



# Psychological underpinnings of democracy: Empathy, authoritarianism, self-esteem, interpersonal trust, normative identity style, and openness to experience as predictors of support for democratic values

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## ABSTRACT

Although the role of individual differences for political attitudes is undisputed, the psychological determinants of support for democratic values received limited attention. This study aimed at incorporating a variety of measures of stable individual differences and determining their relative effect on support for democratic values as well as at testing a new predictor, i.e. normative identity style. The analysis of a survey in a sample of middle adolescents ( $N = 1341$ ; 16–17 year olds) showed that (a) right-wing authoritarianism, interpersonal trust, normative identity style, and empathy were good predictors of support for democratic values, (b) empathy and authoritarianism were the strongest predictors of democratic commitments, and that (c) self-esteem was not related to support for democratic values.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of democratic personality is an integral assumption of democratic theory which recognizes support for democratic values as an essential ingredient of a democratic state (Almond & Verba, 1963; Dahl, 1998; Eckstein, 1966). In addition to historical, socio-structural, and political determinants support for democratic values has been linked to psychological properties. Studies suggest that citizens can be either drawn to the democratic creed or be repelled away from it depending on their psychological security and flexibility (McClosky & Brill, 1983; Sniderman, 1975; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982), authoritarianism (Cohrs, Kielmann, Maes, & Moschner, 2005), and empathy (Miklikowska, 2011). There are several limitations connected to previous researches. First, the majority of them have studied the predictors of democratic commitments either in a one-at-a-time fashion with new correlates being presented without reference to older ones (Zalkind, Gaugler, & Schwartz, 1975) or by combining various psychological charac-

teristics into a single construct (Sullivan et al., 1982). As a result, the relative importance of variables and their power collectively to predict democratic values is limited. Second, many of the predictors have been utilized with little accompanying explanation making it difficult to comment about the merits of the underlying psychologies. Third, a majority of the studies has been conducted in the 1980s, and since then, new predictors of democratic values, e.g. empathy, have been studied. Herein, we aim at integrating the aforementioned psychological explanations and at incorporating a new predictor, i.e. normative identity style, into a single study of middle adolescents. Although thinking about democratic theories may be more developed at older ages, strong correlations between the attitudes of adolescents and adults indicate a relative stability of attitudes and show that adolescents develop persistent political views (VenDeth, Abendschön, & Vollmar, 2011).

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Conceptualization of democratic values

Democratic values refer to the basic principles of democratic governance that allow distinguishing between democratic and nondemocratic process such as e.g. equality, impartial justice,

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universal suffrage, or freedom of expression (Dahl, 1998). According to various theories of democracy, e.g. liberal (Dahl, 1998), participatory (Barber, 1984), or elite-oriented (Schumpeter, 1950), as well as to empirical studies on political culture (Almond & Verba, 1963), the majority support for these norms is a *sine qua non* of a democratic state.

On the one hand, research has shown that citizens endorse democratic values when stated in abstract terms, and on the other hand, the respondents less consistently support these norms when they conflict with other values e.g. public order (McClosky & Brill, 1983). Therefore, democratic norms have been measured with items reflecting both an unconflicted, generalized support for democracy and support for civil liberties when they are in conflict with other values (e.g. Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003; Sniderman, 1975).

## 2.2. Who supports democratic values?

Factors which have been found to influence the degree of support for democratic values are commonly classified as historical, socio-structural, political, and psychological (Sullivan & Transue, 1999). It was not until the late 19th century that favorable conditions existed for the advance of democratic ideas (Dahl, 1998). Gender has been a significant predictor of democratic commitments despite contradictory findings concerning sex differences (Gibson, Duch, & Tedin, 1992; Jones, 1980). Among the political predictors of support for democratic values are political knowledge and activism (McClosky, 1964; Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003). In addition to demographic and political characteristics, support for democratic values has been linked to psychological properties. Research shows that individuals supportive of democratic values are more flexible and secure psychologically than their nondemocratic counterparts. Psychological inflexibility, i.e. tendency to divide the world into friends and foes and closedness to information that threatens internalized beliefs, has been exemplified by dogmatism (Sullivan et al., 1982; Zalkind et al., 1975) and intolerance of ambiguity (McClosky & Brill, 1983). Studies show that those who are psychologically inflexible might be more easily threatened by political differences and hence oppose democratic norms (Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003). In contrast, those who are open to new experiences tend to be more tolerant (Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995).

In light of tripartite security system theory, according to which psychological security leads to the less defensive worldviews (Hart, Shaver, & Goldenberg, 2005), endorsement of democratic norms should be greater among psychologically secure individuals. In accordance with this claim, Sullivan, Marcus, Feldman, and Pierson (1981) showed trusting individuals to be more tolerant and Almond and Verba (1963) linked interpersonal trust to democratic participation. Other measures of psychological security, e.g. self-esteem (Sniderman, 1975; Sullivan et al., 1981) predicted prodemocratic orientation as well.

According to Altemeyer (1998), right wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) are two variants of authoritarian personality: a submissive (RWA-based) and a dominating (SDO-based) one. Elaborating on this idea, Duriez & Van Hiel (2002) considered RWA and SDO expressions of dispositional prejudice. Both RWA and SDO have been good predictors of negative democratic commitments (Cohrs et al., 2005).

Democracy is “primarily a mode of associated living” (Dewey, 1966, p. 87). In line with this, psychological attributes related to handling social exchanges, i.e. empathy have been suggested as building blocks of democratic orientation (Miklikowska, 2011;

Morell, 2010). According to social-cognitive and motivational theories (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008; Levinson, 1958; Pratto & Sidanius, 1994), adoption of political beliefs reflects psychological needs. Democratic ideals might appeal to empathic individuals’ needs of care (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990).

## 2.3. New predictor of support for democratic values

Identity styles are the social cognitions through which individuals perceive and process reality (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999). Individuals who use an information-oriented style deal with identity issues by seeking out and utilizing information in order to make well-informed choices. In contrast, individuals who use a normative style follow the normative expectations held up by significant others. Finally, individuals who use a diffuse-avoidant style procrastinate personal decisions until they are forced to make a choice by pressuring situational demands.

Predominantly normative oriented individuals attach importance to preserving their rigidly organized and committed identity and conform to conservative opinions, hence shutting themselves off from experiences and values that may threaten their internalized beliefs (Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992). They score high on measures of cultural conservatism, need for structure, and need for cognitive closure (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999) as well as exhibit closed-minded and defensive attitudes towards others (Soenens, Duriez, & Goossens, 2005). In line with this, normative identity style can be considered an indicator of inflexibility (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999) and hence, be negatively linked to support for democratic norms. Although identity style has been linked to antidemocratic factors, e.g. authoritarianism (Podd, 1972) and prejudice (Soenens et al., 2005), its possible role for democratic commitments has not been studied.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Procedure and participants

This study was conducted on a random sample of 1341 upper secondary schools students. Seventeen schools were selected at random from the educational registry from three regions of Finland (South, South-West and West). Questionnaires were administered in the presence of the author during regular school hours. The average age of the students was 16.94 years ( $SD = .52$ ), 56% female, 44% male. Uneven sex ratio can be explained with greater absenteeism of males as well as their tendency to skip the surveys e.g. when students were being gathered in the bigger halls to fill out the questionnaires. Due to the refusal of participation of a few vocational schools, they were underrepresented in this study, which might have contributed to the uneven sex ratio as well.

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. Support for democratic values (SDV)

The SDV scale was an additive index based on 10 items derived from the Multi-Dimensional Scale of democratic values (Gibson et al., 1992 as cited by Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman 1999), the Democratic Values Scale (McClosky, 1984 as cited by Robinson et al., 1999), the Fundamental Principles of Democracy Scale (Prothro & Grigg, 1960 as cited by Robinson et al., 1999), the Democratic Principles and Applications Scale (McClosky, 1964 as cited by Robinson et al., 1999) and the Support for Democratic Principles (Kaase, 1971). Given an outdated nature of many democratic values items, an American context they pertain to, and complex vocabulary used, only items which could be applied to the

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