works” in countries where democracy may not be in operation or is not yet fully consolidated is likely to be problematic and in need of further validation. In fact, it is a bit like asking Pete Rose how it feels to be in the Baseball Hall of Fame. At the same time, I find it a questionable strategy to use this sample of new, transitioning, and non-democracies to study a construct that has been used mostly to examine regime performance in established democracies. To invalidate a large body of research conducted in the established democracies of the West on the basis of a sample of countries that are far from representative of contemporary democracies is premature at best.

**What’s Good for the Gander . . .**

Interestingly, the authors do not employ the same standards they apply to the satisfaction with democracy measure for validating their own indicators of system support and support for democracy. For example, are the institutional confidence measures they use, apparently without much worry, valid indicators of “system support” or do they, as Klingemann argues, measure regime performance? One could certainly argue the point, given the question wording etc., that they are indicators of support for specific institutions and not support for the system as a whole.

Curiously, CMS do not provide the kind of information used to test the validity of the satisfaction with democracy measure for the items they use to tap into specific and system support. For example, it is unclear what the correlations among the variables shown in the tables are. This makes it difficult to assess
how well the items used to test different “levels” of system support share the shortcomings identified by the authors in the SWD measure. Incidentally, results of factor analyses reported by the authors (but not reported in tables) indicate that the scales overlap (p.516, footnote 10). Using these scales when they overlap significantly seems to indicate to me (using the authors’ own criteria) that they do not allow for a completely separable test of the correlation between specific and system support on one hand and the satisfaction with democracy measure on the other.

Generally speaking, it also is arguable how useful the multivariate results are, given that the models are likely to be incompletely specified. Moreover, the exclusion of specific support items from the Latinbarometer for the calculation of the multivariate results poses a problem because we now lack an important control variable. Thus, it is unclear how much faith we can have in these multivariate results, which compare the size of the coefficients.

Similarly, question wording is an important issue that is not well addressed. In the introduction, the authors state that the satisfaction with democracy question asks about how democracy “works” in the respondent’s country. This is, in fact, not always true. It is only true as far as I know for the Eurobarometer and the Latinbarometer questions. The Central and Eastern Eurobarometers ask, for example, about how democracy is developing (something the authors acknowledge), and there are other variants still.

Where Do We Go From Here?

It seems to me that if there are questions about what the item measures, the authors have two options: First, they could propose a better measure and then use this improved measure to test to see if the results of studies that have used the satisfaction with democracy indicator to test theories of political system support can be replicated. This is, for example, what Norris does in her (1999) paper on institutions and support where she replicates important elements of the Anderson-Guillory study using alternative measures of regime support. The second option would be to find a way to salvage the satisfaction with democracy indicator. As
it turns out, the authors followed neither strategy. Instead, it appears that CMS chose the least constructive way to proceed by seeking to tear down the indicator (and the research that has employed it) without putting something in its place.

More generally, before accepting too hastily the recommendation to throw out many years of valuable research, it would be crucial to know how the tests reported by CMS affect the conclusions we have reached in the literature. To argue that “The view defended by Kaase and Anderson and Guillory is, in essence, that we should shoot first and ask questions later” (p.510) seems to greatly overstate and simplify what these authors are after. These researchers argue that, in the absence of a better item (which the authors, incidently, do not supply), the satisfaction with democracy measure is a reasonable (albeit imperfect) indicator that we can use to test our theories. Hopefully, we will be able to develop even better indicators later that can then help to validate the research that has been done with this indicator. That is, it would be much preferable to seek a triangulation of evidence using different items and methodologies, not to throw out what took years to achieve.

There seems little basis for the authors’ argument (p.524) that “... nothing in the preceding pages provides grounds for optimism.” I would argue exactly the opposite. Nothing in the CMS paper invalidates existing theories. For example, how are theories about the effects of economic performance and incumbent government support on system support undermined by the results presented here? In what way are these conclusions challenged by showing that the satisfaction with democracy measure is correlated with institutional confidence and measures of specific support? I was expecting the authors to focus their attention on what they argue should be done; namely to develop superior indicators (p.510). These, then, could be used to test existing theories and maybe show that these relations do not hold using different (better) indicators or other kinds of evidence. Yet, the authors provide no alternative measure, the findings do not undermine existing theories, and they do not help researchers test such theories.

One cannot help but get the sense that the paper’s agenda is to invalidate the satisfaction with democracy item. It seems clear that the working assumption was that the satisfaction with democracy
measure is meaningless; consequently, the analytic strategy is designed to find confirming evidence for this view. The results clearly do not prove that the satisfaction with democracy indicator does not measure any dimension of political support. In fact, they show that it does. If we use a different starting assumption, namely that the satisfaction with democracy indicator does measure something, the evidence can be interpreted to show that it measures regime performance and is somewhere in-between specific support and institutional confidence.

Thus, in the end, the conclusions thus profoundly and inappropriately overstate the “findings” of the paper. To liken the satisfaction with democracy indicator to a variable whose label and identity has been lost is not warranted; similarly, to argue that “It makes as much sense to compare satisfaction with democracy in Panama, Paraguay, and Peru as it does to compare the weather in France with the cost of living in Austria and with employment opportunities in Belgium” (p.525) speaks more to a presumptive hostility toward the indicator than an effort to figure out in what way it can help us develop and understand theories of political support. Given the severity of the indictment, the evidence is simply insufficient to throw out the indicator for good.

Instead, the second, and in my view more constructive and preferable option, therefore would be to make an attempt at salvaging the satisfaction with democracy indicator. Given the authors’ professed concern with theoretically meaningful constructs, it would have been much more constructive to try and validate the indicator by examining its usefulness for testing different theories of system support. Viewed from this vantage point, even the findings reported by CMS are, for example, consistent with Easton’s idea that there are different levels of support that are correlated for a reason. Another test of Easton’s ideas would be to examine the relationship between specific and diffuse support over time in order to test the argument that people develop a reservoir of diffuse support that may erode over time if specific support is persistently low. It seems to me that an additional test of the validity of the indicator would be whether eroding specific support would empty this reservoir of diffuse support. This would require data collected over time, which are available for the West European democracies from the early 1970s to the present and for the East European
countries from the early 1990s to the present.

Alternatively, it would be useful to whether different measures of system support are similarly affected by important independent variables, such as economic performance or vote choice. If the satisfaction with democracy indicator is invalid, then it should not be affected by similar underlying factors as more valid measures of system support. Whether this is indeed the case is a question most fruitfully explored in future research.

A more statistically-minded solution might be to purge the existing indicator is somehow of those effects CMS deem to be undesirable. This would allow us to replicate previous research that has used the indicator. This also would allow researchers to continue to use an indicator that is widely available and that can then be used to validate existing theories and expand our knowledge base about theoretically meaningful relationships among concepts.

To make it sound as if scholars chose the indicator willy nilly to measure whatever they say it measures overstates the case and maligns much thoughtful and interesting research in the area of comparative political behavior. Close reading of this literature reveals that those who view the satisfaction with democracy measure as an indicator of system support usually have been very explicit about which aspect of system support they think it measures (e.g., Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995; Anderson and Guillory 1997). CMS argue that those who view the satisfaction with democracy measure as an indicator of system support are interested in using it as a proxy to measure support for a country’s constitution, institutions, and electoral formula, e.g. (p.506, note 1). This is not the case. Instead, those researchers argue that the indicator measures the functioning of these rules. By now, most argue that it measures the performance of the system, not the system as an ideal or set of formal rules; what Fuchs, et al. call a country’s “constitutional reality” (Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995: 328).

Simply put, I would suggest that we avoid throwing out the baby with the bathwater. This is also eminently reasonable on practical grounds. Few data sets permit an analysis of mass political support across a meaningful number of contemporary democracies. The Eurobarometer data sets criticized by CMS are, for
example, among the few that do. I, for one, wholeheartedly agree with Kaase who notes the potential problems with the question wording of the satisfaction with democracy indicators, but finds that “... there is little point in deploiring conceptual and operational ambiguities in the wording of the questions” (Kaase 1988: 120). While there are other indicators of diffuse support, they are not available across a great number of countries.

None of this is to argue that the satisfaction with democracy measure is perfect. In fact, few, if any, indicators are. However, it is meant to point out that the criticisms advanced by the CMS are quite simply overstated, open to challenge, and, on occasion, incorrect. Moreover, it is intended to contend that the measure is more than adequate for the task at hand as long as its use is theoretically well-motivated and confined to a relatively narrow definition of system support.

To be sure, CMS’s challenge to consider whether our measures do a good job is welcome; they ask the right question, but I think they draw the wrong inference. Moreover, although they ask a good question, they do not provide a single constructive solution. Unfortunately, I think that the problem may not be so much with the indicators we use, but with the theories that generate them. Thus, in the end, any doubt regarding the satisfaction is likely to stem from theoretical weaknesses, not empirical ones. These weaknesses can be alleviated most fruitfully by using all theoretical and empirical resources at our disposal—including the satisfaction with democracy indicator—not to discard them on the basis of arguable evidence and the desire to discard measures that fall short of perfection.
Notes

1. While both Romania and El Salvador were rated as free at the time the data were collected in these countries, democracy as a system of government clearly is of more recent vintage in these countries relative to, say, Western Europe. Similarly, 10 of the 17 Latin American countries were rated only as “partly free” in 1996-97, while virtually every Western country scores at or near the top of the freedom rating and higher than every country in the sample of Latin American countries, except for Costa Rica.

2. In fact, the specific support and institutional confidence scales overlap in the Romanian case, for example, because the prime minister and parliamentary confidence measures load highly on both the authorities and institutional confidence factors. This means that they are not distinct.

3. Similarly, the authors do not provide the question wordings on the different variables measuring confidence in institutions variables or even the exact question wording of the satisfaction with democracy measure used here.
References


