

Political participation and perceptions of justice and fairness: evidence from ESS data

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Abstract

There is a huge gap in research about the connection between political participation and perception of justice and fairness since few authors have analysed this phenomenon. The purpose of this article is to analyse the connection between political participation and people's perception of fairness and justice, using a representative sample of the European Social Survey (ESS). This article is based on European Social Survey data of the 9th Round. Interviews were carried out with 47,086 respondents aged 15 and over in 27 European countries. The method of statistical data analysis was the correlation analysis of measures of political participation and measures of perceptions and evaluations of justice and fairness (Pearson's r coefficient). From the results of the study, it was concluded that people participating in all political activities more often agree that society is fair when the political system allows people to have a say in what the government does.

Keywords: Distributive justice; Europe; fairness; justice; political participation; procedural justice.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, European societies have witnessed unprecedented increases in social inequalities. European welfare models, faced with more flexible labour markets, more open trade, skill-biased technological changes, and major socio-economic structural changes, have been unable to prevent such increases. These structural developments challenge not only the established strategies for resolving distributional conflicts and the normative conceptions used to justify the distribution of goods and burdens in society, but they also affect the acceptance of political and societal institutions and European societies' prosperity and capacity for innovation. Inequalities in wealth, prosperity, education, and other social resources and their consequences for societal solidarity, social cohesion, and democracy, in general, are of particular interest in both academia and the public sphere (ESS, 2018).

Some argue that inequalities of any kind are always harmful and only increase the feeling of injustice in society, others say that they consider a certain degree of inequality to be a necessary component of a market economy, as the talent, investment in education, and even motivation must be rewarded. Whether inequality is perceived as high or low, good, or bad, right, or wrong, it always depends on the normative perspective (Heywood, 2004). Empirical research on the perceptions of justice and its self - distribution shows that people have different attitudes towards it. It could also be noticed that citizens, taking an active role in the political realm and thus expressing their critical positions towards the political system, infer new ways of participation using social movements and new demands, especially in terms of social justice (Norris, 2011, as cited in Filgueiras, 2013, p. 63). That is why political participation could be considered as one of the factors of perceptions of social justice and fairness. However, the question is what is the relationship between political participation and perception of justice and fairness?

Pioneers of the study of procedural justice were Rawls (1971), Thibaut and Walker (1975), who developed ideas about the influence of procedures on establishing and maintaining stable social interactions and goal attainment and where fair procedures help to accept the allocation of duties and burdens, but they did not analyse the connection between political participation and perception of justice. So, there is a huge lack of research about the connection between political participation and perception of justice and fairness, as there are only a few authors who analysed this phenomenon. One of such authors was Cohen (1985) who analysed procedural justice and participation. However, his work was based on organizational aspects and procedural justice within organizations and workplaces, but he did not analyse the impact of perceptions of procedural justices towards political participation or vice versa. Roark (2015) wrote a seminal book on social justice and deep participation, where she analyses how the use of deep participation, integrative power allows people and groups to collectively reorganize themselves and their social institutions within their preferred culture. Political participation in this article is understood as activities by individuals formally intended to influence who governs or the decisions taken by those who do (Hague, Harrop & McCormick, 2016, p. 217).

Because there are very few studies about the connection between political participation and perceptions of justice and fairness, their shortage justifies the relevance of this article. The main goal of this article is to analyse the connection between political participation and societal perceptions of justice and fairness by using a representative sample of the European population. The fact that this kind of analysis, which uses a representative sample, has never been done before, contributes to the novelty of the article.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Concept of political participation

Political participation was widely studied by Milbrath (1965), Verba and Nie (1972), Verba, Nie and Kim (1978), Barnes et al. (1979), Leonardi et al., (2001), van Deth (2014), Norris (2001; 2002; 2003; 2011), Theocharis (2015). According to Brady (1999, p. 737, as cited in Thomassen, 2001, p. 194), almost all definitions of political participation include four basic concepts: activities or actions, ordinary citizens, politics, and influence. The most well-known definition of political participation is proposed by Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978, p.46), who describe it as the “activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take”. Those actions refer to political actions and not to political attitudes. These actions should also address political institutions or certain government policies and actions. Political participation always refers to the actions of ordinary citizens and not of politicians or government officials. Political participation thus refers simply to activity that is intended to influence government actions – either directly, by affecting the making or implementation of public policy, or indirectly, by influencing the selection of people who make those policies (Kaase 2012). According to (Hague, Harrop & McCormick 2016, p. 217), political participation describes how people seek to influence the composition or policies of the government or, in other words, activity by individuals formally intended to influence who governs or the decisions taken by those who do.

Barnes et al. (1979) described different political actions available to citizens and introduces the terms of conventional and unconventional political participation. Modes of conventional political participation refers to mainstream, everyday political participation and includes traditional and expected modes of political participation, such as voting, donating to a political campaign, or volunteering for a campaign and similar political actions, and unconventional political participation refers to activities that are sometimes considered to be inappropriate but are not illegal – e.g., boycotts, demonstrations, and protests.

1.1.2. Concepts of justice and fairness: distributive and procedural justice

Justice has been of central importance to political life for over two thousand years and still, it is an overly complex phenomenon of social and political life. Usually, there is drawn a clear distinction between distributive and procedural justice. The distinctions between perceptions and evaluations, rational interests and normative preferences, and reflexive and non-reflexive justice attitudes rely on two fundamental conceptions from contemporary empirical justice research: (1) *what* outcomes are allocated to individuals and how are these distributed within a society (distributive justice) (Jasso et al., 2016); (2) *how* are these outcomes allocated (procedural justice) (Vermunt & Steensma, 2016; as cited in ESS, 2018, p. 8).

As distributive justice deals with the allocation of social and economic resources (Scherer, 1992; Sabbagh & Schmitt, 2016) it can be explained by a four-fold classification of distributive justice attitudes that reflect the order-related principles of equality, equity, need, and entitlement (Liebig & Sauer, 2016). A broad number of empirical studies from psychology and sociology support the classification of these four basic distributive justice principles (Liebig & Sauer, 2016; Hülle et al., 2018, as cited in ESS, 2018). *The equality principle* means that everyone should receive the same in society. *Equity principle* means that benefits and burdens should be distributed in a society proportional to individual investments. *Need principle* means that everyone in a society should get enough to cover basic needs. *Entitlement principle* means that benefits or burdens in a society should be allocated according to the ascribed or achieved status characteristics of a person, such as a gender, education, occupation, or origin.

Predominantly focusing on equality and equity, the results of existing research highlight the tension: while high levels of inequality violate the distributive principle of equality, strict equality violates the distributive principle of equity. While many studies support the conclusion that people find a balance between equality and equity (Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 1992; Scott, Matland, Michelbach, & Bornstein, 2001; Traub, Seidl, Schmidt, & Levati, 2005, as cited in ESS, 2018). Few studies have examined how this balance is achieved in the context of rising inequalities and what levels of inequality will no longer be justifiable.

Procedural justice refers to how decisions or outcomes are achieved, as opposed to the content of the decisions themselves. It means that a just and acceptable outcome is guaranteed by the application of particular and procedural rules (Heywood, 2004). Procedural justice is a necessary condition for institutional stability. If that condition is not met, people will question the legitimacy of the decision and the institutional structure in which it was made (Cohen, 1985, p. 645).

Procedural justice is a strong social regulation tool, shaping and coordinating social interactions and stimulating cooperation between individual persons, between individuals and groups, and between individuals and society. One of the most important functions of procedural justice is the relationship individuals have with others. Procedural justice is important in the interaction with powerful authorities who can exploit people and give people information on what their status or position in the group is. So, procedural justice judgments and experiences have a function for people's status position toward others. Another function of procedural justice says that people are not only a part of a social community but also of a moral community: the way people are treated gives an indication of the appropriateness of attitudes and behaviors concerning others. When people strongly identify with a group or collectivity and adopt its basic beliefs, these beliefs may become guidelines for behaviour and evaluations. And these beliefs may overrule other guidelines that bind people to their group. Procedural justice judgments and experiences have a moral function and may unite or divide people (Vermunt & Steensma, 2016, p. 231-232).

1.2. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this article is to analyse the connection between political participation and people's perception of fairness and justice, using a representative sample of the European Social Survey (ESS). The main research question is whether political participation is positively related to perceptions of fairness and justice. Conceptually, the ESS module "Justice and Fairness" is premised on the traditional distinction of four dimensions of politics: what outcomes are allocated or distributed unequally, such as income, wealth, and educational degrees (distributive justice); how are they allocated (procedural justice); who is part of the solidary community and can make claims (scope of justice); and when do costs and benefits of redistribution have an impact on society (intergenerational justice)?

2. Methodology

2.1. Data collection

This article is based on the data from the 9th round of the European Social Survey (ESS). ESS is an academically driven cross-national survey that has been conducted across Europe every two years since its establishment in 2001. The data of the rotating module "Justice and Fairness" and the core module "Politics" is analysed in this article. ESS is a multi-country survey based on face-to-face interviews which are conducted with newly selected, cross-sectional samples (Šarkutė, 2017). In the 9th round, ESS covered 27 countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and United Kingdom. The average duration of the

interviews was one hour. The fieldwork period was in 2018/2019. Interviews were carried out with 47 086 respondents aged 15 and over in 27 European countries.

The concept of political participation was measured by five questions in the ESS core questionnaire. As it was discussed earlier political participation covers items of both conventional and unconventional participation. Conventional political participation includes electoral activity, e.g., voting in last national elections (B13 in Table 1), and non-electoral actions, such as contacting politicians or government or local government officials (B15), working in a political party or action group (B16). Unconventional political participation is covered by two variables: signing a petition (B19) and taking part in lawful public demonstrations (B20). Respondents of ESS were asked whether they participated (yes, no, not eligible to vote) in these activities during the last twelve months (see Table 1).

Table 1

Variables measuring political participation

| Variables (ESS question number in brackets) | Values and categories |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Voted in the last national election (B13) | 1=yes, 2=no, 3=not eligible to vote |
| Contacted a politician or government official (B15); worked in a political party or action group (B16); signed a petition (B19); took part in a lawful public demonstration (B20); | 1=yes, 2=no |

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), Round 9 Data (2018).

2.2. Data analysis

The concept of justice and fairness is measured by two sets of variables: the first set is measuring distributive justice and its basic normative principles and the second is analysing the perception of procedural justice. Basic normative principles were measured by four questions, whether respondents agree or not (5-point rating scale) that a society is just if income and wealth are equally distributed among all people (G26); a society is fair if hard-working people earn more than others (G27); a society is fair if it takes care of those who are poor and in need regardless of what they give back to society (G28); a society is fair when people from families with high social status enjoy privileges in their lives, i.e., they have better-living conditions than those with lower status (G29). Respondents of ESS were asked whether they agree or disagree with these statements.

The perception of procedural justice in society was measured by five variables (5-point rating scale): the political system ensures that everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics (G1); the government takes into account the interests of all citizens (G2); the political system allows people to have a say in what the government does (B2); the political system allows people to influence politics (B4); decisions in politics are transparent, meaning that everyone can see how they were made (G3) (see Table 2).

Table 2

Variables measuring justice and fairness: basic normative principles and perception of procedural justice in society

| Variables (ESS question number in brackets) | Values and categories |
|--|--|
| Basic normative principles: A society is just if income and wealth are equally distributed among all people (G26); if hard-working people earn more than others (G27); if society takes care of those who are poor and needy (G28); if citizens with higher status have better living conditions than those with lower status (G29). | 5-point rating scale 1=agree strongly, 2=agree 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Disagree, 5=Disagree strongly |
| Perception of procedural justice in society: The political system ensures that everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics (G1); the government considers the interests of all citizens (G2); the political system allows people to have a say in what the government does (B2); the political system | 5-point rating scale 1=not at all, 2=very little, 3=some, 4=a lot, 5=a great deal |

allows people to influence politics (B4); decisions in politics are transparent, meaning that everyone can see how they were made (G3);

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), Round 9 Data (2018).

The method of statistical data analysis was employed in the article. Correlation analysis of the measures of political participation and the measures of distributive and procedural justice have been carried out by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient, also referred to as Pearson's *r*.

3. Results

Data shows that almost all correlations between items of political participation and elements of basic normative principles are statistically significant (see Table 3). People who voted in the last election, contacted politicians, worked in a political party, signed a petition but did not participate in public demonstrations more often agree that society is fair when income and wealth are equally distributed. It has to be noted, that the minus sign can mislead, because the lower values of the items of political participation mean higher engagement in political activities (for more information, see table 1, where yes=1 and no=2). Those who worked in a political party or interest organization and took part in public demonstrations agree that society is fair when hard-working people earn more. However, there are not any relations with voting, contacting politicians, and signing petitions. It is interesting to note that people who do not participate in politics more often believe that society is fair when it takes care of the poor and needy, regardless of what they give back to society. Finally, people participating in all political activities more often believe in privileges.

Table 3

*Correlation between basic normative principles and political participation (Pearson's *r*)*

| Correlation (Pearson's <i>r</i>) | Equality Society is fair when income and wealth is equally distributed | Equity Society is fair when hard-working people earn more than others | Need Society is fair when takes care of the poor and in need, regardless of what they give back | Entitlement Society is fair when people from families with high social status enjoy privileges |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| Voted last national election | -0.068 ** | 0.002 | 0.026 ** | -0.065 ** |
| Contacted politician or government official | -0.072 ** | 0.009 | 0.020 ** | -0.039 ** |
| Worked in political party or action group | -0.007 | -0.014 ** | 0.041 ** | -0.026 ** |
| Signed petition | -0.061 ** | -0.005 | 0.055 ** | -0.068 ** |
| Taken part in lawful public demonstration | 0.051 ** | -0.032 ** | 0.090 ** | -0.085 ** |

**p*< .05; ** *p*< .01.

Weighted data: analysis weight is used. European Social Survey, round 9 Data (2018). Data file edition 2.0.

Data shows that almost all correlations between items of political participation and elements measuring perception of procedural justice are statistically significant (see Table 4). People who participate in politics believe in how democracy works in their countries and vice versa. The only exception is taking part in lawful public demonstrations – as there is not any significant correlation. It has to be noted, that the minus

sign can mislead, because the lower values of the items of political participation mean higher engagement in political activities (for more information, see table 1, where yes=1 and no=2). People who voted in the last election, contacted politicians, worked in a political party, signed a petition more often agreeing that the political system ensures everyone a fair chance to participate in politics.

People who contacted politicians worked in a political party, signed a petition, and did not participate in public demonstrations agree that a government takes the interests of all citizens into account. People who did not vote in the last election and did not participate in public demonstrations but contacted politicians who worked in a political party signed a petition agreeing that decisions in country politics are transparent. People participating in all political activities more often agree that society is fair when the political system allows people to have a say in what government does and also it shows that there exist correlations between political participation, both conventional and unconventional, and people’s beliefs in a political system allowing people to influence politics.

Table 4

Correlation between the perception of procedural justice and political participation (Pearson’s r)

| | The political system ensures everyone a fair chance to participate in politics | The government in a country takes into account the interests of all citizens | Decisions in-country politics are transparent | The political system allows people to have a say in what the government does | The political system allows people to influence politics |
|--|---|---|--|---|---|
| Voted last national election | -0.043 ** | 0.000 | 0.032 ** | -0.039 ** | -0.056 ** |
| Contacted politician or government official | -0.098 ** | -0.067 ** | -0.035 ** | -0.088 ** | -0.127 ** |
| Worked in political party or action group | -0.055 ** | -0.025 ** | -0.020 ** | -0.075 ** | -0.110 ** |
| Signed petition | -0.118 ** | -0.056 ** | 0.008 | -0.099 ** | -0.142 ** |
| Taken part in lawful public demonstration | 0.000 | 0.032 ** | 0.040 ** | -0.041 ** | -0.072 ** |

*p< .05; ** p< .01.

Weighted data: analysis weight is used. European Social Survey, Round 9 Data (2018). Data file edition 2.0.

4. Discussion

Political participation is positively correlated with all the dimensions of distributive justice – i.e., basic normative principles – equality, equity, need, and entitlement, and with the most of variables. This research revealed that people who voted in the last national elections, contacted politicians or government officials, signed a petition, or took part in lawful public demonstrations more often agree to the principles of equality – i.e., they believe that everyone should receive the same in society and vice versa. People who worked in a political party or action group are tended to believe that society is fair when hard-working people earn more than others. This trend shows that both conventional and unconventional participation is important to the equity principle when benefits and burdens should be distributed in a society proportional to individual investments (Nicklisch & Paetzel, 2020).

People who do not participate in politics more often believe that society is fair when it takes care of the poor and needy, regardless of what they give back to society. In other words, the conducted research revealed that people who are not politically active, they still agree that everyone in a society should get enough to cover basic needs. This could be explained by disappointment and frustration regarding political

matters when people do not see the meaning of political participation but still, they think that the state should provide goods and benefits (Haas, Loft & Pham, 2019).

The research revealed that people participating in all political activities more often believe in privileges and otherwise people who believe in privileges more often participate in politics. As the entitlement principle means that benefits or burdens in a society should be allocated according to the ascribed or achieved status characteristics of a person, such as a gender, education, occupation, or origin, it is expected to believe that people who believe in privileges, they more often participate in politics, as they see it as a privilege as well (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). However, the research did not reveal the causality, and further research is necessary for more extensive conclusions.

Political participation is positively correlated with all the dimensions of procedural justice – fair chances of participation, taking into account the interests of all citizens, transparent political decisions, the right to have a say in politics and influence a public policy, and with the most of variables. People who voted in the last election, contacted politicians, worked in a political party, signed a petition more often agree that the political system ensures everyone a fair chance to participate in politics and vice versa – people who do believe in fair chances to participate in politics they do participate, except the participation in public lawful demonstrations as there was not any significant correlation. This conclusion clearly illustrates the essence of modern democracy – fairness of political procedures and political participation are inseparable (Wang, 2021).

5. Conclusion

People who contacted politicians worked in a political party or action group, signed a petition, and did not participate in public demonstrations agree that government takes into account the interests of all citizens. It is clear that people who are contacting politicians and government officials, actively involved in parties or action groups, or even signing petitions –are more active than the majority of the population and probably they reach their goals in influencing public policy more often than others and there is no need to organize or participate in public lawful demonstrations. The same explanation is possible for the next correlation: people who did not vote in the last election and did not participate in public demonstrations but contacted politicians who worked in a political party signed a petition agrees that decisions in country politics are transparent, as they have more abilities to influence public policy and probably to see how it is implemented.

Finally, people participating in all political activities more often agree that society is fair when the political system allows people to have a say in what government does, and also it shows that there exist positive correlations between political participation, both conventional and unconventional, and people's beliefs in a political system allowing people to influence politics. In all, it can be stated that people who participate in politics are more likely to believe in a fair and just political system. Those who believe in a fair and just political system more often are politically active and they are involved in both, conventional and unconventional, political participation.

Also, it must be mentioned that there are certain limitations regarding the conducted research. The main study limitation is related to the chosen method of statistical analysis, which did not show the causation. It remains unknown whether political participation is the cause or the outcome of perceptions towards justice and fairness in European populations. That is why further research analysing connections between political participation and perceptions of justice and fairness is not only very welcome but also it is essential to draw more extensive and causal oriented conclusions.

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