

How Political Elites Think About Democracy: Evidence From Europe

Marco Improta , Elisabetta Mannoni , and Francesco Marangoni 

Department of Social, Political and Cognitive Sciences, University of Siena, Italy

Correspondence: Elisabetta Mannoni (elisabetta.mannoni@unisi.it)

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Abstract

Political elites are not only decision-makers but also key interpreters of democracy. Yet, we still know little about how they understand democracy across its different dimensions. Using an original elite survey from the REDIRECT project covering elected elites in eight European countries, we examine five conceptions of democracy: electoral, liberal, social, direct, and populist. Our findings show broad elite support for democracy, but important differences in how democracy is understood. Electoral and liberal democracy are widely shared, whereas direct and populist conceptions are more contested. Democratic views are shaped by both individual and contextual factors. Education strongly affects support for unmediated forms of democracy, while ideology matters mainly for social democracy. Evaluations of democratic performance and national contexts also influence elite understandings of democracy. Overall, we find both convergence and variation in elite democratic views. These findings have important implications for democratic representation in contemporary Europe.

Keywords

democracy; democratic views; Europe; political elites

1. Introduction

Scholars have long recognised the difficulty of defining and measuring how political actors understand democracy (Parry, 1969; Sartori, 1987). This challenge is particularly acute when studying political elites. In this article, we deem it crucial to understand how elites conceive democracy, given their role as decision-makers and interpreters of democratic norms. Yet, assessing the content and coherence of elite democratic ideals remains difficult. There are two (interrelated) reasons why this problem persists. First,

political elites in democratic systems are intrinsically pluralistic (Dahl, 1989). They differ by social background, ideological orientation, institutional roles, and political trajectories, which makes them less identifiable as a consistent monolithic group. Second, elites are widely understood as strategic actors (Czudnowski, 1991), mainly concerned about seeking reelection (Mayhew, 2004). Their beliefs about democratic mechanisms, and even about democracy's core values, may adapt to political incentives that frequently change, and to competitive pressures and institutional contexts (Higley, 2006). Together, these features traditionally make any attempt to identify stable and coherent elite conceptions of democracy a complex task.

The development of comparative empirical research, particularly following the behavioural revolution, enabled researchers to more directly address these issues by analysing the perceptions expressed by political representatives themselves. A landmark contribution in this respect is Putnam's comparative study of political elites in the United Kingdom and Italy in the 1970s (Putnam, 1973). With the aim of combining large-scale elite survey data with qualitative insights, Putnam showed that even in a period marked by relatively stable party systems and elite configurations, democratic beliefs among elites were far from uniform. In both countries, but especially in Italy (a younger and more institutionally fragile democracy), elite attitudes clustered around multiple, distinct conceptions of democracy. Drawing on the literature, Putnam identified at least four such conceptions: polyarchic, liberal, classical, and socio-economic (Putnam, 1973). Importantly, he showed that this variation could be explained not only by socio-structural characteristics, education, and partisan affiliation, but also by historically embedded national traditions. Although his two-country design did not allow for systematic cross-national testing, his analysis clearly pointed to what he famously described as a "tug of national tradition" (Putnam, 1973, p. 239). Political style, cognitive orientations, and democratic ideals, he argued, were deeply shaped by country-specific historical trajectories. Since then, empirical research on political elites has expanded considerably and now constitutes one of the most developed areas in political science. Yet, defining the extent to which elites operating within a given political system can sustain a coherent and shared understanding of democracy remains difficult. The concept of an "elite settlement," central to the elitist reinterpretation of liberal democratic theory (consider, for instance, Higley & Burton, 1998), presupposes a degree of normative convergence among elites. However, this assumption increasingly clashes with evidence that political representatives have limited synoptic capacity and are influenced by contingent and destabilising factors.

This erosion of elite coherence has become particularly visible with the decline of the ideological glue that historically bound European party families together (Mair & Mudde, 1998; von Beyme, 1996). Over the first decades of the 21st century, this decline has contributed to significant and often unpredictable party system realignments, especially in Europe (Chiaramonte et al., 2025). These dynamics have been most pronounced in systems where the emergence of a "thin" post-ideology centred on people-centrism (Canovan, 1999; Katsambekis, 2022) has reshaped both representation and governance. In such contexts, challenger and populist actors have exerted substantial influence on elite recruitment and behaviour (Borri & Verzichelli, 2021; Meijers et al., 2025). The anti-elitist rhetoric associated with contemporary populism entails a delegitimisation of representative roles and intermediary institutions (Rooduijn, 2014). This, in turn, reinforces a long-standing paradox of liberal democracy: the asymmetry between elites' representative authority and their capacity to credibly embody popular sovereignty (Held, 2006, p. 125). As a result, elites may find themselves simultaneously defending democratic institutions and confronting narratives that question the very legitimacy of mediated representation.

Elite studies face clear empirical constraints. They are more costly, less systematic, and less conducive to long-term analysis than mass surveys (Best, 2007). Consequently, we lack comprehensive comparative evidence on how elite democratic attitudes evolve over time. Nevertheless, the original data generated by the REDIRECT project's (Verzichelli et al., 2025) elite survey provide a unique opportunity to explore key interpretative hypotheses related to what has been described as a growing "representative disconnect" (Verzichelli, 2025). More importantly, these data allow us to examine how elites themselves understand democracy at a time when representative institutions are under increasing strain (e.g., Rey, 2023). In this article, we focus on some levels of variation that are particularly relevant for understanding contemporary elites' democratic views. The first is cross-national variation, echoing Putnam's emphasis on country-specific political traditions. The REDIRECT elite survey includes politicians from several major European democracies, and this allows us to carry out a systematic comparison between representatives operating within the core institutional framework of the European Union and outside of it. The second level of variation concerns ideology. Specifically, we examine the potentially residual influence of ideological traditions and party family affiliations on elite democratic convergence, and compare representatives of populist parties (Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn et al., 2024; Zulianello, 2026) with those affiliated to non populist ones.

Building on these considerations and drawing on an original dataset of elected politicians' attitudes, in this article we adopt a multidimensional approach: We distinguish five different conceptions, i.e., direct, electoral, liberal, populist, and social democracy.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Political elites have long occupied a central position in theories of democracy (Higley & Burton, 1998; Putnam, 1973). From the classic contributions of Michels, Mosca, and Pareto to more recent comparative research, elites have been understood not only as decision-makers but also as key carriers of democratic norms and values. In representative democracies, elites are indeed entrusted with the task of translating abstract democratic principles into institutional practices and political choices. As a result, their understanding of democracy plays a crucial role in affecting how democratic systems function in practice. At the same time, we learned from past research that democracy is not a singular or uncontested concept (König et al., 2022). Political theory and empirical research alike have emphasised that democracy encompasses multiple dimensions, which may coexist, overlap, or come into tension with one another (e.g., Held, 2006). Electoral competition, liberal constitutional guarantees, social equality, direct citizen participation, and populist appeals to popular sovereignty all represent distinct, and sometimes competing, understandings of what democracy entails. Political elites may endorse democracy as a general principle but diverging substantially in the importance they attach to these different dimensions. Early empirical studies of elites already recognised this plurality. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, we know from Putnam's (1973) comparative analysis of British and Italian political elites that elites were able to combine commitment to democratic procedures with markedly different normative orientations toward participation and representation. Subsequent research has reinforced the idea that elite consensus on democracy often coexists with disagreement over its more specific manifestations and proper functioning. In this sense, elite support for democracy should not be equated with a uniform democratic worldview.

Building on this tradition, we adopt a differentiated perspective on elite democratic views. We distinguish between five conceptions of democracy that capture both established and contested elements of

democratic governance. Electoral democracy refers to the centrality of competitive elections as the primary mechanism for translating popular preferences into political authority. Liberal democracy emphasises constitutional constraints, checks and balances, and the protection of individual rights against majoritarian encroachment. Social democracy highlights the role of redistribution, social protection, and equality as integral components of democratic life. Direct democracy focuses on plebiscitarian instruments and forms of participation that allow citizens to bypass (or complement) representative intermediaries. Finally, populist democracy frames democracy as the unmediated expression of a homogeneous “people,” often in opposition to political elites, institutions, and intermediary bodies. These democratic views differ not only conceptually but also in their relationship to elite authority and mediation (e.g., Martini, 2025). Electoral and liberal democracy have historically constituted the institutional core of representative democratic systems and have become deeply embedded in elite norms and practices (MacKuen & Rabinowitz, 2003). Social democracy, which is also institutionalised in many European countries, remains more closely linked to ideological conflict and distributive disputes (Meyer & Hinchman, 2007). Direct and populist democracy, by contrast, challenge established forms of political mediation to varying degrees and have often been mobilised as critiques of representative institutions and elite decision-making (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Altman, 2010; Dalton et al., 2001; Leemann & Wasserfallen, 2016; Lupia & Matsusaka, 2004).

From this perspective, variation in elite democratic views can be expected to reflect both individual-level characteristics and, more generally, the political contexts. At the individual level, classic elite theory points to the importance of socialisation processes associated with education and professional political careers (Putnam, 1973; von Beyme, 1996). Higher education is thought to foster cognitive skills, technocratic orientations, and factors related to familiarity with complex institutional arrangements (e.g., Hartmann, 2009). These traits are likely to be associated with stronger support for mediated, representative forms of democracy and greater scepticism toward unmediated or plebiscitarian models. Conversely, support for direct or populist democracy may resonate more strongly with actors who are less invested in professionalised political environments or who adopt a more critical stance toward representative institutions. Ideological orientation constitutes a further source of differentiation. While electoral and liberal democracy have increasingly become fairly shared normative reference points across the ideological spectrum (Rhoden, 2015), social democracy may remain closely tied to left-right competition. Questions of redistribution, inequality, and social protection continue to divide political actors along ideological lines, and elites may be no exception in this regard. As a result, ideological self-placement is likely to play a more pronounced role in altering elites’ views of social democracy than their views of other democratic dimensions.

Evaluations of how democracy functions in practice also matter. Satisfaction with democracy captures elites’ assessments of the performance of democratic institutions and processes. Lower levels of satisfaction may be associated with openness to alternative democratic models that promise greater responsiveness or popular control, including direct and populist forms of democracy (Borri & Verzichelli, 2021; Held, 2006). Higher satisfaction, by contrast, may reinforce attachment to established representative arrangements and reduce the appeal of models that challenge institutional mediation. In addition, democratic views may be influenced by more diffuse forms of regime support (Easton, 1975). Support for democracy as a regime principle traditionally reflects a general normative commitment to democracy, independent of short-term performance evaluations. This form of support is expected to be most closely linked to more institutionalised democratic models, such as electoral and liberal democracy, which have long been regarded as defining features of democratic regimes. Whether and to what extent this principled commitment

extends to direct democracy is worth investigating further, and whether it underpins populist conceptions of democracy remains an empirical question to be explored. Finally, elite democratic views are embedded in national contexts (Putnam, 1973). Factors like political traditions, institutional arrangements, and historical trajectories may indeed affect how democracy is understood across countries. Even in the presence of transnational elite socialisation and shared democratic norms, national contexts may continue to provide distinct frameworks within which elites interpret democratic principles. Cross-national variation in elite democratic views is therefore relevant and worth examining.

Based on this, we derive a set of expectations that link elites' social background, ideological positioning, evaluative orientations toward democracy, and national contexts to distinct democratic views. Importantly, these expectations are not formulated under the assumption that all democratic dimensions respond to the same drivers. To make this logic explicit, Table 1 summarises the hypotheses guiding the empirical analysis. The hypotheses are grouped into four analytical domains: sociodemographic characteristics, ideological preferences, evaluative orientations and regime support, and national context.

Table 1. Overview of hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Analytical domain	Expectation
H1a	Sociodemographic characteristics	Sociodemographic characteristics like age and gender may play a limited role in structuring political elites' democratic views (e.g., Highley & Burton, 1998).
H1b	Sociodemographic characteristics	Higher levels of education are associated with lower support for democratic models that challenge political mediation, such as direct and populist conceptions of democracy (Coffè & Michels, 2014).
H2	Ideological preferences	Ideological self-placement is selectively associated with democratic views, exerting a stronger influence on conceptions of democracy linked to distributive conflict than on other views of democracy (e.g., Munck, 2015).
H3a	Evaluation and support	Lower satisfaction with democracy is associated with greater openness to alternative democratic models that challenge representative institutions (Borri & Verzichelli, 2021; Held, 2006, p. 125).
H3b	Evaluation and support	Support for democracy as a regime principle is primarily associated with institutionalised democratic models and does not uniformly extend to all conceptions of democracy (Ulbricht, 2018).
H4	National context	Political elites' democratic views vary systematically across national contexts (Putnam, 1973, p. 239).

3. Data and Methodology

3.1. Data

To collect the data, we first targeted members of national parliaments (MPs) and members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Information on elected representatives was collected from official parliamentary and institutional sources between March and October 2024 and reflects the composition of these assemblies during that period. For Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, and the European Parliament, the dataset reflects the composition

of the newly elected legislatures following the 2024 elections. In Italy, Norway, and Poland, all parliamentarians in office during data collection were included, while for Germany we also incorporated members elected following the 2025 federal election.

The survey was administered through a CAWI (computer-assisted web interview) questionnaire distributed via e-mail. A first wave of fieldwork was conducted between January and June 2025, targeting national MPs and MEPs. However, given the limited number of responses obtained during this phase, a second module was introduced to expand the sample to include subnational representatives from Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom. This additional module included elected representatives serving in local assemblies or councils, depending on the institutional structure of each country. After collecting their contacts between July and August 2025, from September to December 2025 we conducted a second wave of fieldwork, both re-contacting MPs and MEPs and inviting subnational representatives to participate in the survey.

The final dataset includes 475 valid responses (of which 230 were subnational representatives). Due to item nonresponse and differences across model specifications, the number of observations included in the analyses is lower in the fully specified models. We therefore interpret the findings with caution, particularly given the heterogeneity of representatives included and the well-known challenges associated with recruiting political elites in comparative survey research based on voluntary participation (Walgrave & Joly, 2018). Additional information on sample composition, response rates, and fieldwork procedures is provided in the Supplementary File.

3.2. Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is political elites' views of democracy. To capture these views, we included in the survey a battery of five statements referring to different normative understandings of democracy and then asked the respondents to rate those on a 0–10 scale where 0 indicated that the aspect was not important at all for democracy in general and 10 that it was extremely important for democracy in general. A detailed overview of the dependent variable and the exact question wording of the introductory text and each statement is provided in Table 2. Drawing on the literature (e.g., Hernández, 2016; Martini, 2025), these statements are commonly understood as capturing distinct conceptions of democracy and different expectations about what democratic systems should deliver. Based on the answers given, we classified

Table 2. Dependent variable question wording.

Introductory text	
Now, we would like to know about how important you think different things are for democracy in general. There are no right or wrong answers, so for each of the following aspects, please select how important for democracy in general you think it is, using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Not at all important for democracy in general" and 10 "Extremely important for democracy in general."	
Democratic view	Wording
Electoral	That national elections are free and fair.
Liberal	That the courts treat everyone the same.
Social	That the government protects all citizens against poverty.
Direct	That citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting in referendums.
Populist	That the views of ordinary people prevail over the views of the political elites.

elites' responses into five democratic views: electoral, liberal, social, direct, and populist (see Table 2, first column). As Figure 1 in the analysis section will show, there is a pronounced consensus among political elites on electoral and liberal conceptions of democracy, which appear to be the least contested, particularly when compared with social and populist views.

3.3. Independent Variables

Now we shift the attention to the independent variables. We focused on the following factors: age class, gender, education, left–right ideological positioning, satisfaction with democracy, support for experts, support for democracy, and trustee-style preference.

Starting from basic sociodemographic characteristics, political elites were first asked to report their age. For analytical purposes, this information was subsequently recoded into four distinct age groups: under 40, 40–49, 50–59, and 60 or over. In a similar vein, gender was measured through a self-identification question allowing respondents to choose between male, female, and “I prefer not to answer.”

Moving beyond sociodemographic traits, we then account for differences in educational attainment. Education was measured through the following question: “What is the highest degree or level of education that you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received.” Respondents could indicate levels ranging from elementary (primary) school or below to post-graduate degrees (master’s or PhD), with the additional option “I prefer not to answer.” To facilitate interpretation, educational attainment was recoded into three distinct categories capturing low, medium, and high levels of education.

In addition to education, ideological orientation represents a core individual-level driver of democratic views. To capture this dimension, respondents were asked:

In politics, people sometimes talk of “Left” and “Right.” Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the “Left” and 10 means the “Right”? You can choose any value between 0 and 10 to define your position.

This variable was treated as continuous in the analyses.

Beyond ideological positioning, we also consider evaluative orientations towards the functioning of democracy. Satisfaction with democracy was measured by asking respondents: “On the whole, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates ‘Extremely dissatisfied’ and 10 indicates ‘Extremely satisfied,’ how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [Country]?” Again, responses “Don’t know” and “I prefer not to answer” were excluded from the analyses. Closely related to this evaluative dimension, we further include a measure capturing support for expert-based decision-making. As part of a battery on different political systems, respondents were presented with the following statement:

We are going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing [Country]. For each one of the following statements, please select how good or bad you think it is using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “Very bad” and 10 “Very good.” Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country.

This variable was entered as continuous.

At the same time, and still within the same battery, we include a measure of support for democracy as a regime principle. Respondents were asked to evaluate the statement “Having a democratic political system” on a scale ranging from 0 (*very bad*) to 10 (*very good*). Like the other cases, responses “Don’t know” and “I prefer not to answer” were excluded from the analyses.

Finally, to capture preferences regarding political representation, we rely on a question tapping into the classic Burkeian trustee–delegate dimension. Respondents were asked:

How should a Member of Parliament vote in parliament, if his/her own opinion on an issue does not correspond with the opinion of her/his party voters? Please choose your position using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that the Member of Parliament should “Follow her/his party voters” and 10 “Follow own judgement.”

Higher values on this scale therefore indicate a stronger preference for a trustee-style model of representation. In the next subsection we describe our estimation strategy.

3.4. Estimation

Regarding the estimation strategy, to examine how individual characteristics are associated with political elites’ understandings of democracy, we estimate a set of multivariate regression models using ordinary least squares (OLS). The analytical strategy is intentionally parsimonious and comparative, that is, each democratic view is analysed in a separate model. The dependent variables are elites’ evaluations of our five democratic views (electoral, liberal, social, direct, and populist), each measured on a 0–10 scale. Given the variation observed across the scale and the approximately continuous nature of these measures, we deem OLS estimation as one that provides a parsimonious and easily interpretable estimator, particularly suited to comparing effect sizes across models and democratic dimensions. All models include country fixed effects to account for unobserved, time-invariant differences across national contexts. This specification absorbs country-specific characteristics such as institutional arrangements and historically embedded patterns of elite socialisation. As a result, the estimated coefficients capture within-country variation among elites, net of cross-national heterogeneity. Standard errors are robust to heteroskedasticity.

The set of independent variables reflects the theoretical framework developed in the previous sections and spans four analytical domains. We first include basic sociodemographic characteristics, namely age group and gender. We then account for education, left–right self-placement, satisfaction with democracy, support for democracy as a regime principle, and support for experts in decision-making. Finally, we include a continuous measure capturing preferences for a trustee-style model of political representation. This modelling strategy allows us to evaluate whether elite democratic views are influenced by common drivers or whether their determinants are dimension specific. Estimating separate models for each democratic view, we avoid imposing conceptual equivalence across dimensions that differ both theoretically and empirically in their relationship to representation and political mediation (e.g., König et al., 2022).

4. Analysis

We begin by examining how political elites position themselves across different democratic views. In Figure 1, we therefore report the density distributions for five dimensions of democracy: electoral, liberal, social, direct, and populist. Across most dimensions, responses are concentrated toward the upper end of the scale. Most elites place themselves between 7 and 10, and fewer observations are located at the lower end. This pattern confirms that democratic support is widespread among political elites. At the same time, the distributions are clearly not identical. Electoral and liberal democracy show the strongest clustering at high values, with relatively little dispersion. In both cases, responses are tightly grouped, and the mass of the distribution lies close to the upper bound of the scale. These two dimensions appear to represent the most established and widely shared understandings of democracy among elites. Social democracy displays a broader distribution. While high scores remain common, there is noticeably more variation across respondents. Compared to electoral and liberal democracy, scores are less tightly concentrated, and the distribution extends further toward the middle of the scale. Our interpretation is that issues related to redistribution and social protection, namely the “content” dimensions of democratic quality (Morlino, 2011), remain subject to greater disagreement within elite groups. What is more, the distributions for direct and populist democracy differ more sharply. Both dimensions show flatter shapes and lower concentrations at the top of the scale. Responses are more spread out, and mid-range values are more frequent. Compared to the other dimensions, these distributions reveal a more fragmented configuration of elite attitudes. Direct and populist models of democracy appear to attract uneven support and to divide elites more strongly.

These first descriptive patterns highlight that elite support for democracy is not captured by a single underlying dimension. Considering this, we may argue that political elites overwhelmingly endorse democracy, but they do so in different ways. Some democratic models command broad agreement, while

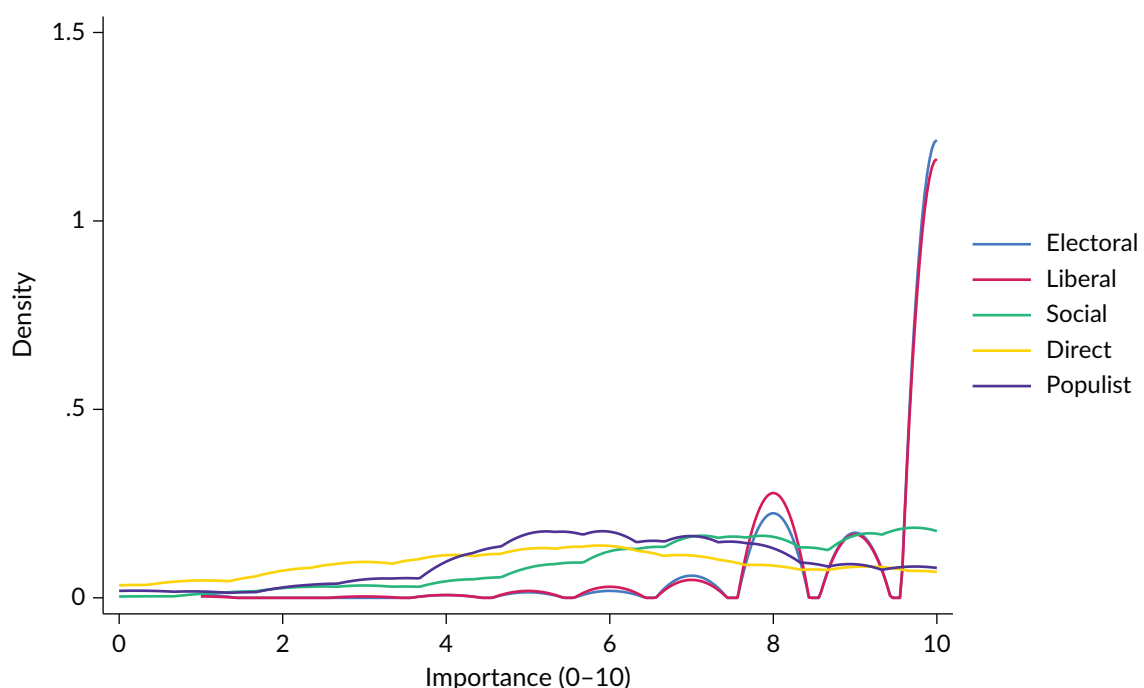


Figure 1. Distribution of democratic views among political elites.

others generate more heterogeneous responses. This variation provides the basis for the multivariate analysis that follows, in which we examine how individual characteristics and national contexts are associated with these different democratic views.

We now turn to multivariate analysis. Table 3 reports OLS regression models with country fixed effects, estimating the individual-level determinants of each democratic view.

Table 3. OLS regression models (fixed effects) on individual views of democracy of the elites.

	(1) Electoral	(2) Liberal	(3) Social	(4) Direct	(5) Populist
<i>Baseline: Under 40</i>					
Age 40–49	–0.156 (0.190)	–0.213 (0.197)	–0.0329 (0.341)	–0.189 (0.522)	0.246 (0.562)
Age 50–59	–0.171 (0.221)	–0.206 (0.209)	0.392 (0.328)	0.293 (0.502)	–0.00150 (0.558)
Age 60+	–0.185 (0.221)	–0.204 (0.239)	–0.203 (0.387)	0.244 (0.573)	–0.460 (0.615)
<i>Baseline: Male</i>					
Female	0.0219 (0.154)	0.0747 (0.141)	0.237 (0.221)	–0.344 (0.308)	–0.0622 (0.284)
<i>Baseline: Low education</i>					
Medium education	0.487 (0.770)	0.598 (0.480)	0.583 (1.367)	–1.136 (0.814)	–2.986*** (0.645)
High education	0.594 (0.765)	0.479 (0.463)	0.760 (1.347)	–1.963*** (0.721)	–3.054*** (0.613)
Left–right (0–10)	–0.0398 (0.0302)	–0.0425 (0.0278)	–0.423*** (0.0419)	0.00833 (0.0591)	–0.00358 (0.0541)
Satisfaction with democracy	–0.0397 (0.0301)	–0.00122 (0.0297)	0.117 (0.0717)	–0.400*** (0.0763)	–0.161** (0.0799)
Support for experts	–0.00352 (0.217)	0.335 (0.225)	0.135 (0.454)	0.788 (0.481)	0.581 (0.405)
Support for democracy	1.995*** (0.562)	2.077** (0.943)	0.503 (0.769)	2.827** (1.338)	1.147 (1.001)
Trustee-style preference	–0.00339 (0.00572)	–0.00582 (0.00825)	0.00160 (0.00756)	0.00955 (0.0118)	–0.0200 (0.0210)
<i>Baseline: Belgium</i>					
France	–0.588** (0.270)	–0.848*** (0.267)	–0.288 (0.393)	–0.502 (0.516)	0.943* (0.531)
Germany	0.302* (0.172)	0.128 (0.160)	–0.689* (0.397)	–0.982* (0.509)	0.616 (0.612)
Hungary	–0.265 (0.382)	–0.708 (0.488)	–0.445 (0.618)	–1.754* (0.971)	0.407 (0.800)
Italy	–0.415** (0.200)	–0.688*** (0.198)	–0.0966 (0.323)	–0.0469 (0.481)	0.555 (0.491)

Table 3. (Cont.) OLS regression models (fixed effects) on individual views of democracy of the elites.

	(1) Electoral	(2) Liberal	(3) Social	(4) Direct	(5) Populist
Norway	0.415 (0.376)	−0.119 (0.393)	−0.719 (0.955)	−1.913* (0.974)	−1.021 (0.642)
Poland	0.107 (0.254)	−0.588 (0.505)	0.564 (0.586)	1.383* (0.722)	1.843*** (0.682)
United Kingdom	−0.681* (0.372)	−1.128*** (0.299)	−1.744*** (0.413)	−1.574** (0.646)	0.247 (0.574)
N	256	257	256	254	235
R-squared	0.152	0.212	0.375	0.256	0.136

Notes: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

We can observe that factors such as age and gender do not play a significant role in affecting elites' democratic views. Across all five models, age coefficients are small and statistically insignificant, and no systematic gender differences emerge. Democratic orientations among elites therefore do not appear to be structured along generational or gender lines. One plausible explanation is that elite socialisation and professional trajectories tend to "standardise" democratic beliefs, and this factor may be relevant in reducing the scope for differences that are often observed in the mass public. Within elite circles, shared norms and institutional experiences may thus override cohort- or gender-based patterns in democratic attitudes. Education, by contrast, emerges as one of the most consequential predictors, albeit in a quite selective way. Higher levels of education are strongly and negatively associated with support for direct and populist views of democracy. The relationship is monotonic: Moving from low to medium and high education is associated with a marked decline in the importance attributed to these two dimensions. Direct and populist conceptions of democracy sit uneasily with professionalised decision-making. At the same time, education does not exert a significant effect on electoral, liberal, or social democratic views. Hence, education appears to differentiate elites' openness to more "unmediated" democratic models.

Moving to the second hypothesis, we notice from our analyses that ideological orientation matters in a similarly selective fashion. Left–right self-placement is strongly and significantly associated with social democratic views, with more left-leaning elites attaching greater importance to social democracy. Not only are no comparable ideological effects observed for electoral, liberal, direct, or populist views; if we look at the social view only, and compare the coefficients not horizontally but vertically, we can appreciate that ideology is also the only statistically significant predictor in the model (leaving the country differences aside). And indeed, by comparing the *R*-squared across the models, it seems like the variance explained by the selected predictors in the social view model is much higher than in any of the other models. Now, this result probably comes with little surprise. However, we believe that it can further pinpoint the distinctive status of social democracy within the broader set of democratic dimensions. Among elites, in fact, social democracy remains closely tied to ideological conflict, whereas other democratic views appear to operate largely outside left versus right. This tells us that ideological divisions resurface when distributive issues and questions of social equality are directly involved. This political divide over the social dimension of democracy, and thus over democracy understood as a matter of substantive content rather than mere procedure, following the theoretical framework on the quality of democracy developed by Diamond and Morlino (2005), invites further reflection because it is closely linked to elite polarisation. From a democratic repair perspective (Hendriks et al., 2020), political elites play a crucial role in influencing the strategies deemed

most appropriate to fix democracy. However, if elites hold such sharp and opposing views on democracy, in this case on its social dimension, we can expect intense conflict when issues such as economic and social equality come to the fore. This, in turn, is likely to generate disputes over redistribution and taxation that may not remain confined to the elite level but spill over into broader societal conflict among citizens.

Moreover, a further pattern emerges with respect to satisfaction with democracy. Lower levels of satisfaction are associated with stronger importance attached to direct and populist views, while no meaningful relationship is found for electoral, liberal, or social democratic views. Elites who are dissatisfied with how democracy functions appear more willing to endorse models that challenge or place pressure on “classic” interpretations of democracy and the role of democratic representative institutions. On the other hand, higher satisfaction with democracy is associated with more stable support for representative forms of democracy, even within elite groups. What is more, support for democracy as a regime principle is among the strongest predictors in the models. It is positively associated with electoral, liberal, and direct democratic views, but shows no effect on social or populist views. Electoral and liberal democracy thus appear closely tied to principled democratic commitment and constitute the institutional core of elite democratic beliefs. However, direct democracy also benefits from this association. Populist views, conversely, are not anchored in regime-level democratic support.

Finally, preferences for trustee-style representation do not show a significant association with any of the democratic views considered. This absence of effects is nonetheless itself informative. The lack of significance in statistical terms may indicate that representation styles and normative understandings of democracy do not neatly overlap. In other words, being inclined toward a trustee model of representation does not imply different democratic views, nor does it correspond to a specific democratic vision. Representation preferences and democratic views therefore appear to operate as analytically distinct dimensions of elite belief systems. To facilitate interpretation, we complement the regression results with graphical evidence based on predicted values from the OLS models. The marginal plots reported in Figures 2, 3, and 4 thus illustrate how the most substantively relevant predictors are associated with different democratic views.

In the final part of the analysis, we turn to cross-national variation. Specifically, we examine predicted values derived from the regression models. We show that, even after accounting for individual-level characteristics, marked differences emerge across countries. Indeed, we are in the presence of meaningful national variation in how political elites understand democracy. First, electoral and liberal democratic views are consistently high across the countries considered. Although some cross-national differences are visible, these dimensions display a relatively limited range of variation, and of course here lies the idea that electoral competition and liberal institutional guarantees form a shared democratic baseline among European elites. In contrast to these two democratic views, social democratic views vary more substantially across countries. Levels of elite support differ in ways that may be related to long-standing differences in welfare and redistributive traditions, as also shown previously. Where cross-national variation is most pronounced is when we take into consideration direct and populist views of democracy. Here, differences between countries are sharper and more uneven, with some cases exhibiting comparatively high levels of elite support for plebiscitarian or populist elements (e.g., Poland), while others remain far more sceptical (e.g., Norway). All in all, the country-level patterns show that elite consensus on democracy does not translate into uniform democratic understandings across national contexts. While political elites broadly endorse democratic principles, the meanings they attach to democracy vary in systematic ways from country to country. Democratic views among elites are therefore influenced not only by individual attributes but also by the national environments in which elites operate.

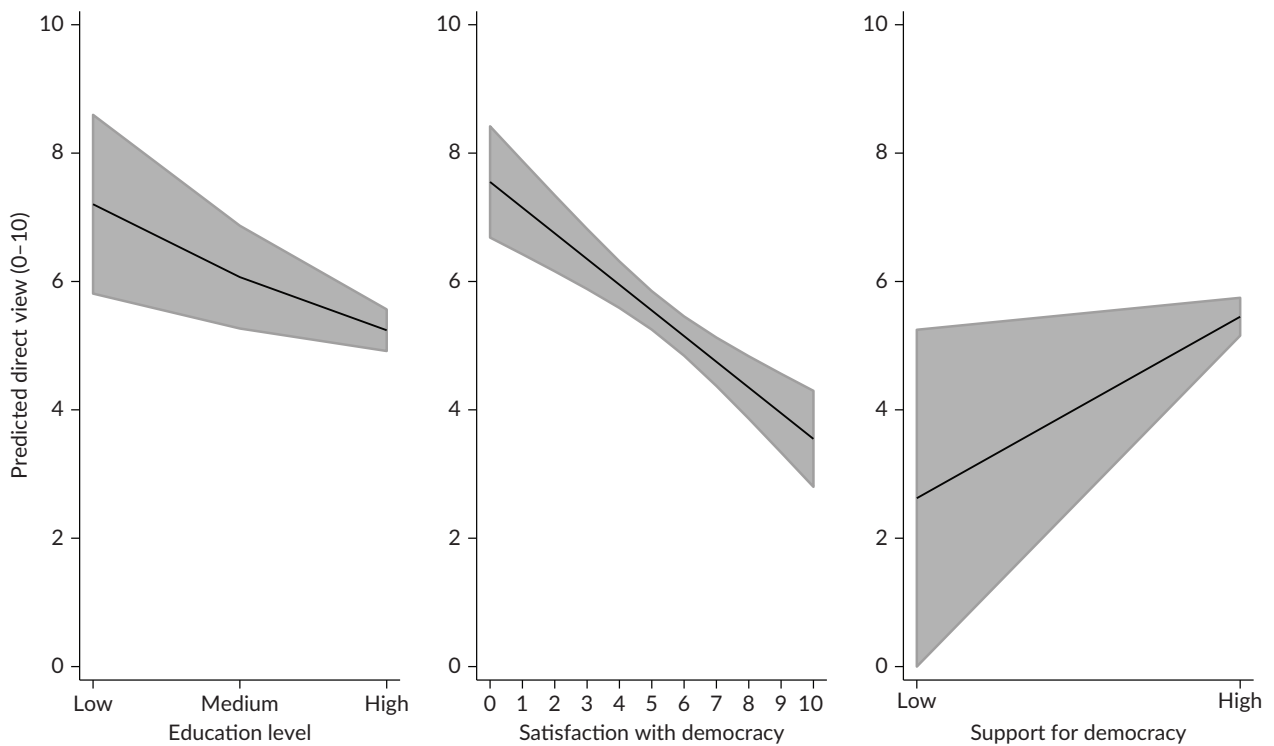


Figure 2. Drivers of direct views among political elites.

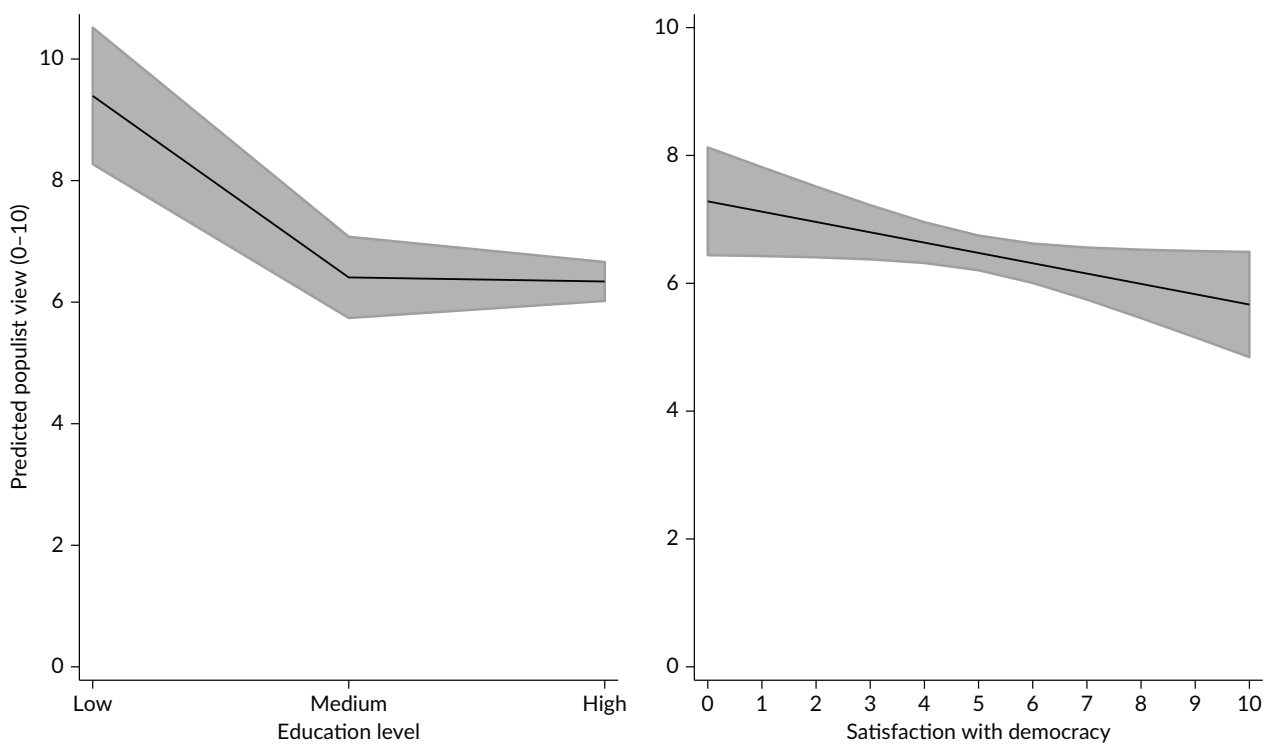


Figure 3. Drivers of populist views among political elites.

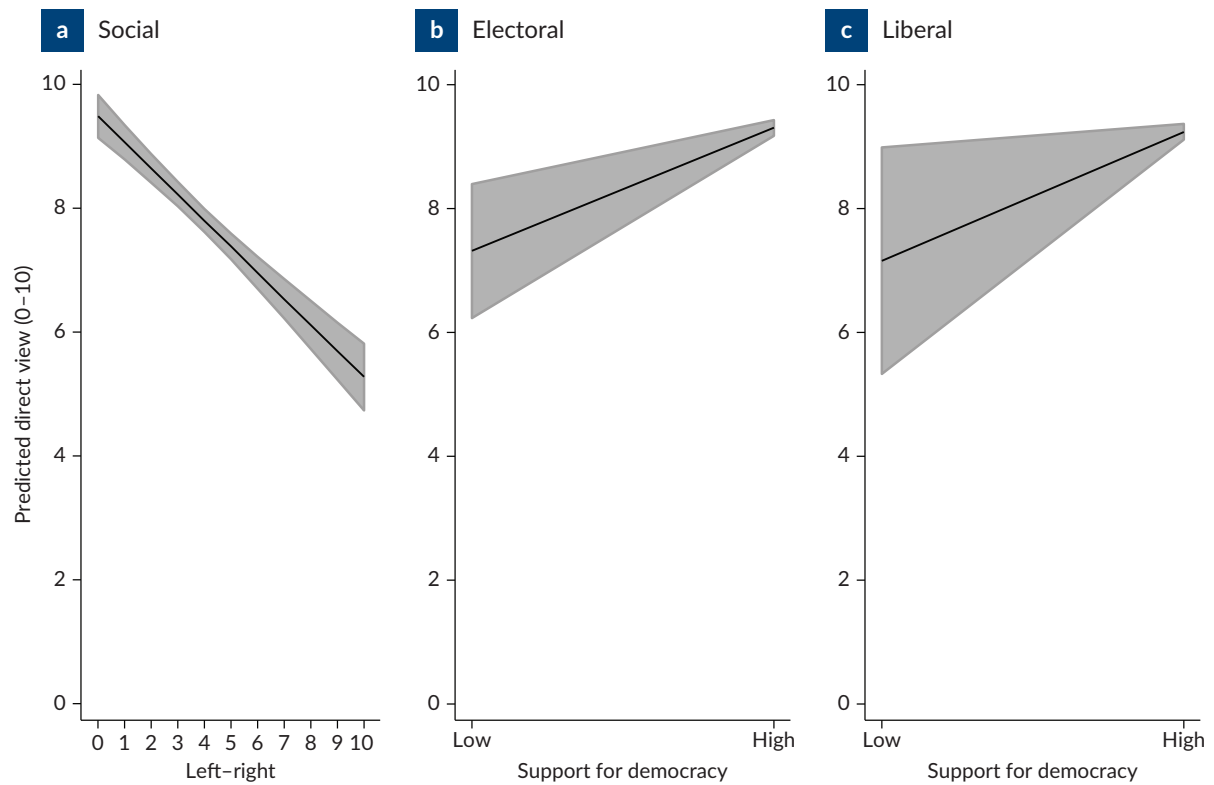


Figure 4. Drivers of (a) social, (b) electoral, and (c) liberal views among political elites.

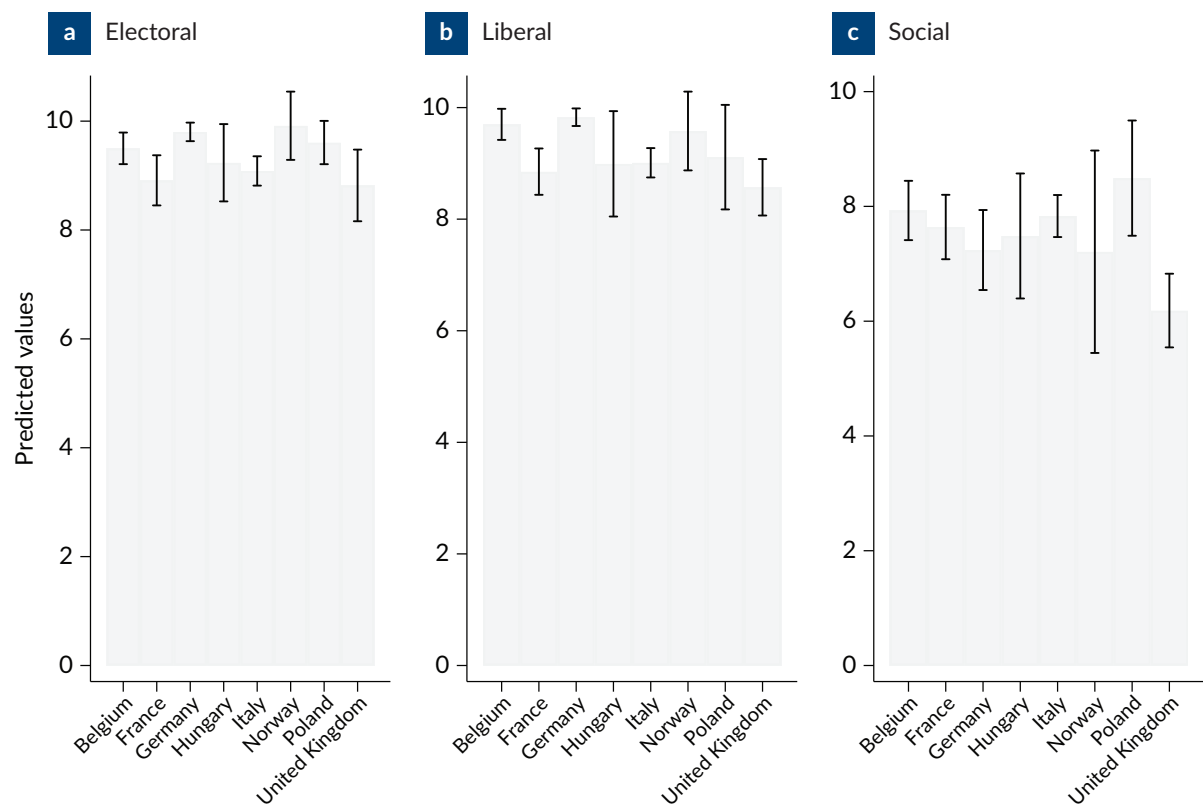


Figure 5. Country variation of (a) electoral, (b) liberal, and (c) social views among political elites.

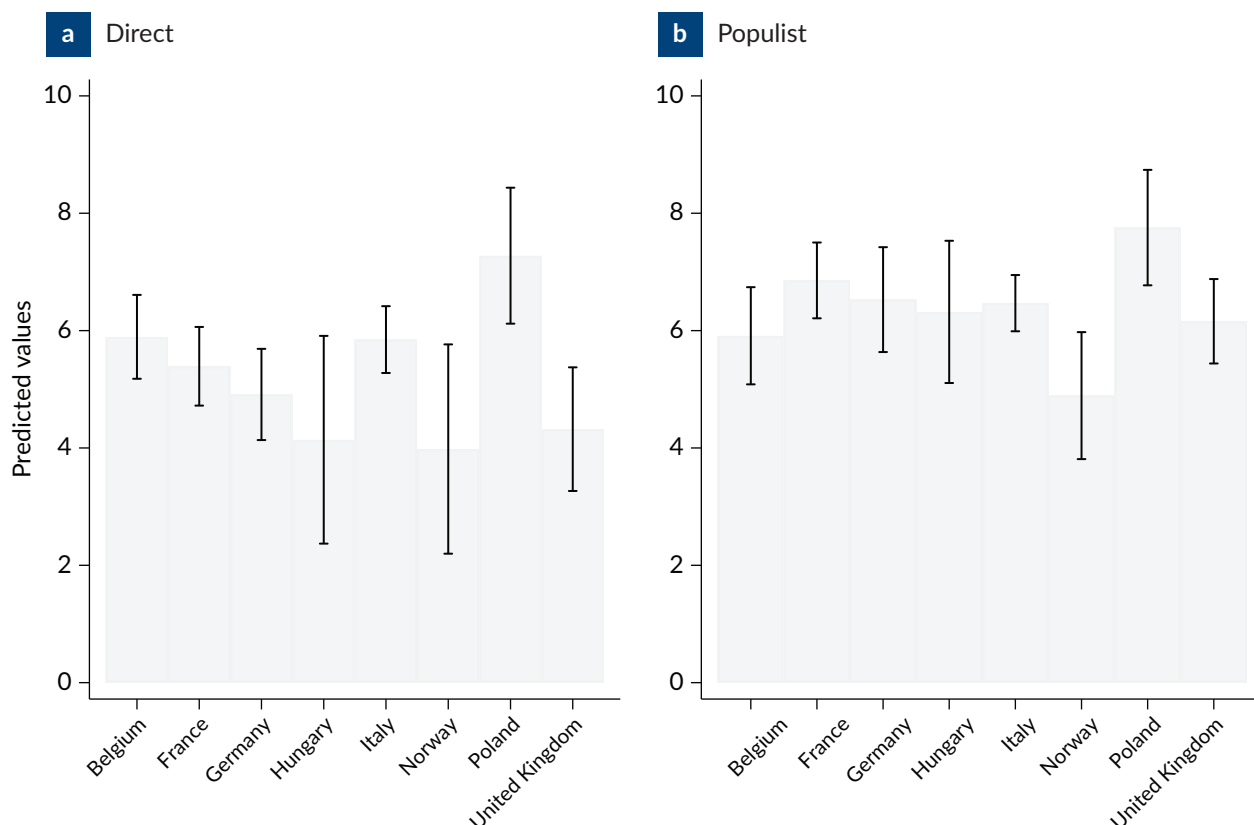


Figure 6. Country variation of (a) direct and (b) populist views among political elites.

To further explore the relationship between elites' ideological orientations and their conceptions of democracy, we also adopted a more fine-grained classification than simple left-right self-placement. More specifically, we relied on party family classifications. What we observe in Table 4 is a clear and theoretically meaningful pattern. Compared to the baseline category of Communist/Socialist elites, party families differ mainly in their support for social, direct, and populist conceptions of democracy, whereas differences in electoral and liberal conceptions are somehow more limited. More specifically, the electoral conception of democracy appears relatively consensual across European elites. Only Green/Ecologist, Social Democratic, and Right-Wing elites display significantly lower support compared to the Communist/Socialist baseline. Similarly, the liberal conception shows very limited variation across party families.

What is more, substantial differences emerge regarding the social conception of democracy. Almost all non-radical left party families report significantly lower support for this dimension compared to Communist/Socialist elites. The strongest negative effects are found among Liberal, Conservative, and Christian Democratic elites. Differences are also visible for the direct conception of democracy. In particular, Christian Democratic elites exhibit significantly lower support for direct democracy, possibly reflecting a stronger preference for mediated and institutionalised forms of representation. The populist conception of democracy displays the strongest polarisation across party families. Liberal, Conservative, Christian Democratic, and Social Democratic elites all show significantly lower support compared to the Communist/Socialist baseline, with the largest negative coefficient observed among Christian Democratic elites.

Table 4. OLS regression models (fixed effects) on individual views of democracy of the elites with party families.

	(1) Electoral	(2) Liberal	(3) Social	(4) Direct	(5) Populist
Communist/Socialist	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline
Green/Ecologist	−0.493* (0.226)	−0.0684 (0.170)	−0.886 (0.478)	−0.983 (0.728)	−3.267** (1.054)
Social Democratic	−0.475* (0.219)	−0.202 (0.194)	−1.222** (0.436)	−0.233 (0.576)	−2.746*** (0.801)
Liberal	0.0826 (0.299)	0.0422 (0.264)	−3.412*** (0.600)	−0.312 (0.658)	−3.628*** (0.892)
Christian Democratic	−0.276 (0.192)	−0.237 (0.172)	−3.208*** (0.651)	−3.397*** (0.769)	−4.810*** (1.418)
Conservative	−0.448 (0.325)	−0.132 (0.325)	−3.541*** (0.607)	−0.0262 (0.876)	−3.442*** (0.856)
Right-wing	−0.585* (0.226)	0.0765 (0.216)	−3.357*** (0.556)	0.496 (0.669)	−1.934* (0.821)
Special issue	−0.0975 (0.382)	−0.213 (0.543)	−2.100* (1.034)	−2.853 (1.982)	−3.979 (2.273)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	202	203	202	202	189

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. In this table, “Special issue” refers to parties that mobilize voters around a specific (“special”) issue (e.g., climate change, abortion, or taxation).

In the next section, we build on these results to discuss their implications for the study of elites and democracy, as well as their relevance for a better understanding of contemporary challenges and transformations of representative democracy.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we set out to examine how political elites in Europe understand democracy across multiple dimensions, moving beyond a unidimensional conception of democratic commitment and leveraging a novel elite survey. Examining and documenting patterns in elite attitudes, we believe that our study can contribute to a relevant theoretical question: how political elites conceptualise democracy in an era marked by pressures on representative institutions. Our findings suggest that elite democratic views are best understood not as indicators of democratic commitment per se, but as reflections of how elites position themselves vis-à-vis multiple democratic conceptions. Based on this, a first theoretical implication concerns the internal differentiation of democratic views among elites. Electoral and liberal democracy appear to function as *taken-for-granted* and more “valence” reference points. They indeed are not sites of active ideological contestation but rather form what might be described as the institutional grammar of elite democracy. This is consistent with the idea, central to the “representative turn” in democratic theory (Urbinati & Warren, 2008), that representation has acquired its own normative legitimacy, independent of

participatory or deliberative ideals. Among European elites, commitment to democracy is therefore inseparable from commitment to mediated, institutionalised forms of rule.

On the other hand, direct and populist conceptions of democracy emerge as genuinely contentious. Their association with lower education and dissatisfaction with democracy points to a tension between professionalised versus unmediated politics (especially regarding decision-making). From a theoretical standpoint, this suggests that elite resistance to plebiscitarian or populist models is not simply a matter of self-interest or status preservation but is embedded in a normative understanding of democracy as a complex, institutionally mediated process. In this sense, elites appear to defend representation (and possibly, the very nature of their job). What is more, the selective role of ideology further refines this picture. The fact that left-right orientation matters for social democracy suggests that distributive conflict remains the primary axis along which democratic meanings are ideologically structured among elites. Democracy, in other words, has been partially de-politicised at the institutional level, while it remains politicised where material interests and social justice are potentially directly involved. Evaluative orientations toward democracy introduce an additional layer of complexity. Dissatisfaction with democracy does not translate into generalised democratic scepticism among elites. Instead, it is associated with greater openness to models that promise immediacy, responsiveness, or symbolic reconnection with “the people.” We may interpret this pattern as a challenge of simplistic assumptions that elites uniformly defend the status quo. Rather, dissatisfaction appears to destabilise representative commitments even within elite circles, revealing potential fault lines in the normative foundations of representation itself.

Read through the “representative disconnect” framework, our findings are particularly instructive. In fact, they suggest that when the conditions of democratic representation (e.g., public contestation, interactive decision-making, and effective reception of bottom-up claims) are perceived as weakened, elites may themselves begin to entertain alternatives that strain the logic of mediation. Representation remains normatively central, but its legitimacy is conditional and performance sensitive. We thus may consider the state of representative democracy as not self-sustaining, even among those who operate it. Additionally, national context further complicates this picture. Cross-national variation emerging from our analysis indicates that elite democratic views are not fully homogenised by transnational elite socialisation or shared democratic norms. Instead, national political traditions, as emphasised by Putnam decades ago, continue to alter how elites interpret democratic principles. Therefore, we should be cautious against overly universalistic accounts of “elite democracy,” and we should carefully consider the need to situate elite attitudes within specific political ecologies.

Beyond the usual constraints of cross-sectional survey data, in this study we face some additional limitations that merit explicit discussion. First, democratic views are measured as general normative orientations, detached from concrete institutional choices or policy behaviour. For instance, when we ask elites about their views on social democracy in terms of protecting all citizens from poverty, this does not allow us to directly infer their preferred policy choices. This choice is the most suitable for cross-national comparability, but of course it leaves open the question of how these views translate into actual political decisions. This is particularly relevant when it comes to social or direct democracy, as these views imply concrete solutions to problems related to taxation, redistribution, direct involvement of citizens in the decision-making process, deliberation practices, and other policy trade-offs. Future research seeking to contribute to the research agenda of elites’ democratic understandings perhaps might explicitly connect elite democratic conceptions

to such elements. Second, we are aware that elite samples are necessarily selective. Our survey captures a broad range of political elites, but we did not fully account for internal hierarchies within elites, such as differences between governing and opposition actors. Moreover, the analytical sample remains relatively limited in size and combines representatives operating at different levels of governance, including both national and subnational officeholders. Disaggregating elite types may reveal further differentiation in democratic views that remains hidden in aggregate analyses. However, we opted to perform aggregate analyses in this study to give a first overview of elites' democratic understandings in contemporary Europe, laying the groundwork for subsequent investigations on more granular subsamples and contrasts. Third, the meaning of concepts such as "direct" or "populist" democracy may vary across national contexts. Even when measured with identical survey instruments, respondents may interpret these notions through country-specific lenses. We therefore believe that qualitative approaches, including elite interviews or discourse analysis, would be valuable complements to survey-based evidence. Finally, the analysis remains largely silent on change over time. Elite democratic views are likely altered by critical junctures and crises. Longitudinal data, which is a common limitation of elite survey (reliable) investigations, would allow scholars to assess whether the observed patterns are stable features of elite democracy or contingent responses to specific political moments.

Despite these limitations, the article contributes to the study of political elites and democracy in three main ways. First, it provides new comparative evidence on how elected elites understand democracy across several European countries, a question that remains less systematically explored than citizens' democratic attitudes. Second, it empirically shows that elite support for democracy is multidimensional: Broad agreement on electoral and liberal democracy coexists with sharper disagreement over social, direct, and populist conceptions. Third, it identifies the main lines along which this variation is structured, showing that education, democratic satisfaction, ideology, party family, and national context matter in different ways depending on the democratic conception considered. In conclusion, the findings suggest that democratic consensus among elites primarily concerns the institutional core of representative democracy, while substantial disagreement persists over how democratic representation should be exercised. This implies that support for democracy among political elites should not be interpreted as uniform adherence to a single democratic model. Indeed, the much-debated democratic disconnect may concern not only the distance between citizens and elites, but also the distance among political elites themselves over the different manifestations democracy can take.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

REDIRECT survey data are not publicly available at this time due to an embargo period. However, all replication materials, including coding scripts and model specifications, are publicly available at <https://osf.io/k8956/overview> and can be applied to the survey dataset once it is released online at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EDM75> (upon completion of the project and, in any case, no earlier than 31 January 2027).

LLMs Disclosure

The use of ChatGPT was strictly limited to grammatical editing and language polishing.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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About the Authors

Marco Improta is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Siena, Italy.

Elisabetta Mannoni is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Siena, Italy.

Francesco Marangoni is a full professor at the University of Siena, Italy.