

MIND THE GAP! ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF A
DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT ON CITIZENS' POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN
EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES¹.

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ABSTRACT:

For over a decade many scholars have expressed concerns that contemporary democratic states are going through a major period of crisis (e.g. Flinders, 2012 ;Hay, 2007; Mair, 2013; Norris, 2011), arguing that a healthy skepticism towards democracy in modern industrial states has given way to a corrosive cynicism towards the legitimacy of the regime (Flinders, 2012). Researchers have pointed to a decline in voter turnout, low membership with political parties and declining social capital as evidence of this crisis. A central concern is that an emerging disequilibrium between the demands of the public for democratic outputs and the incapacity of governments to deliver on those expectations leads to a democratic deficit, whereby citizens, disillusioned with the democratic process, withdraw from engaging in political activity. The aim of this paper, then is to explore the impact of the democratic deficit on political participation. Utilizing the dataset from the European Social Survey Round 6 (2012), I find that citizens propensity to vote is unaffected by perceptions of a democratic deficit but that a wider gap in the deficit leads to greater participation in other political activities. The findings speak to the debate the democracy in crisis literature and concerns over the need for political reform.

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INTRODUCTION

For over a decade many scholars have expressed concerns that contemporary democratic states are going through a major period of crisis (e.g. Flinders, 2012 ;Hay, 2007; Mair, 2013; Norris, 2011). They argue that the triumph of democracy as a system of government at the end of the twentieth century has given way to a *corrosive cynicism* towards the legitimacy of the regime at the turn of the millennium (Flinders, 2012).

Scholars have pointed to a rise in citizen disengagement as evidence of this crisis, with declining trust in government, decreasing turnout in elections, low membership in political parties, declining social capital and low satisfaction with democracy being central causes for concern (e.g. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Mair, 2013; Putnam, 2000).

Key explanations for this decline centre around a disequilibrium between the capability of governments to supply democratic outputs to the public and an increase in policy demands placed on institutions by the citizenry. Such arguments suggest that incongruence between supply and demand leads to a democratic deficit where citizen expectations about democratic procedures and outcomes do not match their evaluations of what governments deliver. It is this deficit, in turn, which drives citizen disengagement with the political process.

While empirical evidence investigating the symptoms of the crisis has been well documented, the causes of the ongoing malaise are less well understood. For example, recent research on public support for European governments since the global financial crisis in 2008 (Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014) indicates that a dramatic decline in satisfaction with democracy was caused by pressure from international organisations and market interference with national democratic procedures. Here, people appear able to identify the constraining effects of supranational actors on domestic decision making and this, coupled with perceptions of declining national economic performance has driven citizens to withdraw their support for governments.

Moreover, for Mair (2013) these effects are nothing short of a hollowing out of democracy. Representative government is failing as both parties and voters retreat

from the zone of engagement. On the one hand, citizens place increasing demands on parties to represent an ever widening range of policy interests. Parties, on the other hand, no longer have the capacity to meet these demands and consequently have become less rooted in civil society as they place greater focus on their role as governors.

However, not all scholars agree with the assessment that the public is withdrawing their support because of these developments. Dalton (2009), argues that public dissatisfaction is not necessarily a sign that democracy is failing but, instead, is evidence that a new generation of citizens are cultivating a healthy skepticism towards political institutions and seek out alternative means of participation beyond the vote.

Norris (2011) further suggests that evidence of fluctuations in political support over time are trendless and that support for democracy as a desirable system of government (as opposed to satisfaction with the performance of government) has remained consistently high. However, she indicates that a widening of the gap between citizens' expectations for democracy and what democracies are capable of delivering may trigger an apathy among the electorate in participating in conventional forms of engagement, or may prompt the destabilisation of state authority through increased involvement in protest politics.

Collectively, these studies suggest that public perceptions of a democratic deficit can impact on an individual's engagement with the political process. On the one hand, the widening incongruence between democratic supply and demand may prompt greater disillusionment amongst citizens, causing them to withdraw from political activity entirely. On the other hand, the larger the gap between the public's expectations for democracy and their evaluations of their countries democratic performance may increase the use of alternative methods of political activism such as participating in demonstrations (Gurr, 1970; Norris et al; 2005).

This assertion that incongruence between supply and demand of 'democracy' drives citizen disengagement remains underexplored in the empirical literature. In addition, studies have traditionally measured public attitudes towards democracy by relying on indicators which ask respondents their satisfaction with the way democracy works in

their country. Such measures can be problematic as research indicates they tap into multiple dimensions of political support and that the items' meaning varies across individuals and nations (Canache Mondag and Seligson, 2001). Moreover, theoretically there is a subtle but important difference between the concepts of satisfaction with democracy and the democratic deficit. In principal, an individual may perceive a gap between what they identify as an ideal democracy and what their country delivers, and yet, remain reasonably satisfied with the workings of democracy in their country. In this respect, we continue to know little about citizens' preferences towards specific democratic procedures and their evaluations of government effectiveness in satisfying these demands.

The goal of this paper is to address the gap in existing research by examining the congruence between citizen expectations for democracy and their evaluations of democracy in practice in 29 European states. I utilise an innovative dataset from the European Social Survey (2012), to build a measure of the 'democratic deficit' that examines the gap between respondents expectations about what democracy should deliver (e.g. free and fair elections, referendums, protection of minority rights, protection from poverty etc) and the extent to which they perceive their national governments as delivering on these expectations.

From this starting point the paper's central question of interest is *what effect does the perception of a democratic deficit have on the public's level of political participation in European democracies?* I explore the role of the democratic deficit as a predictor of citizen engagement by testing its impact on several methods of political activity, namely voting, working with a political party, signing a petition, participating in a demonstration, boycotting a product and contacting a politician.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: Section II elaborates on the theoretical debate that democracy is in crisis. Section III sets out the theoretical argument detailing the predictors of political participation and introduces the core hypotheses. Thereafter, section IV introduces the data and method for the empirical analysis. Section V produces the main results and finally I conclude with a discussion of the main findings.

DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS

Democracy, by nature, requires the involvement of an active and engaged public. In its absence, the policy interests of the population go unheard, politicians are unable to effectively fulfill their role as public representatives and the legitimacy of the democratic process is called into question. It is this key concern that has led political scholars to observe changes in voter behaviour over the past few decades and raises the question of whether or not democracy in advanced industrial states, is itself, at risk.

The debate exposes an apparent paradox of democracy. In an era where support for democracy as a system of government is at an all time high, increasing numbers of citizens are critical of political elites, dissatisfied with government performance and apathetic towards democratic engagement (Dalton, 2014). Here, scholars point to a widening gap between public demands and the ability of political actors to respond to them. Researchers claim that the representative landscape has become increasingly complex as the public expects a larger number of policy issues to come under the government's remit (Flinders, 2012; Norris, 2011; Mair, 2008, 2013; Zakaria, 2003; Macedo et al, 2005). Governments are unable to effectively increase the supply of policy and parties are unable to offer a clear range of policy alternatives to voters in line with public demands. Thus, as Mair (2008; 2013) notes, government forming parties have retreated from a form of adversarial politics in which parties compete across distinct ideological platforms towards a 'politics of de-politicisation' (p50) where policy is made through compromise and all parties are potentially coalitionable. Consequently, the public seeks representation with populist parties (Mudde, 2007); become increasingly dissatisfied with the performance of government and retreat from traditional modes of political activism.

A key concern in the democracy in crisis debate lies in understanding the consequences of this gap. For example, evidence demonstrates that when individuals perceive their demands for economic and other policy preferences are not being met, and where they believe national procedures for delivering policy to be ineffective in getting those demands realised, they tend to withdraw their support (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014; Hobolt, 2012; McEvoy, 2016).

Eckstein (1961) argues that regime instability is the main consequence of a congruence gap between the supply and demand of democracy that has grown too large. Specifically, when demand exceeds supply it can prompt the mobilization of reform movements. Evidence for this proposition in recent literature shows that many citizens in advanced industrial states have become ‘disatisfied democrats’. Such individuals are not a threat to democracy as such but show high levels of commitment to the ideals of democracy couple with disillusionment with the way politics works in practice. Research shows that such individuals demonstrate high levels of support for alternative participatory mechanisms such as referendums or deliberative democratic structures (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Coffe and Michels, 2014; Dalton, 2009; Neblo et al, 2010; Webb, 2013)

By contrast, Eckstein (1961) also notes cases where the supply of democracy outstrips demand. For example, if a state that lacks democratic traditions is pressured to hold competitive elections, such structures are likely to prove fragile as they lack widespread legitimacy.

Clearly, there is little to suggest a growing unease in advanced industrial societies with democracy as a regime of government. However some scholars have argued that the solution to the ills of democracy is not more democracy (Zakaria, 2003). A number of studies have recently claimed that people do not want more involvement in government but rather want the day to day of policy making to be invisible such that the mechanisms of political accountability only come into play in unusual circumstances (Hibbing and Theiss Morse, 2002; Webb 2013). Such ‘stealth’ democrats, it is argued, shy away from time consuming forms of political participation.

The main argument, and the central question of interest in this article, is what are the consequences for political participation arising from the congruence gap between public expectations for democracy and what they perceive democracy delivers. It is to this democratic deficit that I now turn.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

Democratic theory is divided on what the optimum level of public participation in the political process is expected to be. While some scholars argue that the landscape requires reform which includes varied and active deliberative processes (e.g. Farrell, 2014; Neblo, 2010) others suggest a more minimalist approach (Zakaria, 2003; Hibbing and Theiss Morse, 2002). However, even the more elitist theories of democracy recognise the importance of public participation in the process, albeit limited to choosing the representatives who shape policy at the beginning of each electoral cycle (Schumpeter, 1943).

In this respect, it is useful to consider the conditions under which people are likely to engage in the political process. Teorell (2006) offers a useful model for understanding participation. He notes that participation in the empirical field is dominated by an understanding of participation as *influencing attempts*. He outlines the definition described by Verba and Nie (1972) as a private citizens attempt to influence government either by affecting the choice of personnel or by influencing the choices made by those personnel. This definition includes, but is not limited to, the vote. Here, citizens do not act on policy themselves, but engage in a variety of activities such as signing petitions, engaging in protests and contacting politicians to attempt to induce decision makers to respond to their needs.

Teorell argues that the central causes of participation can be classified as resources and incentives. First, he notes there are three types of resources – physical, human and social capital. Physical capital refers to material assets of the individual including items such as income, property and access to technology. There is some support in the literature that voter turnout is higher in advanced economies (Blais and Dobrzynska 1998, Norris 2002, Fornos et al. 2004) and that those on higher incomes are also more likely to vote (Smets and van Ham, 2013). However, theories of participation in mass protests are more divided on the issue. For example, anti-state theories suggest that participants will disproportionately be drawn from lower socio-economic and working class groups who struggle to exert political influence via traditional means. Yet, Norris et al (2005) indicate that alternative modes of political activism have become normalized in 21st century politics such that the characteristics of participants in

traditional modes of activism such as voting and campaigning will also be evident amongst protesters.

Human capital refers to human capacities to enable action, typically measured through education and political knowledge. People who are better educated are more likely to access to political information, have developed cognitive skills to follow political campaigns and have a stronger sense of civic duty and, as such, are more likely to engage in voting, community activism and contacting politicians (Verba and Nie, 1972; Dalton, 2014).

Social capital refers to the strength of social networks. It describes the set of entities that facilitate the actions of individuals embedded within some social structure (Coleman, 1990). Putnam (2000) for example, argued that participation in civic groups teaches individuals norms around political involvement and the decline in citizens engaging in local community activities has led to a concurrent decline in political engagement.

Second, Teorell (2006) notes that it is not enough for individuals to have the resources to participate, they must also have a desire to do so. Thus people are likely to participate when they have both the capacity to act and when they are likely to accrue benefits from doing so. While such benefits, in the direct sense are material (e.g. economic) Teorell also notes that “process” and “expressive” incentives can also exist, whereby citizens participate out of a sense of duty to the wider community or to express support for a particular cause or identity.

In the context of the democratic deficit, a widening of the gap between the governments supply of democratic outputs and public demands for policy and procedural benefits may frustrate participation efforts even where resources and incentives are present.

Participation, operationalised as *influencing attempts*, suggests that public actions are part of an indirect responsiveness process, whereby individuals seek to exert pressure on policy makers to act according to their preferences. In this respect, the responsiveness of the system is a key concern. A central issue in the democratic crisis

literature is that the democratic deficit encompasses both citizens' perceptions that the government's delivery of policy is weak and that the procedural mechanisms of the regime – those that allow decision makers to respond to public demands - are inefficient. This deficit, in turn, drives people to either withdraw from the democratic process or to seek alternative, potentially destabilising, modes of political influence (e.g. Mair, 2008 2013; Norris, 2011).

If people view the democratic process as lacking the capacity to have their preferences realised in the policy space, then, from a resource perspective, they may withdraw from participatory activities. Put another way, if citizens perceive a large democratic deficit within the political regime, the perceived incapacity for influence may cause them to withdraw from some or all participatory attempts.

By contrast, a large deficit may incentivise individuals to participate in alternative modes of participation. For example, citizens may consider free and fair elections, the use of referendums and a free press as very important for a democracy to function effectively and yet not perceive their country as delivering these mechanisms sufficiently to allow them to exert influence. Such people may be more inclined to engage in alternative activities such as protesting and signing petitions as a means of exerting influence on decision-makers.

One final point to note here, beyond the issue of resources and incentives, is that empirical scholars have noted additional contextual factors that influence an individual's likelihood of participation, in particular the age of the person in question. The 'life cycle' model, for example, argues that political involvement increases with age since people assume greater responsibilities for work and family and become more integrated into their local communities (Verba and Nie, 1972; Schlozman, Verba and Brady, 2012). Other studies, however, suggest that observed increases in voting patterns with age are evidence that successive generations are less likely to develop norms habituating political participation as they accumulate less social capital and remain apolitical over time (e.g. Putnam, 2000; Twenge and Campbell, 2010).

However Dalton (2009) puts forward an alternative argument that connects concerns over democracy in crisis with patterns of political participation amongst different age

cohorts. Here, he argues that the norms of citizenship for older cohorts are different for those formed by younger age groups. Older people view citizenship from the perspective of duty where individuals prioritise acts such as voting, paying taxes and obeying laws out of a responsibility to the wider community. Younger people, by contrast, understand citizenship from the perspective of engagement, prioritising issues such as solidarity and helping others. Such citizens, Dalton claims, are less trusting of political institutions than older cohorts and are more likely to engage in a healthy skepticism of the regime, much like the dissatisfied democrats, discussed above.

They are, therefore, less likely to develop habitual voting behaviours but are more likely to participate in a variety of alternative participatory mechanisms such as signing petitions and protesting.

Collectively, the foregoing discussion leads to the following hypotheses.

H1: Citizens who perceive a large democratic deficit in their country are less likely to vote in competitive elections, work for a political party or contact their politicians directly compared to citizens who perceive a smaller deficit.

H2: Citizens who perceive a large democratic deficit in their country are more likely to sign petitions, participate in public demonstrations and boycott products compared to citizens who perceive a smaller deficit.

H3: Younger citizens are more likely to engage in alternative mechanisms of public participation beyond voting in competitive elections compared to older citizens.

DATA AND METHOD

Data from the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 6 is utilized for the main analysis. Field work for the survey was completed in 2012, which consisted of face-to-face interviews with 54673 respondents in 29 European States². The central focus

² Countries in the analysis are Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, Albania, Iceland, Israel, Kosovo, Norway, Switzerland, Russian Federation and Ukraine.

of the cross-national study is the examination of public evaluations of democracy amongst European citizens, making it a useful dataset for the present study.

Dependent Variables

The main variable of interest in this paper is ‘political participation’. As noted in the foregoing sections – participation is operationalised as *influencing attempts*. While this ordinarily encompasses voting it also refers to broader public efforts to engage with the political process with the aim of influencing decision makers’ behaviour. The ESS dataset has several variables to measure this. The survey asked respondents if they had voted in the last election and whether or not, during the previous 12 months, they had contacted a politician or government official; worked in a political party or action group; signed a petition; taken part in a public demonstration; or boycotted certain products. The variables were coded dichotomously where 1 equals having acted and 0 otherwise.

Independent Variables

The central expectation in the hypotheses outlined above is that perceptions of a democratic deficit impact on an individual’s level and mode of participation in the political process. The *democratic deficit* is operationalised here as the congruence gap between a citizen’s expectations for democracy and their evaluations of how democracy works in their country. Theoretically, a deficit occurs when the expectations for democracy exceed evaluations of the practice of democracy and a democratic surplus occurs when when evaluations of the democratic process exceed an individuals expectations for democracy.

To construct a measure of the democratic deficit, I utilize an index of 28 variables from the ESS dataset. These variables asked respondents to rate a set of 14 items on the degree to which they are important for democracy, where 0 equals not at all important for democracy and 10 equals extremely important for democracy. The survey also asked respondents to rate the same 14 items on the degree to which they believe they apply to democracy in their own country, where 0 equals ‘does not at all apply’ and 10 equals ‘applies completely’. To construct the democratic deficit variable, the sum of the democratic expectation responses are subtracted from the sum of the democratic evaluation responses. The final index measure ranges from -140

which indicates a strong democratic deficit to 140 which indicates a strong democratic surplus.

The underlying logic of the index measure is that items used should tap into a latent measure of “democratic expectations” on the one hand and “democratic evaluations” on the other. Therefore, I would not expect that responses to each of the items to be independent of each other. However, a concern for the ‘democratic expectations’ items in particular, is that respondents treat the survey questions as a smorgasbord of options for an ideal democracy, identifying all features as extremely important but giving little individual consideration to each item in turn. Figure 1 illustrates that respondents report very high average expectations, although averages vary from country to country. To explore this issue further, I conducted a principal component analysis to test the underlying latent effect of the variables. Tables 1 and 2 report the results. Table 1 shows that four factors emerge from the solution for the democratic expectations items, explaining 65% of the variance, although only the first three factors have an eigenvalue above 1. Table 2 shows two factors with eigenvalues above one, which explains 50% of the variance. The results are suggestive of a small number of latent measures, which tap into respondents overall level of expectations for (and evaluations of) democracy in their country.

To test the impact of the democratic deficit on political participation, I use a multi-level logit regression to examine hypotheses.

Given that the foregoing discussion identifies a number of predictors influencing public levels of political participation, a number of control variables are included in the model. These include, age, education, political interest, household income, trust in parliament and attitude towards the country’s economy³. Two variables are used to measure social capital, namely, the respondent’s self reported belief that people in the local community help each other and the closeness the respondent feels towards their community.

³ See appendix for variable question wording.

Finally, several studies of voter turnout have explored the impact of institutional predictors such as electoral systems, the effective number of parties and compulsory voting on citizens' likelihood to participate (e.g. Blais, 2006; Lefkofridi et al, 2014). While the impact of such factors on alternative methods of participation is less clear, I include a measure of proportionality in electoral rules to account for institutional differences across countries. Disproportionality measures the degree of deviation of seat shares from vote shares. Arguably, the greater the degree of proportionality, the greater the likelihood that a voters policy preferences get represented in the policy space. To measure disproportionality, I use Gallagher's least squares index (Gallagher, 1991).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 illustrates the average proportion of participation in each activity across the 29 countries analysed. Unsurprisingly, voting dominates across all countries as the most reported political act engaged in. 70.32% of respondents reported voting in the previous national election compared with 19.73% reporting having signed a petition, the next most popular type of political activism. However, there is considerable variation in self-reported voting activity across countries. For example, 85.15% of respondents in Denmark voted in the previous election compared to just 53.73% of respondents in Lithuania.

In respect to alternative participatory mechanisms, there are other similarities within countries. Working for a party or other action group was the least popular activity with just 4% of respondents having engaged in this activity. This is followed by attending a public demonstration, which has a cross-country rate of 7.11%. These patterns of political activism suggest that levels of participation are at least somewhat related to the degree of effort required to engage in them. Working for a party or engaging in political protest are typically highly partisan activities. They require a reasonable degree of time and effort, active political interest and effort to acquire information. Acts such as voting or signing a petition, however, require far less effort.

It should be noted that these patterns are not consistent across countries. For example, 55.32% of respondents from Israel and 43.53% of Swedish respondents signed a petition within the previous 12 months compared to 3% of Hungarian and 3.2% of

Ukrainian respondents. Further, Spanish respondents were far more likely to engage in public protests (25.89%) compared to individuals from Finland (1.5%).

Figure 2 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the key independent variable in the analysis – the democratic deficit. First, the figure reports the average scores for democratic expectations in each country. This is the sum of scores for each of the 14 items discussed in the previous section. The overall scores are high with an average score of 116 (out of a maximum of 140). The level of expectations between countries varies however, from a low of 109 in Slovakia to a high of 128 in Albania.

Unsurprisingly, in every case, the democratic demands of respondents exceed their perceptions of democratic supply by their respective countries. Figure 2 shows a mean score of 79 for respondents evaluations of democracy although there is more variation between countries on this measure compared to public expectations. For example Ukraine and Kosovo hold a mean score of just 52 and 53 respectively compared to a score of 102 and 103 in Norway and Sweden respectively.

Moreover, the figure demonstrates that citizens in each country consistently report a deficit between their expectation about what democracy should deliver and what they believe their governments actually deliver. No country reported a democratic surplus where government supply exceeded expectations, although there is considerable variation in the extent of the gap within countries. For example, the mean deficit score in Ukraine is -65 compared to a score of -15 in Sweden.

Turning to the regression analysis, table 3 reports the results of the multi-level logit models for each mode of political activity.

The coefficients for the democratic deficit variable are negative across each mode of activity. This means that the wider the deficit, the greater the likelihood that a respondent will report participating in each activity. Further, the coefficients are significant in each case with the exception of voting. The result runs counter to the proposition that a widening of the congruence gap between public demands for democratic outputs and government supply of such outputs leads to public withdrawal from political activity. Instead, the findings here point to a more nuanced explanation,

one that speaks to citizen disaffection and a public desire for more varied and direct political involvement.

The results do not show support for hypothesis 1 but offer support for hypothesis 2. It appears that the likelihood of citizens participating in voting is irrespective of their perceptions of the size of the democratic deficit. However, respondents perceiving large deficits are more likely to contact politicians, work in parties or other action groups, sign petitions, participate in demonstrations and boycott products. These findings offer support for the theory that disaffected individuals seek alternative mechanisms within the political system, in order to find influence (Dalton, 2009; Norris, 2011). These findings are robust to the inclusion of a respondent's level of trust in parliament and their attitudes towards the economy. While, it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore the issue, it is plausible for individuals to perceive a large deficit and yet still maintain trust in political institutions.

The findings also offer some support for hypothesis 3 and for the 'engaged citizenship' model. In confirmation of Dalton's (2009) earlier findings, older age cohorts are more likely to vote while the opposite is true for the other participatory activities. This result runs contrary to the proposition that younger age groups are apathetic towards the democratic process.

Furthermore, the models confirm that resource and incentive factors are key predictors of *influencing attempts* since education, income and political interest are significant and positively related to political participation. The results from social capital variables are less clear. While ties to the local community have a positive effect on voting, their impact on alternative methods of participation are less consistent.

While the models presented in table 3 demonstrate a significant effect of the democratic deficit on political participation, interpreting the magnitude of these effects from the logit coefficients can be difficult. I therefore convert the results to odds ratios in order to analyse the strength of the predictors in determining levels of political participation. The odds ratio for *the democratic deficit* is 0.97 in model 2 meaning that for a one-unit decrease in a respondent's perception of a democratic

deficit, the odds of that respondent stating that they contacted a politician within the previous 12 months, decreases by approximately 3%. Similarly the odds ratio for *the democratic deficit* is 0.90 in model 5 meaning that for a one-unit decrease in a respondent's perception of a democratic deficit, the odds of that respondent stating that they attended a public demonstration within the previous 12 months, decreases by approximately 10%. Moreover, the odds ratios for the impact of the democratic deficit on working for a party, signing a petition and boycotting products are 0.95, 0.90 and 0.89 respectively.

Overall the findings demonstrate an increased propensity for individuals to engage in additional participatory mechanisms where they perceive a wider gap in the deficit. These findings are illustrated further in figure 3, which reports the predicted probabilities of political participation contingent on the size of the democratic deficit. For example, the probability of signing a petition where an individual reports a deficit of -140 is 0.34 but this probability is only 0.04 where the individual reports a surplus of 99. This demonstrates an increased probability of 0.3 that an individual will engage in signing petitions where they perceive a large democratic deficit in their country.

CONCLUSION

Democratic theory understands that there needs to be at least a minimal level of public engagement with policy making and policy makers if the regime is to have legitimacy and is to function effectively. Empirical studies of participation, which have typically focused on predictors of voter turnout, note that having sufficient resources, personal incentives and operating within particular institutional arrangements (e.g. compulsive voting, PR electoral systems etc) all impact on an individuals propensity to engage in the political process.

However, over the past decade a number of scholars have raised concerns that increasing number of people in advanced democracies are turning their backs on the process, pointing to empirical evidence that voter turnout is in decline, that party membership is at an all time low and that the public, when asked, show increasing mistrust with public officials and democratic institutions. For some scholars, this is evidence of a hollowing out of democracy (Mair, 2008; 2013). They argue that there is a growing disequilibrium between the demands that citizens place on democracies

and the capacity of governments to meet public expectations. This democratic deficit leads to citizen disengagement with political institutions, which threatens to delegitimize the process. Other researchers, by contrast, contend that while the growth in public disaffection with national regimes is perhaps worrisome, it should not be construed as a decline in the public's preference for democracy as a system of government. Instead, they argue that a democratic deficit is evidence of a changing citizenry, who seek alternative mechanisms of participation where they perceive traditional modes, most notably voting in competitive elections, as ineffective (Dalton, 2009; Norris, 2011).

The central aim of this article, then, was to explore empirically the impact of citizen perceptions of a democratic deficit in advanced industrial democracies on their levels of participation in the political process. The findings provide support for the latter assertion and show that respondents who perceive a wider gap between their expectations for democracy and what they perceive their country regimes deliver are more likely to engage in alternative participatory activities in their attempts to influence decision makers. Moreover, there appeared to be little effect on perceptions of a deficit on the public's propensity to vote. The results of this analysis should be of some comfort to those concerned about a growing disaffection towards democratic regimes. The perception of a deficit does not itself appear to weaken public engagement and may in fact strengthen it by providing incentives to citizens to find additional routes to influencing political actors.

One remaining concern that is beyond the scope of the current article, is whether the positive impact of a democratic deficit on alternative mechanisms of participation is evidence of a wider destabilisation of democratic processes. Other scholars have pointed out (Eckstein, 1961; Gurr, 1970; Norris, 2011) that a deepening of the congruence gap between the demand and supply of democracy can prompt intensified involvement in protest politics, which has the potential to cause violent disruption and undermine the authority of elected officials. Greater attention to this issue in the context of the current debate surrounding a crisis of democracy may pave the way for future research in the field.

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Table 1: Pattern Matrix for Democratic Expectation Variables

	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	<i>Factor 3</i>	<i>Factor 4</i>
free and fair elections	0.662			
political discussion before voting			0.829	
clear party alternatives			0.678	
opposition free to criticise government	0.716			
media free to criticise government	0.734			
media provide reliable information	0.765			
minority rights are protected	0.655			
referendums		0.514		
equal treatment by courts	0.611	0.501		
governments punished in elections		0.543		
government protection against poverty		0.837		
government explains decisions		0.714		
reduction in income inequality		0.792		
considers the views of EU governments.				0.945
Eigenvalue	5.93	1.39	1.02	0.79
% Explained variance	0.25	0.22	0.12	0.07

Note: Results are factor loadings from principal component analysis with varimax rotation, loadings smaller than 0.5 not shown.

Table 2: Pattern Matrix for Democratic Evaluation Variables

	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	<i>Factor 3</i>	<i>Factor 4</i>
free and fair elections		0.628		
political discussion before voting		0.849		
clear party alternatives			0.673	
opposition free to criticise government	0.849			
media free to criticise government		0.857		
media provide reliable information		0.536		
minority rights are protected		0.514		
referendums	0.66			
equal treatment by courts	0.728			
governments punished in elections	0.58			
government protection against poverty	0.85			
government explains decisions	0.806			
reduction in income inequality	0.832			
considers the views of EU governments.				0.901
Eigenvalue	6.41	1.48	0.84	0.84
% Explained variance	0.29	0.21	0.11	0.07

Note: Results are factor loadings from principal component analysis with varimax rotation, loadings smaller than 0.5 not shown.

Table 3: Multilevel Analysis of Political Participation

	<i>Attend</i>					
	<i>Vote</i>	<i>Contact Politician</i>	<i>Work for Party</i>	<i>Petition</i>	<i>Demonstration</i>	<i>Boycott Product</i>
<i>Fixed Effects</i>						
Deficit	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.02 (0.01) **	-0.04 (0.01) ***	-0.09 (0.01) ***	-0.1 (0.01) ***	-0.11 (0.01) ***
Political interest	0.59 (0.02) ***	0.58 (0.02) ***	1.16 (0.04) ***	0.42 (0.02) ***	0.58 (0.03) ***	0.46 (0.02) ***
Trust in parliament	0.08 (0.01) ***	0.02 (0.01) *	0.05 (0.01) ***	0.01 (0.01) *	-0.001 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Economy	0.003 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.01) **	-0.03 (0.02) *	-0.03 (0.01) ***	-0.04 (0.01) **	0.02 (0.01) **
Education	0.12 (0.01) ***	0.12 (0.01) ***	0.08 (0.02) ***	0.15 (0.01) ***	0.12 (0.01) ***	0.15 (0.01) ***
Age	0.27 (0.01) ***	0.01 (0.01)	-0.04 (0.02) *	-0.12 (0.01) ***	-0.2 (0.01) ***	-0.11 (0.01) *
Income	0.07 (0.01) ***	0.04 (0.01) ***	0.001 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01) ***	-0.008 (0.03)	0.03 (0.01) ***
Local area help	0.03 (0.01) *	-0.01 (0.01)	0.002 (0.02)	0.03 (0.01) **	-0.003 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01) *
Close to community	0.13 (0.02) ***	0.12 (0.02) ***	0.16 (0.03) ***	0.02 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.02) *
Disproportionality	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.05)
<i>Variance Components</i>						
Country Level	0.27 (0.52)	0.24 (0.48)	0.17 (0.42)	0.95 (0.97)	0.48 (0.69)	1.32 (1.15)
N	30320 (29)	32073 (29)	32085 (29)	32041 (29)	32085 (29)	32007 (29)
Log Likelihood	-13114	-12364.7	-5209.5	-15064.5	-7644.7	-13002
AIC	26250	24751.5	10441	30151	15311.4	26026.6

Note: Country level N=29, standard Errors in Parentheses *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

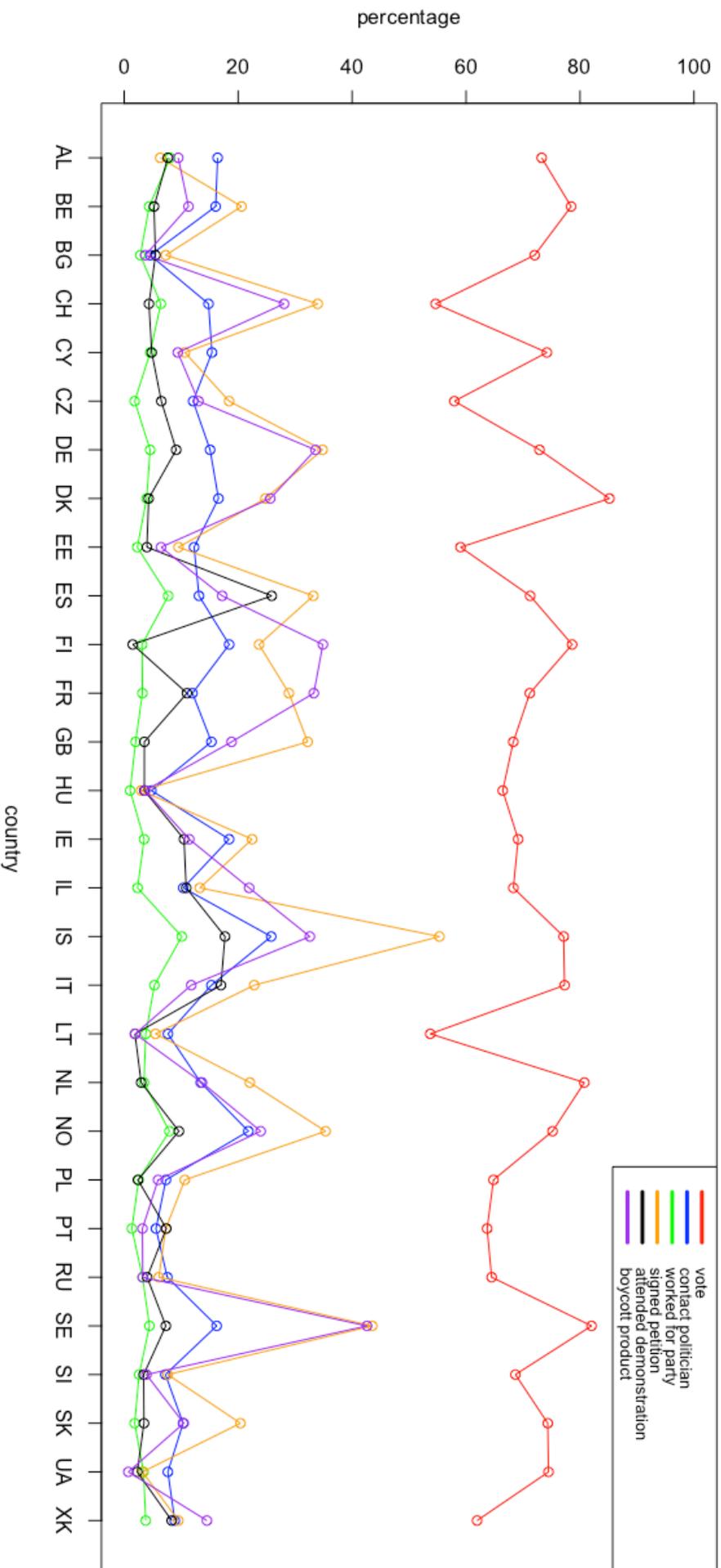


Figure 1: Proportion of Political Participation by Country.

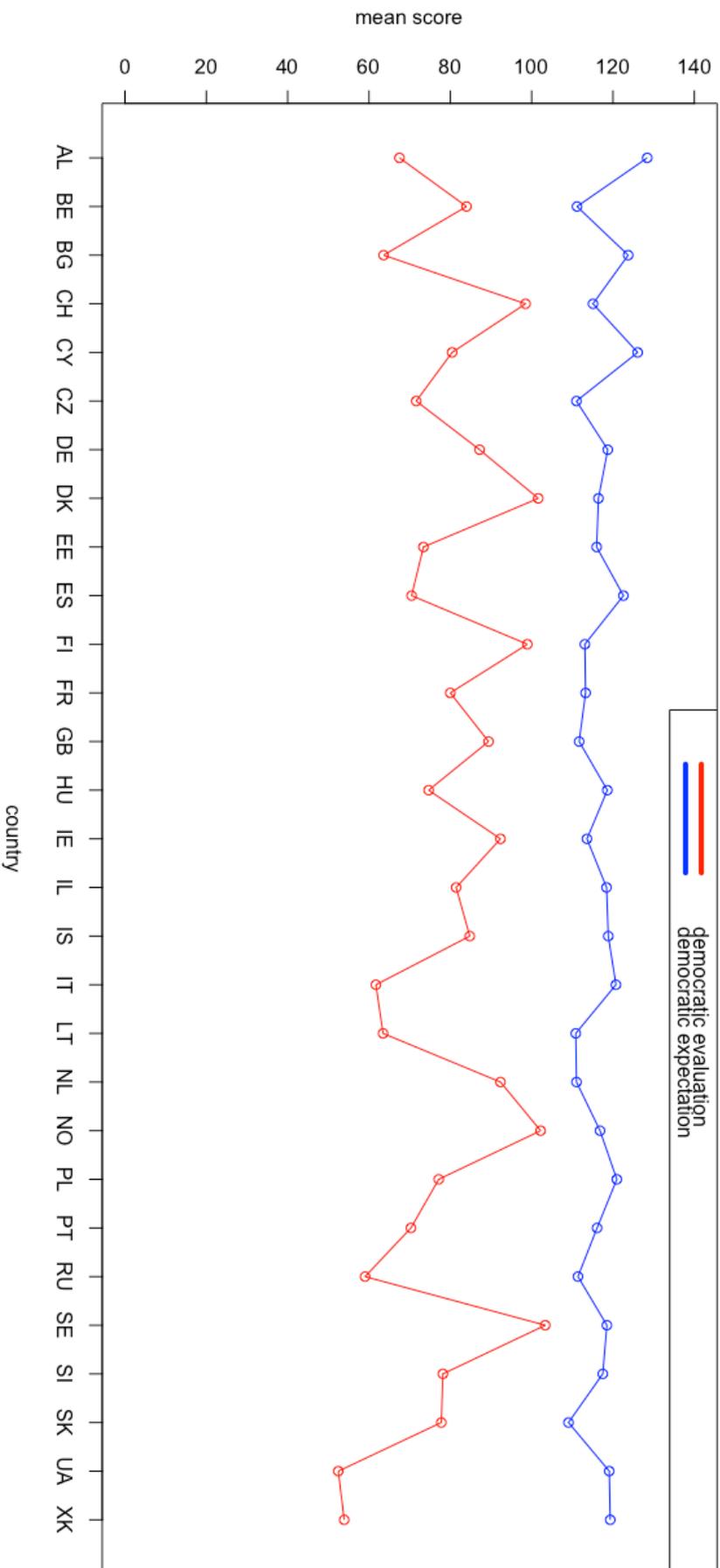


Figure 2: Democratic Deficit – Average Scores for Respondent Evaluations of Democracy in their Country and Expectations for Democracy

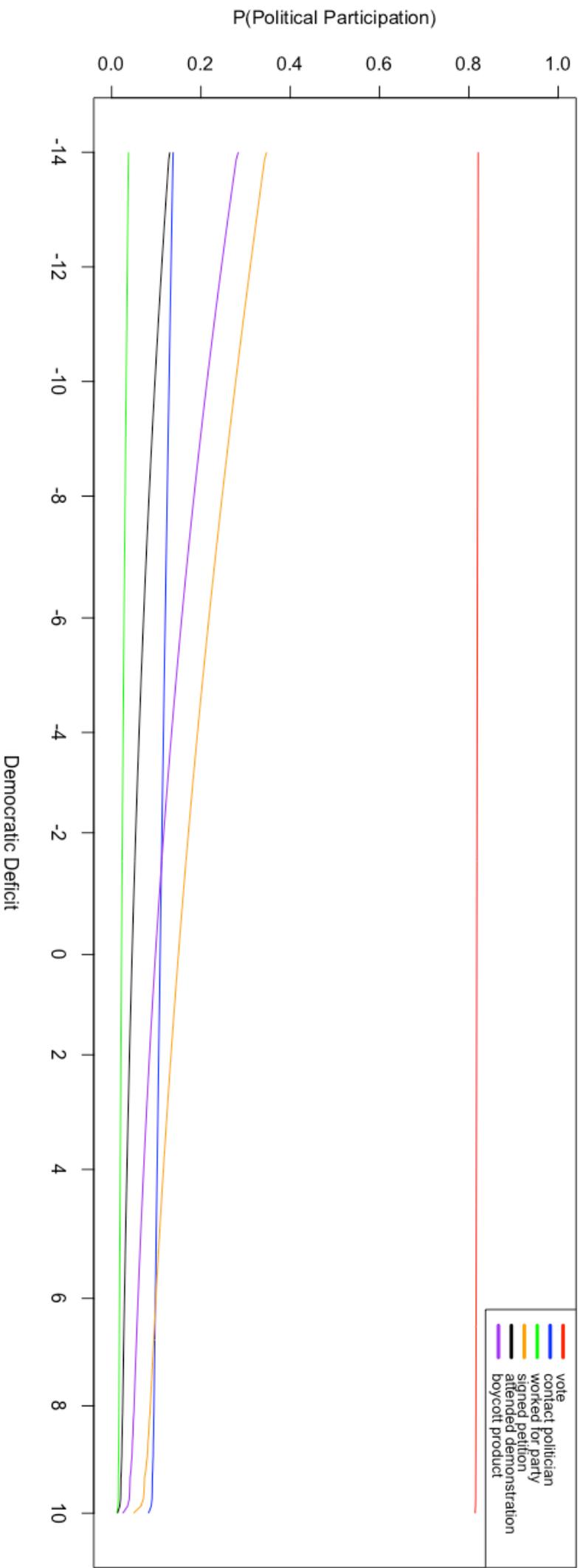


Figure 3. Predicted Probabilities of Political Participation.

APPENDIX

Question wording for independent variables.

Democratic Deficit

Please tell me how important you think it is for democracy in general...

0 means you think it is not at all important for democracy and 10 means you think it is extremely important for democracy

Please tell me to what extent you think each of the following statements applies in [country]...

0 means you think the statement does not apply at all and 10 means you think it applies completely

- ...that national elections are free and fair?
- ...that voters discuss politics with people they know before deciding how to vote?
- ...that different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another?
- ...that opposition parties are free to criticise the government?
- ...that the media are free to criticise the government?
- ...that the media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government?
- ...that the rights of minority groups are protected?
- ...that citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums?
- ...that the courts treat everyone the same?
- ...that governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job?
- ...that the government protects all citizens against poverty?
- ...that the government explains its decisions to voters?
- ...that the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels?
- ...that politicians take into account the views of other European governments before making decisions?

Political Interest:

How interested would you say you are in politics –?

Are you:

- very interested (3)
- quite interested, (2)
- hardly interested, (1)
- or, not at all interested? (0)
- Don't know

Trust in Parliament:

Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust.

[Country's] parliament.

Economy

On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy in [country]?

Extremely dissatisfied = 0

Extremely satisfied = 10

Local Area Help

Please tell me to what extent you feel that people in your local area³³ help one another?

Not at all = 0

A great deal = 10

Close to Community

Please say to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

I feel close to the people in my local area.

Strongly Disagree (0)

Disagree (1)

Neither Agree Nor Disagree (2)

Agree (3)

Strongly Agree (4)

Don't Know.